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Blood Bytes

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BLOOD BYTES

Susan Phelan

Dedication

For Carol and Gerry, whose own happy ending was interrupted, but will continue in another time and place.

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Prologue

New York City sometime in the future... Friday night

Client SG1972 stood in front of the series of thin mirrors that dangled from the ceiling studying her reflection.

Client SG1972.

That was the way she was referred to at the agency, so it would follow that it was also the manner in which she had come to think of herself during these frequent meetings.

No names, no shame.

Giving herself a once-over she looked at her strawberry blonde hair that fell straight down to the center of her back, still a tad wet from her recent rinsing. A look of growing excitement filled her large brown eyes and the freckles that were sprinkled across her nose and cheeks seemed to positively jump out on her pale skin as if in fright.

Damn it but how she hated those little dots, she pouted, straightening her sleek black dress that, like the flesh on her face, was flecked with tiny circles. Thanks to that new morphing procedure—the latest rave that let you choose the tone, texture and even the shape of your face and body to suit—she was a completely different looking woman—well that is, different from what she had been yesterday. In actuality, she had used the revolutionary new process to morph back to her "real" self for the date. Where her former appearance, complete with a rich dark tan and ne'er a freckle in sight, had been the fake version, now as she stood regarding her true look in the long skinny mirrors that hung like icicles from the overhead beam, she wondered if she had made the wrong decision by going *au naturel*. Then again, the smattering of pale dots did make her look like she was seventeen as opposed to her actual age so they weren't all bad. But enough already with the obsession with her looks. After all, this wasn't her first time being the recipient of purchased pleasure by any stretch.

Sex for hire had long since become legalized, even commonplace, leaving the human population eventually de-sensitized and bored with the blatant amount of "normal" sex readily available. Starved for excitement, all sorts of sexual alternatives were being explored, people ever in search of the ultimate experience. Advancements galore in the field of medicine had created drugs to ensure better, faster and longer couplings, even completely eliminating any kind of erectile dysfunction in human males. However, it was only in the last few decades or so that the immortal equivalent had, pardon the pun, sprung up. For the first time in history, the undead could partake in sexual intercourse, and rumor had it mating with an immortal far exceeded any human-on-human contact. This made the vampire lover a very, very hot commodity.

Just then, a tri-tone buzzer broke the stillness of the single living unit announcing the arrival of her "date."

Reaching for the black chrome handle and turning it, she opened the door and smiled at the gorgeous vampire who stood waiting on the other side.

"Hello handsome. Come on in."

Chapter One

Saturday morning

Tess Monterey groaned as a light-infused chiming infiltrated her dream, disrupting her from a rare lengthy sleep. She'd been visiting Venus, strolling along the pink-sanded beach, the soft warm waves of the purple Trimonic Sea washing up along her bare legs as the tangerine sun warmed her skin.

Grumbling, Tess grabbed one oversized pillow and, burying her face deep within the silken folds of the black satin sheets, did her best to ignore the flashing light and sound. The contact indicator persistently clanged, needling her to respond. Irately tossing the pillow aside and whipping back the covers, she rolled onto her side and flipped the switch initializing the view function on the bedside vista-communicator. The wafer-thin computer screen automatically emerged from a thin opening in the wall and rolling out to stop adjacent to the top of the bed, flickered on to reveal the grinning face of the last person on the planet she wanted to see...Detective Darwin Renaldi.

"Morning Tessandra. Hey, nice jammies."

God she hated that name and he knew it. Reaching back, she grabbed the corner of the shimmering silver bedspread and briskly covered both herself and her unicornembossed teddy.

"Shut up Renaldi. And don't call me that. What do you want?"

"Listen, I know it's your day off but we got a 442 - a bizarre one too."

"You're right. It's my day off."

"I know but we're flying with one wing over here. Jorgensen's on leave, Brantford has that thing for his kid today and now Stanton just called in sick. Personally I think he's just nursing the mother of all hangovers. I know he and a couple of the guys hit the Lonesome Lagoon last night."

Despite its small size, the Lonesome Lagoon was one of the hottest mingling spots in New York, the club's diminutive interior ensuring an ever-present and lengthy line-up snaking around the circumference of the short brick building that faced the East River. Tess had only been to the glamorous lounge once and that was on the occasion of her best friend Desi's pre-Christmas, exceptionally nasty divorce a couple of years earlier. An ace weapons specialist on the Force, Desi had very stoically decided to push on through the painful event with the aid of one of the more popular drinks of the time known as a Purple Punch—the name compliments of the cocktail's lavender hue. Apart from a flurry of recollections of the night that include her brooding buddy who, feeling temporarily elated, danced atop a table, followed by treating the men of the joint to an impromptu striptease—Tess' prominent memory of the evening was of the two of them freezing their butts off waiting in line outdoors in a near blizzard.

"Not my problem," she shot back at Renaldi, sluggishly wiping the sleep from her eyes and thoroughly disgusted at the implication that a late night of over-imbibing was a viable excuse for not going to work. "Tell him to take a Ranovan shot and get his ass to the crime scene."

"No can do."

"Can't or won't?"

"Listen, I feel your pain but it's not my call."

True enough. Renaldi was only her partner, not her boss. But for the love of God, couldn't they manage one shift without her? She'd been working nights for the past two and a half months without a single stint off. Then again, that was the story of every other police patroller in the New York Police Force, a.k.a. the New York Force. Short staffed, the cop covens that were peppered throughout the city had been working around the clock dealing with the metropolis' usual rash of accidents, robberies and homicides.

"You could always say you couldn't reach me," her voice sounded hopeful as she ran a lean hand through her crimson, shoulder-length tresses.

"But that would be lying."

"And that would stop you why?"

The little scoffing laugh he gave showed that he clearly got the barb. Their closet romance had ended abruptly last year when she found out he was seeing someone on the side. Like every other woman in denial, Tess had played ostrich, ignoring all the little signs and screaming intuitions she'd encountered along the way, even convincing herself that the reason Renaldi had insisted they keep their relationship *hush-hush* was to avoid office politics. There could be no other explanation for the deception, like—say for example—he was a two-timing scumbag. No, discounting that little voice inside her, Tess had chosen to believe that deep down, Renaldi was a decent guy who really did care about her. Really he did.

Yeah right.

A long silence followed Tess' questioning shot in which she had dropped her gaze to stare at the floor. When she finally raised her eyes to the computer screen once again, she saw Renaldi regarding her expectantly, his large blue eyes focused on her intently. Struggling up into a sitting position, she heaved a deep sigh of resignation.

"I'll meet you there then?" Renaldi prodded.

"Yeah," she answered dispassionately. "I'm on my way."

"Fine. I'll tell Captain Wa-"

Tess reached over and hit the disconnect switch, effectively cutting him off midsentence.

For a split second, a long-forgotten stab of remorse reared up to ricochet through her. While she no longer loved him or even felt any pain at the memory of their year and a half affair, every now and again she was overcome with a deep sense of regret at all the time and emotion she had invested and, ultimately, wasted.

Rising, she headed for the bathroom, flipping both the vista-communicator and bed removal control on the wall as she went. The silent automated system and the viewing screen slid back into the wall, the narrow slit from where it had emerged closing up. With the aid of an internal vacuum-like mechanism, the sheets and covers were sucked and smoothed into position on the single, hovering mattress as were the rumpled and misplaced pillows. A small mirrored area on the wall at the head of the bed split into two equal pieces to allow entry of the entire contraption as it moved into its hidden compartment. A metallic clink sounded as the large circular handle underneath the bed that allowed for manual movement knocked against the wall. The sleeping source then disappeared, leaving no evidence of its existence once the two glass panels closed behind it.

Moving into the spacious washroom, Tess reached into the bathing pod and initializing the audiovisual panel selected *tropical waterfall* before pressing the *start* button. With the water temperature and pressure previously set to her particular preference, Tess need only chose the setting and sounds in which she wished to bathe. Peeling off her lingerie she gingerly stepped into the ceramic bathing chamber, her body weight directly signaling the enclosure of the cell and the commencement of the program.

Immediately thereafter every one of her senses was surrounded with the sensations of a balmy and beautiful virtual paradise. Holographic, three-dimensional images of lush foliage suitable for any rain forest encompassed the small clearwater pond in which she stood, her toes snugly secure in the soft white sand beneath. The lace-like, brilliantly green leaves and branches of the multitude of trees and shrubs that were interspersed with huge, vibrant blossoms in variations of orange, magenta, marigold and turquoise, blew softly in the warm, humid breeze as a symphony of birdcalls filled the air. The sun beat down from a baby blue, cloudless sky to glisten on the drops of water that cascaded down in a warm, welcoming rush over her head and body from the cragged rock waterfall behind her.

Closing her eyes, Tess easily rinsed off the groggy remnants of the night's slumber but much to her surprise she struggled to wash away the memory of her former romantic relationship with Renaldi—the recollection rising up through the steam like a ghost to haunt her once more.

Sure, time and all its healing powers had enabled her to first see him without erupting into a crying jag, talk to him and eventually even work side-by-side with him. In the end, she had to concede that the whole experience had served a purpose. There was a lesson to be learned and by God, she had learned it. Hitting the wall dispenser that sprayed a light film of lily-scented soap up and down the length of her body, Tess reminded herself of the indisputable cold hard fact that men are selfish jerks and women in love are fools. Mystery solved. Case closed.

Turning around to face the stream of liquid warmth, the water running like tears down her face, Tess was glad of the one indelible, overriding certainty that now remained... she would never, ever, ever, fall in love again.

Chapter Two

The single living unit at 1001 Rochester and Vine was still in relative darkness when Tess arrived. The entrance to the three hundred floor building complex had been marked off with holographic police tape—the words *CRIME SCENE*, *DO NOT CROSS* floating above ground like some sort of literary apparition which incidentally was charged with enough voltage to zap you into the next millennium on contact.

Tess carefully ducked beneath the hovering message and headed for Renaldi. He was wearing the usual department issue for the New York Force, a sleeveless, navy vinyl shirt and ribbed pants—the latter studded down the outside of each leg with a succession of shining metal buttons and a pair of two-tone, lace-up launch boots equipped with mini rockets that proved to be great for getting a jump on the bad guys. Despite his professional attire though, Renaldi still managed to look like some down-on-his-luck derelict—mostly thanks to his after-five shadow and ever-present, sleepy-eyed expression.

Conversely, Tess looked on fire. Her neon lemon latex unitard—an alternative version of the usual uniform—was an explosion of color that hugged every curve of her five foot seven inch frame. A sequence of thin silver and ivory belts spiraled up from her ivory booted feet along her legs and hips to where the glitter of her badge clipped to one belt-loop drew a attention to her slim waist. A pair of yellow cats-eye sunglasses completed the look and was magnificently complimented by the flaming red of her hair.

"So what do we have?"

"From what I gather, it seems... hey, look at you. What up? Did I miss the memo on new uniforms?"

In response, Tess just stared at him. She'd be damned if she was going to tell him that her other outfit was vaporized into itsy-bitsy teeny-weeny bits during the hostage taking in that west side nuclear plant last week. When things got hot, the hostage taker blew one of the gaskets to the main pipeline, triggering an explosion that left Tess lying in her underwear wearing nothing else but a semi-automatic laser rifle and a pair of pistol poppers. After a couple rounds of ultra-fast zip-microsurgery to repair her nicks and bruises, she was good as new.

Well, almost.

One predominantly stubborn scar situated on her left shoulder, granted hair-like in width but nevertheless still visible with the naked eye, was proving to be resistant to the latest technique in cosmetic surgery. The only hope her dermatologist could offer was that the skin was supple and young and therein would definitely heal but only when it was good and ready which basically meant *in its own good time*.

When it became apparent that Tess wasn't going to address Renaldi's question about her unorthodox attire, he finally gave up and attended to her original enquiry about the crime scene.

"We got a female victim – one Sara Greenwood."

"What happened?"

Renaldi just shook his head slowly.

"I don't really know. I've never seen anything like this before."

Now that was a statement. New York City in this day and age yielded all sorts of heinous crimes with brutality and innovation combining to shock and sicken even the most seasoned and Renaldi was no exception. With ten-plus years on the New York Force, he'd seen his share of gruesome scenes.

Glancing down, he ran a hand over his new buzz cut, the close-cropped hairstyle making Tess wince. She had always preferred his hair longer and he knew it, but every once a while, he'd go and get a G.I. Joe do which, rational or not, quickly converted into yet one more thing that registered as a big "Fuck You" to Tess. Turning away, she headed for the bedroom.

"I'm going to take a look."

Stepping into the spacious room, Tess nodded curtly to the two-man forensics team that was hard at it. Crouched at the foot of the bed, a fresh-faced young man was in the process of sliding a sample stick into a plastic bag. Upon hearing her enter, he looked up, his expression brightening as he stood up.

"Heya Tess, how's it going?"

Staring at him vacantly, a distant sense of familiarity gnawing at her, Tess struggled to put a name to the face. If memory served her correctly, it was Freemont something. While he had worked a certain few years in the field down in Georgia, he was a relative newcomer to the New York Force. In fact Tess had only worked with him once before on that murder-suicide case in Queens a couple months back.

What the heck was his surname?

With short spiked hair the color of eggplant and a psychedelic tattoo that snaked halfway around his neck to this throat, he looked more like a tarted-up junkie than evidence *aficionado*. However his sterling reputation that preceded him wherever he went in the free world easily offset his questionable and somewhat unprofessional appearance. Sharp as a whip, twice as disciplined as most guys his age and reported to be an absolute natural at collecting and deciphering samples, the "flipping whiz kid" as Captain Warner had been known to refer to him on occasion, was among the best on the continent at what he did, not to mention the youngest. And if that weren't reason enough to like him, the kid possessed an easygoing and humorous manner that was flat out charming.

With the details of his background flooding back to her, Tess had to inwardly admit with a little wistful smile, that if she were fifteen years younger and not so committed to staying the hell away from all matters of the heart, she might be interested in the unconventional hotshot.

Of course not everyone at the cop shop was pleased with the newest acquisition to come on board, namely Renaldi, whose assessment of the likeable young addition to the team was far from flattering.

"Young, dumb and full of cum," he had whispered under his breath to Tess after Gale had been introduced to the two before following the captain into his office for a closed-door introductory chat.

Though not thin-skinned, naïve or prudish, there were fewer expressions that Tess disliked more. With a disdainful frown, her response to Renaldi caught him unaware.

"Minus the 'young', that description would apply more to you, don't you think?"

But that was then and this was now and right now all three colleagues had to concentrate on the crime scene that spread out before them—she, Renaldi and...

Gale! That was it. Freemont Gale.

"Hey Gale," she replied with a very slight nod before turning her attention to the task at hand.

Slowly circling around the bed where a woman lay sprawled naked atop the tangled covers, her identity hidden by the tangle of long reddish-blonde hair that covered her face, Tess gingerly moved about the quiet space. The victim's wrists, tied and attached over her head to the headboard, were raw and bloody from struggling against the scarves that confined her. Large gashes that created deep, long streaks in her flesh ran down the length of her throat and torso. Remarkably, though, there was hardly any blood—certainly not the volume you would normally expect from such wounds.

"Carson, what do you make of this?" she asked the head of the forensics team—an older man who had made a twenty-five-year career out of tracking the bad guys through their deposited DNA. Positioned near the bed's headboard he was meticulously scraping underneath the nails of the deceased with a long narrow wooden stick and depositing his findings into a plastic bag.

"Werewolf?" Gale suggested, following her view of the deep gouges in the woman's skin.

Keeping her gaze on the wonder boy's superior, Tess waited for a response. Straightening, the salt and peppered haired scientist managed to push up his specs with the back of his forearm before looking at her directly.

"Werewolf? Nah," he said, shrugging off both the suggestion and the very notion of the mythical creature simultaneously. "But I think we're getting warm."

Tess glanced down once more at the tattered remnants of the victim's neck and midsection.

"Ah, do you want to elaborate on that?"

Stephen Carson, like Gale, was brilliant at what he did but he had an annoying tendency toward excessively condensing his thoughts to as few words as humanly possible, often leaving the listener at a bit of a loss as to what the hell he was talking about.

Carson reached over and delicately drew back the victim's matted hair from her face, the movement revealing two indentations in the tender flesh of her throat—the healed-over holes barely noticeable amidst the blood-smeared skin.

Gale let out a low whistle.

"Maybe she was dating Bela Lugosi."

His lighthearted response extracted a look from Carson that unmistakably expressed his disapproval at the younger man's frivolity.

"Maybe," Carson continued cheerlessly. "At the very least, the size and shape of the incisions perfectly aligned with the jugular vein would appear to be caused by a two-pronged instrument, the holes separated about an inch and a half to two inches apart. The wounds were initially pierced by a narrower point and then widened or torn as the tool or tools used thickened in diameter."

Tess gawked at Carson in unadulterated shock. She'd worked with the elder forensic scientist for over a decade and she'd never heard him string together so many words in a row. Looking up, Carson quickly clued in to Tess' astonishment and the reason for it. Gesturing slightly, he murmured under his breath, "My wife says if I don't start talking more she's going to divorce me, so I'm trying to change my ways."

Tess worked to suppress the laughter that bubbled up inside her just as Gale's hypothesis offered one possible explanation for the marks Carson had been referring to.

"Could be from fangs."

"Quite possibly."

Carson's agreement didn't surprise Tess at all. Since coming out a couple of hundred years ago, the undead had not only steadily increased in numbers, rivaling that of their human counterparts, but they were now catching up in crime as well.

"I don't know. What do you think Monterey?" Gale asked out of the blue, his tenor voice cutting into her thoughts that raced to simultaneously digest the information Carson had just given them and jump ahead several steps and link it all together. "Would you ever give it a go with a bloodsucker?"

"Huh?"

"You know, take a vampire love-rrr." |

He rolled his tongue on the last syllable to make a sound that added both an exotic and comically sexy flavor to the word.

Tess didn't hesitate.

"Nope. Not even remotely interested."

"That's good."

His speedy and affirmative response made Tess look at him in question. In turn, Gale looked pleased, almost relieved by her answer to his question, but then just as fast, a dark crease drew his pale eyebrows together as he expressed his puzzlement at others' fixation with the species.

"Me either. I just don't get it. I mean, what's the big attraction?"

Boy, he was young.

"Besides their superior looks, bodies and legendary dexterity in the bedroom? Gee, Gale, I can't imagine what it could be."

Carson gave a light snort that was his way of articulating amusement before resuming with his evaluation.

"The healing properties of vampiric blood would account for the accelerated repair of the wounds," he said. "And I've swabbed the area for saliva and we found a number of hairs that could not possibly be the victim's, so we're off to a relatively good start." Topping off his assessment, he offered a half smile—or what was as close to a smile as Carson ever got.

"What's the time of death?"

"Rigor mortis has just started to set in so I would put the T.O.D. around three a.m. Give or take an hour."

"Who found her?"

"The fiancé," he replied, peeling off a blood- covered glove. "He's in the next room."

Monterey wheeled around, Carson's soft caveat following her as she left the room.

"Go easy. The guy's pretty shaken up."

After Tess departed, Gale moved closer to Carson and dropping his voice to a soft whisper inquired, "So what's her story?"

Carson, who had been kneeling, his masked face only inches from the woman's torso as he tried to retrieve a sample from a lacerated section of her ribcage, stood up and sighed. With a knowing smile, he shook his head as he pulled down his protective face cover.

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"Forget it, kid."

"What? Why?"

"Because it's useless."

"Useless?"
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The word stopped Gale cold and he thought for a moment as a whole bunch of scenarios were blatantly entertained in his overly inventive mind.

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"Why? Is she married?"
"No."
"Gay?"
"No."
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Gale's face lit up and with a cocky innocence that could only be described as sweet, he spread his arms and said softly. "Then she's open season! Just you wait, once she gets a taste of the Freemont. It'll be smooth sailing."

"Listen I don't want to rain on your parade but you best know now than later."

"Know what?"

"There's no way you, or any other man, will be able to get close to that one."

"What makes you say that oh negative one? Are you suggesting that when it comes to my magical manly ways, she is immune?"

"No. She's not immune. She's just not available."

"Oh?"

Sounded like a definite challenge to Gale and if there was one thing he adored, it was a good old-fashioned contest. Learning that, there was now no way he was going to throw in the towel without at least one good kick at the cat.

On the other side of the wall, stepping into the darkened living room, Tess stood for a moment allowing her eyes to adjust to the dimly lit space. The room was rectangular with a large black marble fireplace situated along one wall halfway down. At the far end of the suite, full-length windows allotted a romantic and breathless view of the glittering New York skyline alive with light and activity.

In between the streams of A3s—Automatic Airborne Automobiles—neon signs, traffic lights and decorative markings on the endlessly tall glass, copper and onyx buildings could be spied, the view all the more remarkable after the sun went down. It was then that the normally scenic and transport heavy panorama turned into an undulating sea of electric glowing illumination. In other, more rural parts of the country, bursts of kinetic energy as immortals took to the air without the aid of transport units could also been seen, albeit in a flash, but not in the heart of the city where air traffic was at an all-time high and vehicle-less transport prohibited. Inside the victim's unit, however, the atmosphere was far more subdued. Asian artifacts in black and white and the gurgling waters of a coffee table waterfall created a calm feeling despite the reason for this early morning visit.

Crouched over in the black fabric armchair that sat diagonally opposite the doorway was the bereaved groom-to-be. His face in his hands, he rocked slightly back and forth, with only the knuckles of his fingers apparent here and there between the tousled strands of his blond hair. Standing to his right was Renaldi, looking slightly uncomfortable as the soft moans and sobs of the man rose and fell. Upon seeing Tess, her professional partner hotfooted it over to her.

"What's the story?" she whispered.

"We had to pry him away from her. He didn't want to leave the body."

"His name?"

"Chase Telmor."

Grabbing a quick breath of air, Tess moved forward and delicately began.

"Mr. Telmor? I'm Detective Monterey with the New York Force. I know this is a very difficult time for you but I'd like to ask you a few questions."

The man raised his head, his pale face streaked with tears, his eyes vacant and confused. A long moment passed while he digested her words.

"I can't – she's – who are you?"

Tess patiently and gently repeated her previous statement word for word.

The man only shook his head and looked down. On the end table to his left, Tess spied a pack of old-fashioned nicotine sticks.

Jesus, did they still make those?

"Perhaps you would like to have a cigarette while we talk?"

"What?"

The man appeared to struggle to comprehend the words as if his entire thought process was mired in molasses.

"Oh. Right," he agreed, absentmindedly reaching for the Winstons—an exceptionally ancient but still available method of inhaling nicotine into the lungs. When Tess used to indulge, she far preferred the atomizer inhalant method of appeasing a "nic fit" as they used to call it. It was faster, cleaner and thanks to the minute delivery cylinder that stretched to the back of the tongue, completely bypassed the mouth, but hey, to each his own.

Putting one of the archaic addictive apparatuses in his mouth, Chase tried unsuccessfully to light it with the personal flame flickers that had been tucked inside the pack, but his hands shook so violently that the blaze blew out as he dropped it onto the glass top of the table.

"Please. Allow me," Tess softly offered, successfully lighting his cigarette and utilizing the time he puffed away to study him.

He was twenty-seven, twenty-eight tops—a young, fresh-faced and handsome man. His long hair was tied back in a ponytail—distinctly moving him out of the elite sophisticate circle. Too bohemian to be elegant. Yet his attention to detail in his fine silk shirt and pants indicated a certain affluence and taste, despite the fact that the garments, like his face and hair, displayed traces of a red substance that under the circumstances was more than likely blood.

The smoke from his cigarette snaked up from his narrow hand and curled up in front of Tess' face. It smelled good but she wasn't going there again. She had given that up, about the same time that she'd given up on love, both concurrent casualties of her relationship with Renaldi and she wasn't going there again either.

But evidently this poor sap had gone there and then some. As delicately as she could Tess edged in, absentmindedly fingering the wafer-thin mini recording device in the breast pocket of her uniform which she had turned on upon entering the living unit. Implemented with inexhaustible memory banks, the remarkable gadget immediately and effortlessly recorded any human and vampire vocal patterns within a two hundred

foot radius. It would also break down, separate and transcribe the recorded data to her home and office system. By the time she returned to her single-person living unit tonight, she would have the transcripts from her conversation with the victim's fiancé, besides the dialogue between Gale and Carson in the next room.

"So Mr. Telmor, if we could just ask you a few questions..."

The man took a deep drag of his nicotine stick and nodded his head, the look of pain within his eyes amplified by the glimmer of tears.

"Yeah, yeah, of course."

"I understand you found Ms. Greenwood?"

"Sara?"

Tess smiled.

"Yes. Sara."

The man swallowed hard, his face contorting as he wrestled with emotion.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"We had a dinner date last night but I had to work late," he blurted out, the admission coming out between pained breaths. "I always work late, too much, I've been working too much," he nearly keened, his tear-filled eyes overflowing to release watery streaks of torment down his cheeks.

"So you didn't make your date as planned," Tess gently urged, trying to keep the grief-stricken hubby-in-waiting on track.

"No," he gulped, taking another hit of the cigarette. Blowing out the cloudy air forcefully he turned his head and stared out the window.

"No, I told her I would be too late and that we'd have to do dinner another time. I told her not to wait up."

"Were you living together?" Renaldi asked.

The man turned and looked at him, a light of reminiscent pleasure lit in his eyes.

"Not in so many words, but we might as well have been." Then just like that, the glow of love was gone from his face, a look of total devastation quickly taking its place. "Know what I mean?"

Tess knew exactly what he meant. She could vividly recall what it was like to be momentarily uplifted by a super-sweet memory only, when faced with reality, to come crashing down so fucking hard you damn near broke your neck.

With a light sigh, she looked across the way and through the high-rise's exterior glass façade, noting the A3 that was hovering at a red light just feet from the unit's window. The stripped red and black paint of the vehicle revealed it to be a city porter coach and through its triangular windows, Tess could see the porter, an ethnically-blended youth, drumming his fingers on the control panel as he waited to proceed forward, his gaze regularly lifting up to his rear view mirror where he could monitor the goings-on of the backseat. Though limited, through the posterior porthole, Tess

could spy a relatively young guy and a girl who appeared to be getting very friendly with each other. Either oblivious to or uncaring of the porter's continual observation, they enthusiastically indulged their passion for each other's bodies without so much as a glance in his direction. When the overhead light turned red, the porter hit the accelerator lever and in a whoosh they were gone.

"I understand," she said, turning back to Chase Telmor and drawing the attention of the murdered woman's fiancé back to her once more. "How is it you found Ms... Sara?"

He sighed ultra-deep, crushing out the remnants of his nic stick and running a hand through his hair.

"It was about three – I guess – I dunno. I came in."

"You have a key?"

"Yes, yeah, didn't I say that?"

While their residential familiarity had been implied, the potential suspect had never stated he had unlimited access to Tess's home.

"Not in so many words. So you came in. Then what happened?"

"I was starving so I went and grabbed something out of the froster and nuked it."

"Where was Sara?"

"I assumed in bed. The lights were all out except for the worldwatcher in the living room."

With unlimited access to millions of televised sights around the globe, one could plug into another part of the world and at any given time watch the far-off happenings as easily as flipping a switch. A distant relative of the television of yesterday, the worldwatcher was infinitely further reaching and best of all, every unit in the free world was outfitted with one free of charge.

"Did that strike you as odd?" Renaldi asked.

"What?" He seemed confused as his gaze agitatedly moved between the two police officers. Renaldi quickly clarified the question.

"That she would go to bed and leave the worldwatcher on?"

"No, yes, I dunno."

Trying to keep the inconsolable individual focused, Tess took hold of the conversational reins yet again.

"Please continue. You had something to eat."

"Yeah then I went into the bedroom. No wait! I had a smoke first. Or at least I went to."

"You went to?"

"Yeah, I sat down but remembered I had smoked my last one on the way back from the office."

"I see. So then you went to bed."

"No. I went to get some."

Renaldi and Tess exchanged a quick glance.

"You went to get a pack of cigarettes?" Renaldi posed, the air of suspicion not entirely masked in his tone.

"Yes."

"What time would that have been?"

"I couldn't say for sure. Maybe three thirty. Four? Something like that."

"Ahah. And do you remember which store you went to?"

"Yeah. It was Barclays on Nineth. They're the only ones downtown who carry them."

"And you drove?"

The man looked at Renaldi as if he were insane.

"It's just around the corner."

"So you walked," Tess offered.

"Yeah I walked," he replied, a touch of sarcasm-infused irritation edging into his voice.

"So, round-trip-wise, what are we talking?"

Mr. Telmor shrugged.

"I dunno. I didn't time it. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes."

"Okay. And did you see anyone or speak to anyone en route to or at the store?"

"No. Just the clerk."

Again, Tess and Renaldi looked at each other hastily and mentally assessing the information, continued on.

"So you got back here some time between four and four fifteen give or take—right?" Tess continued.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"And then what happened?"

"I went to bed."

"Without your smoke?" Renaldi challenged a little too swiftly for the man's liking.

"I had it on the way back from the store. What the fuck's going on here? Am I under suspicion or something?"

"We're just trying to get all the facts, Mr. Telmor," Tess answered softly. "It's all right. Just carry on. You went to bed."

Chase openly glared at Renaldi for a long moment before resuming.

"Yeah, I was exhausted. So I got in beside her and..."

He choked on the last word that was left hanging in the air, directly erupting into a fit of sobbing. Tess shot another glimpse in the direction of Renaldi but he had left her

side to mill about the living room. Stopping at the vista-viewer table, he peered down at something before wordlessly waving Gale over where the two began talking in hushed tones.

Turning her attention back to the job to be done, Tess picked up again with her line of questioning.

"So it was dark in the bedroom?"

"Yeah, pretty dark. I..."

An indeterminable time passed in which it seemed nothing more was forthcoming. Mr. Telmor appeared then to fall into a near-comatose state, staring at the floor with a slack-jawed, glazed expression.

"Mr. Telmor?"

"I just wish I would have come home earlier."

"I understand. Just one more question... do you usually go to bed with your clothes on?"

"Huh?"

Again the victim's fiancé seemed bewildered. Tess motioned toward his bloodsmeared appearance.

"Your clothing."

Incomprehension quickly giving way to anger, Mr. Telmor frowned as he snapped out a response, his voice rising dramatically.

"I was whipped, okay? It was three fucking o'clock in the morning -"

"Or four o'clock."

"What?"

"You said it was more about four or four-thirty when you went to bed."

"What-fucking-ever! It was late and I just wanted to hit the sack, so I only got my jacket and tie off before I crashed. Is that a crime?"

Tess ignored the question but duly noted his defensive manner.

"I see. So you lay down partially clothed and when exactly did you realize there was something wrong?"

"When I touched her," Mr. Telmor said, the resentment in his voice subsiding. "I wrapped my arms around her and stroked her arms. That's when I felt the ties and... freaked out."

Could be, Tess thought to herself as she watched his words print out on the miniscreen that, having retrieved from her pocket, she now held in her hand. Or maybe, just maybe, something or someone else caused Chase Telmor to "freak out". Was it possible that the man opposite her accidentally stumbled onto a scenario that he was less than jazzed on?

"What happened after that?" Tess urged, her voice and manner never changing from sincere and professional.

"I scrambled back and hit the lights and," he stopped then, his eyes widening in shock. "She was... she was..." he tried to explain but the words just wouldn't come.

"That's fine for now Mr. Telmor. However, we will need you to go down to the station to make a statement. Detective Renaldi will accompany you."

"Am I a suspect?"

"Right now, you're a POI."

"What's that?"

"A person of interest. If you will get yourself together, the detective will take you on down."

Turning to flag Renaldi over, Tess almost collided with him as he stepped up close to mumble in her ear.

"Take a look at this."

Taking a step back, Tess looked down and squinted at the clear zip lock baggy in his hand, a square dark object, newly collected by Gale, within.

Seizing the packaged evidence, Tess moved into the light of the hallway, immediately noting the stylized writing on the item before flipping over the plastic bag. On the reverse side, there were no additional markings on the rectangular shape inside. Turning it back over, she peered closely at the small red lettering neatly centered on the black business card.

BLOOD BYTES Inc. Vampire Escort Agency 888-6666

Chapter Three

Saturday night

Even before the twenty-something, shellacked Twiggy that manned the front desk of Blood Bytes Inc. spoke to her, Tess deduced the girl was a certifiable twit. With her voice lowered to a conspiratorial tone, the receptionist alternately whispered and tittered girlishly into the mouthpiece of her headset while she twisted an indefinite number of strands of her bleached blonde hair around her index finger, the long bony digit garnished with a silver ring that rested just below the first knuckle.

Glancing up, the young woman's delighted expression quickly faded as she saw Tess and Renaldi standing before her. Unbeknown to her, this was the pair's second visit to the downtown agency that day. Earlier they had arrived at the high-rise office suite with its double frosted doors embossed and plain block letters that read *Blood Bytes Inc.*, but the hours posted at the entrance stated the workplace didn't open until six p.m., as did the organization's vista-viewer answering machine message. It was now six oh two and Tess was eager to speak to the head honcho of the firm.

"Hang on," the petite Barbie doll, decked out in low-rise capri pants made of amber and plastic and a revealing, lace and latex tank that was embossed with the name of the hard rock band *The Frantic Fireballs* as she cast a sweeping, disdainful glance over Tess' attire. "May I help you?"

"We'd like to speak to the person in charge."

"Do you have an appointment?"

The snippy tone of her voice hinted at superiority—a virtual impossibility given her age, position and rather obvious lack of brainpower.

In response, Tess merely flashed her badge, inwardly smiling at the alarm that registered in the receptionist's black-lined eyes.

"Just a sec."

Pressing another button on the switchboard, the front desk clerk spoke softly into her mouthpiece to announce their presence, her eyes warily shifting from one officer of the law to the other. Nodding, she indicated the area behind them.

"You can have a seat. She'll be right out."

Tess didn't bother to thank her. Pivoting, she headed toward the lounge-like nook that was decorated, not so surprisingly, in black and red. A large abstract piece of live art nearly covered one wall. A collection of sharp angles and planes, the two disproportionate faces situated in the center and mildly reminiscent of Picasso's style moved and morphed into different positions and expressions to imitate a live conversation. Intrigued, Tess perused it closely, trying to get a line on the artist's vision

and mood but as was the case with so much art—be it live or, like in the old days, static—it left her baffled and emotionally unengaged. That is, with one notable exception, Vincent Van Gogh. Since she was a little child Tess could always pick up what the Impressionist artist was putting down both on the canvas and beyond it.

Abandoning the quest for connection, she turned away as unconsciously, her hand lifted quickly to her throat where she depressed the square pendant located at the centre of the choker around her neck therein initializing the sonic mind block device situated within the standard piece of jewelry. The apparatus created a kind of internal energy field that prevented any "alien" voyeurs from accessing the mental imaginings of another, an especially important precautionary tactic when in the presence of a vampire.

Where once the telepathic tendencies of the immortal had been downgraded to that of myth, it was now a well-known fact that the undead could read human thoughts like a book and even draw upon their past memories as well. As a means of self-preservation, it had therefore become common practice to wear the personal cerebral obstructers, thus giving a whole new meaning to the old phrase "I need to clear my head."

But Tess, like all the other humans on the planet, switched the microscopic force field contained within the universal piece on and off at will depending on where they were and who they were scheduled to interact with, a custom that, needless to say, left an opening for error. Plus the fact that the vampires who walked the world today were so human-like in every other way, causing their clairvoyant abilities to occasionally slip one's mind, added to the possibility of making mistakes too.

Just then, a cool, detached voice met Tess' ears.

"Good evening. I'm Tamela Hawthorne—the owner of Blood Bytes. How may I help you?"

Tess circled around at the sound of the chilly tone that bore the slightest trace of a foreign accent. Walking toward Renaldi and her was a tall woman, her height and sleek movement bearing the unmistakable air of a runway model. Her long dark hair flowed in straight, silky lines down either side of her chiseled face, which was flawlessly painted and contoured similarly to the faces on the canvas beyond. The soft shade of burgundy on her manicured fingernails perfectly matched her lipstick and accompanied an inch-wide strip of red that ran down the left side of her hair.

An expensive two-piece suit of black polyurethane clung to her curvaceous body, the jacket dipping low enough to reveal an impressive cleavage, while the just-above-the-knee skirt showed a fabulous pair of legs that were made all the more fabulous by a pair of four inch black patent leather boots that rose to just above her knee. Everything about the vampire madam spoke of beauty, elegance and money but beyond her stunning appearance, Tess sensed a nearly imperceptible predatory vibe emanating from the bordello's proprietor.

"I'm Detective Monterey with the New York Force and this is Detective Renaldi. We're investigating the homicide of Sara Greenwood and would like to ask you a few questions."

"How dreadful," Tamela said serenely. "This city is getting more and more primitive all the time, but I don't see how I can be of any assistance. I don't believe I know anyone by that name."

"We have reason to believe that the victim may have been a client of Blood Bytes."

"Perhaps. Many people are. Even so, we have a strict policy of client confidentiality here. People's privacy must be protected at all costs."

"Understandable. But this is a murder investigation."

Tamela only stared at Tess, very clearly unwilling to budge. Renaldi looked warily from one woman's face to the other, waiting out the uncomfortable silence. After a tense few moments, Tess pulled out the big guns.

"If necessary, we can get a court order to access your client database."

A glint of something flashed in Tamela's eyes and Tess immediately identified the fleeting expression. Unless Tess was very wrong, a rarity to be sure, all indications were the chic-but-steely Ms. Hawthorne was not only unaccustomed to being questioned, but was more than a little put out at being forced into a corner. With an internal smirk, Tess mused that if there were such a thing as a poster child for control freaks-turned-closet dominatrices, Tamela Hawthorne would get the job hands down.

"I see. Follow me."

With a walk that Tess, watching from behind, was certain contained enough pop and punch to dislocate one or both hips of the woman she followed, Tamela led them into a separate office and, closing the door, motioned for them to take the two chairs facing the large imposing structure of her glass and sapphire desk. Sitting down behind it, she began tapping away rhythmically on the keyboard situated on the sliding panel underneath the desk's top, her steel gray eyes locked on the 3D computer screen situated to her left. As she did so, pictures and profiles of the Blood Bytes client and escort database rose up to float and slowly rotate just a little ahead and on top of the monitor, offering a 360-degree view of each selected image.

"Here it is," she began. "Sara Greenwood, Client SG1972. Yes, she has used our service before."

Tess noted the strawberry blonde hair and pale freckled face of the victim as it gradually revolved in front of her.

"When was the last time?"

A few more taps on the keyboard.

"Last night."

Tess and Renaldi swapped looks.

"Who was the escort?"

Tamela glanced down at the screen in front of her but no corresponding image sprang up. Instead, she merely raised her eyes to stare at Tess with the cold, unflinching gaze of a cat watching a bird pre-pounce, the latter bracing herself for another outcry about confidentiality. Instead, Tamela's full, painted mouth stretched wide to reveal even white teeth and after a few seconds of uncertainty, Tess came to realize Tamela was smiling. Granted, the grin was one befitting a shark, but it was a smile nevertheless.

"He's to die for. Not that you would have much basis of comparison."

Clearing his throat, Renaldi shifted in his seat and looked at Tess who, squelching the quickly rising desire to leap across the desk and throttle the icy vampwhoremonger within an inch of her life, opted out for an icy retort of her own.

"That's true, I don't sleep around like those in your profession so I'll just take your word for it."

"You'll have to. His fee is more than your annual salary."

"Good thing I don't have to pay for it then, huh?"

"Okay, okay," Renaldi abruptly cut in, attempting to diffuse the tense verbal volley. "If we can just get this guy's name and address, Ms. Hawthorne, we'll get out of your hair."

Tess looked at Tamela, the veneer of the latter's oh-so-perfect persona shattered by the overhead fluorescent light that played off a lone gray strand amongst Tamela's black and red streaked tresses. Looking down quickly, Tess struggled to smother the grin at the words that bubbled up within her.

Yeah, Grandma, every dyed bit of it.

In a leisurely fashion that Tess just knew was drawn out in an effort to irritate her, Tamela oh-so-slowly took a long, slender pen from the container attached to the side of the desk and making a couple of flamboyant scribbles on a nearby note pad, tore off the single sheet of paper and handed it to Renaldi.

Quickly reading the escort's name and residence, Renaldi looked up in question at the domineering madam.

"Do you have a picture?"

"No," Tamara lied. "But believe me," she cooed, her eyes locking with Tess as she spoke, "you'll know him when you see him."

Chapter Four

Devante Matiero's loft was located on the Upper East Side, an airy and elite penthouse that overlooked the East River on one side and the sprawling conurbation of Manhattan including Central Park on the other.

Thanks to a population that had long since exceeded the housing capacity of the city, the majority of New Yorkers lived in single living units—small, compact but fully contained cubicles. Only the very rare individual was able to secure a double living unit—twice the square footage of its single unit equivalent—and entire floor lofts, such as the one that Devante Matiero inhabited, were exclusively reserved for the exceptionally wealthy and well connected.

Buzzing the resident complex keeper, Tess and Renaldi quickly gained admittance to the secure building. Having left the agency and come directly here, they were hoping to catch the vampire escort who had visited the victim the night before he headed out for the evening.

Crossing the marble floor of the lobby, they came to stop in front of the night watchman's desk. Clearly approaching sixty, he was still a fit and attractive figure, his close-cropped white hair strongly contrasting with his tan skin and striking blue eyes.

"How can I help you folks?" he asked, rising to his feet. Clad in a military-looking ice blue nylon shirt and pants that were embroidered with the logo of *Manhattan Manor Lofts* he looked friendly and approachable.

"We're here to see Mr. Matiero," Tess replied, quickly adding as she handed him her identification, "Police business."

After peering at it closely for a moment before returning the ID folder to its owner, the guard didn't miss a beat nor show the slightest sign of surprise or concern.

"Certainly. He's in 9702. Take the skytram to the top floor, turn right and take the hall all the way down. Is he expecting you?"

"I doubt it," she said, offering over her shoulder as they headed for the tram transport. "Best leave it that way."

"Of course."

Two minutes later, Tess and Renaldi cautiously approached the top floor suite, slowing considerably at the sight of the living quarters' open door. Calling in, Tess unconsciously fingered her weapon as it pressed, reassuringly, against the left side of her ribcage.

"This is the New York Force. Anyone home?"

When no response came, Renaldi and Tess regarded each other in silence. While technically not breaking and entering, they didn't have a warrant and therefore

shouldn't enter the premises without the resident's consent. However, as was the case with all things, there were ways around it. As if reading her mind, Renaldi offered one possible out.

"We might have heard something inside that demanded immediate investigation..."

Damn but she hated it when he was right.

Pushing past him, Tess took the lead and guardedly walked through the doorway. Her hand firmly clutched the small golden Reyno laser snugly secure in the shoulder holster preparing to pull and point it if necessary. She, like Renaldi, had changed into the standard contact gear—a customary practice for any detective or officer out on call to a POI or suspect's residence—and the weapon was part of the get-up. But if Tess had her druthers, she wouldn't fire on anyone—her hesitancy to use excessive force considered to be a strength by some and a weakness by others.

"Mr. Matiero?" she called to the dark, silent space.

Just then a woman rounded the corner that separated the hallway from the living room, carrying a basket of clothing. With a penetrating shriek, she dropped her cargo, a steady and agitated stream of Spanish spewing from her lips at the sight of the two weapons that were now aimed in her direction.

"Whoa, whoa," Renaldi said, slightly lowering the muzzle of his piece. "Take it easy. *Habla Inglese*?"

"Si," the woman replied shakily. In her mid-fifties, she wore a stiff, yellow two-piece plastic suit that was mostly covered by a plain yellow apron.

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"What's your name?"
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"Yes. We need to ask you a few questions, all right?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I clean. For Mr. Matiero."

"At night?"

"He sleep during the day."

That went without saying but Tess wondered if the housecleaner knew about her employer's—how would she put it?—*alternative* lifestyle.

"Is Mr. Matiero in?"

"No," she shook her head quickly, the movement loosening a few strands of her dark, curly hair from the loose bun at the back of her neck to fall in bouncy tendrils along either side of her face. "He go out."

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

[&]quot;Alaina."

[&]quot;Okay, Alaina. We are with the New York Force."

[&]quot;Policia?"

[&]quot;Si "

Alaina's eyes grew wide and she motioned emphatically toward the door.

"He just go. Come, I show."

With that, she hastily sped past the two detectives and fled out of the suite.

"Wait a minute," Renaldi called after the maid's quickly departing form as he gave chase, trying to catch up with the maid as she ran toward a neon sign at the far end of the hall that read *TO VEHICLE PORT*.

"Go on," Tess called out to Renaldi as he fled, replacing her Reyno into its holster. "I'll take a look around here."

Moving from the condo's entry, Tess walked into the large L-shaped space, slowly perusing the room, a long, slow breath of appreciation escaping her lips as she did so. She'd seen more than a few bloodsuckers' pads but this was something completely different.

Decorated almost completely in white and light oak, the entire area had the breezy, cool feel of a Malibu beach house, so much so that one nearly expected to look out and see the ocean crashing along the shore a few hundred yards away. That is, if one could see out.

All and any views afforded by the condo's towering vantage point would have been spectacular, but each of the suite's full-length windows was completely covered by mechanical soundproof shutters with a silver, metallic finish that were set to automatically open and close with the rise and fall of the sun. As if on cue, the silver mantel clock atop the broad stone fireplace struck seven p.m. and the mechanized shiny shades rolled upward to reveal the glitzy city lights far beyond and below, as viewed in between the streams of neon-lit A3s.

The soft shade of silver present in the shutters was similarly picked up and threaded throughout the four thousand five hundred square foot dwelling by various modern works of art, shiny end tables that flanked the rectangular white leather sofa and the flat plasma multi-worldwatcher that was mounted on the wall opposite, just above the white mantel of the white stone fireplace. Furnished with an array of screens within the screen, a multitude of different broadcasts played from around the world showing the latest and greatest in a number of areas. In Japan, a red-haired Asian woman decked in the full geisha attire of old fluttered her fans and sang for an enthralled audience, a sex den in Germany flashed evocative images of a client expose complete with scantily clad women and dimly lit meeting rooms, the white gleaming surface of περβωй – the latest Russian spaceship – glistened in the early morning sun as it prepared for its return voyage to Juniper, the green fields and fresh flowing rivers of the once-frozen Antarctic filled another screen.

Looking beyond, Tess noticed a number of porcelain sculptures placed randomly around the room that further contributed to the area's commitment to the fair palette, as did the floor-to-ceiling rounded white pillars that existed in lieu of full walls, allowing an unprecedented view from one compartment through to another.

Always a fan of the vibrant color that was pretty much commonplace in décor around the city, Tess would have expected such a sight would strike her as bland, cold and boring, but there was a luminous, clean feel to the room that she found both refreshing and uplifting.

Heading through an ornately curved archway to the right, she wasn't surprised to see the color scheme continued on in the dining room area, with its modern glass and pewter chandelier, and just beyond into the spotless kitchen, complete with a slanted skylight and roll-up shutters. They were open and she could glimpse the stars overhead, beyond the zooming lines of passing A3s, twinkling in the azure blue of the night sky. Decades of ozone cleansing had finally returned the sky to its original indigo shade.

Curious to confirm her suspicion that the bedroom also contained the silver and white combination, Tess moved past the glistening silver of the nuker and froster to loop around through the hallway, past the reading area chock full of books, slides and a ton of assorted perusal material, to the space set aside for sleeping and other horizontal pleasures.

Suddenly Tess' finely tuned sixth sense began to tingle and spinning around she started at the sight of a figure standing in the suite's entrance, effectively filling the doorway and blocking her exit.

"May I help you?" he asked, both the rich, low tone of his voice and his brooding dark looks sending an unexpected chill down her spine.

"Devante Matiero?"

The vampire nodded slightly but remained rooted, leaning in a sexy devil-may-care way against one side of the frame. Without so much as a conscious thought, years of habit had Tess absorb the details of his appearance in a mere flash.

He was tall and built, no two ways about that. His black boots led the eye up to a skintight pair of black latex pants that were second-skin-snug against his thighs and cradled a mighty-fine looking package. Moving up, the luscious lower half of his body gave way to his ripped torso as spied through the shimmering black gossamer shirt that covered it. Dusted with gold, the sheer garment was laced up on either side with a procession of leather straps—the see-through fabric clearly exhibiting an especially impressive six-pack. However it was the searing black-eyed gaze regarding her from behind silky strands of his dark hair that really put the icing on the cake. Talk about sex in a stare.

"Mr. Matiero, I'm det..."

"Detective Monterey with the New York Force. Yes I know."

Ah yes. The mental acrobatics of the immortal and their renowned clairvoyant abilities—but hang on! She had switched on her sonic mind block well back at the agency. In fact, Tess made it a habit to never leave the precinct without initializing the contraption so how was it that the dangerously handsome figure with the dark expression who was slowly strolling toward her knew her name? Dispassionately grabbing the conversational ball

from her court, Devante continued. "How can I help you?" Unlike many of his contemporaries, he didn't get the slightest charge out of toying with mortals or making them fall, dumbstruck, at his feet—something that came as easily to an immortal as breathing did to a human. That having been said, he did sometimes resort to using his supernatural charm as a way to get out of a sticky situation. And already knowing the reason for the pretty detective's visit, he had to privately admit this was pretty sticky.

"Mr. Matiero, we're investigating a homicide. A client of Blood Bytes was found murdered in her living unit last night."

"We?"

By now Devante was standing right beside her and as he casually reached around her to pick up a set of keys that lay on the table behind her, the soft scent of his aftershave wafted past to drum up the butterflies in Tess' stomach and send them flapping their wings at warp speed.

Sucking in a quick breath, Tess willed her pounding heart to slow and internally examined her unusual response to the person opposite her. What the hell was the matter with her? She'd seen her fair share of hot, cold-blooded bloodsuckers before. So what was it about this guy that made her pulse skyrocket? Maybe it was just because she hadn't had sex in God knows how long—certainly not since she and Renaldi split and that was, *eek*, over a year ago.

Clearing her throat, Tess determined to return her focus to the business at hand, starting by taking a few steps back. Faltering slightly, she motioned over her left shoulder, momentarily forgetting that her partner had given chase to the POI's housekeeper.

"Detective Renaldi and myself."

Devante followed her gesture beyond where they stood and after a leisurely look around the suite, his gaze fell upon her once more, his dark eyes drawing her in and rendering her immobile, as did the evocative tone and words that followed.

"Unless you're seeing something I'm not, there's no one else here. Looks like we're alone."

Tess waited for some response to spring up inside her to Devante's observation that there was, in fact, just the two of them present, but for the first time in a long while, the feisty female investigator was at a loss for words. In fact, a lengthy and awkward silence followed the suggestive statement and in those following few moments Tess grew only more flustered at the fact that the vampire could hear the pounding of her heart. Never one to be shaken by either confrontation or chemistry, Tess now found herself both afraid and aroused—a strange but exciting combination.

Further heightening the intensifying tension that existed between the two of them, Devante slowly took yet another single step toward her, closing the physical distance that separated their bodies to very definitely invade her personal space and that stunned her. She was not one to be barricaded or backed into a corner unwittingly and yet she was starting to feel a little of both. More alarmingly still, Tess was not entirely

sure she was displeased with the sensation. Even so, her right hand dropped down and she reassuringly touched the grip of her laser, ready to pull it from its holster if need be as she inwardly grappled with her fight-or-flight response.

Although she had been keenly aware of Devante's presence and every move of his sublime shape since he had first walked through the archway of the opulent suite, he very apparently possessed an absolute knack for sliding his shape closer to her than she was comfortable with and doing so in such a way that the movement went completely unnoticed—surely a vampire technique if ever there was one. The entrance to the expansive loft was possibly some thirty or forty feet away from where Tess stood and yet it seemed as if, suddenly, the delicious dark soul was smack dab in front of her, breathing down her neck with those blazing black eyes and pouting full lips only inches from her own.

And just like a few moments before, Tess again became aware in the nicest way of his musky aftershave—the gentle aroma this time mixed with the enticing scent of clean hair. Even more startling was the waft of warmth that emanated from his tall, lean figure. Previously Tess had known the undead to be as cold as ice but there was definitely heat rising from Devante's fine form turning her on.

Dazed by her aberrant reaction to the immortal, Tess was thankful when Devante carried on, because for some unknown reason she had yet to ascertain, she felt as though she couldn't speak even if her very life depended on it.

"What's all this got to do with me?"

While Devante already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask, he wanted to hear it from the detective in that strangely appealing raspy voice of hers.

"The client was Sara Greenwood – the same Sara Greenwood that you visited last night. As you are one of the last people to have seen her alive, we'd like you to come down to the station and answer a few questions."

Tess couldn't be positive but she thought a spark of surprise flickered in Devante's eyes before the atmosphere within the searing darkness was replaced by a steady emotionless milieu. His next question when it arrived wasted no time in cutting to the chase.

"Am I under arrest?"

Having informed many suspects of similar news throughout her time with the New York Force, Tess had never seen quite as unruffled and direct a reaction and that fact alone piqued her inquisitiveness.

"No," she replied slowly, "but I would advise you to come down voluntarily."

"Voluntarily. Right. And if I don't?"

Though not evident on his face, the smirk was clearly present in the tone of his voice. Another strange choice on the part of this POI and how appropriate a title that was for him, Tess thought, for this was indeed a most interesting person if nothing else. This non-pulser either was very confident he would be eliminated as a suspect or just didn't care. Maybe there was another cause behind his nonchalant manner but even

taking into consideration the sometimes stoic personality of the vampire, the behavior of this impervious immortal was more than a little curious.

"We can get a legal document to bring you in for questioning if need be."

Eluding to his earlier observation that there was just the two of them there, Devante leaned forward slightly and whispered softly.

"Yeah? Well if you're going to tackle doing that on your own, you might want to use the handcuffs on me."

With the space between them considerably lessened and a nearly tangible sexual spark enveloping them, the suggestion of using the handcuffs on him magically morphed within Tess' mind into a radically different meaning from what he had intended and one that was considerably more suggestive in nature. Indeed, the sound of his low deep voice spoken so softly and close to Tess also worked to invoke a mesmerizing mental picture that immediately blazed in her mind's eye—that of Tess strategically straddling his restrained body to grind herself into that part of him which had grown stiff, shifting from her superior position only to torture every inch of body with her tongue, refusing his release—physical and sexual—until he was near mad with desire.

Stunned by the force of the unexpected imagery, Tess inwardly pondered if it was a genuine thought or if Devante had placed it there subliminally to sidetrack her as his kind was known to do. Heaving a deep sigh, Tess' hand tightened around her Reyno as she set out to abandon the frisky fantasy that was so distracting her and gain control of the situation once more, even if that meant holding off Devante's overwhelming charms at gunpoint.

Blessedly, the sound of quickly approaching footsteps snapped them both back to reality. Hastily she brushed past Devante, unaware that the slight jolt against his shoulder was enough to knock free her badge from her belt-loop where it fell silently on the plush white carpet. Just then, Alaina burst in through the open door to the suite, with Renaldi breathlessly bringing up the rear.

"There he iz. Ju see?" the cleaning woman said, waving a hand in Devante's direction while simultaneously shooting an irate glance at her employer. "I told ju he just leave."

"Yes you did," a winded Renaldi agreed, his eyes narrowing as he openly scrutinized Devante. "Both up and down the seven flights to the underground vehicle park." To Tess' questioning look, he quickly added, "the tram transport in the vehicle port is out of order." Then turning his attention to the engaging and elusive individual they had come there to see, he directed the breathless comment, "But it seems your trip was an awfully short one, Mr. Matiero."

When no confirmation or response came from either Tess or Devante, Renaldi was left to look from one to the other, quickly catching wind of the fiery remnants that flowed between Tess and the vampire and filled the air with a super-charged electricity. "So ah, Monterey...what's going on here?"

Still deliciously dazed from her close encounter of the hot kind, Tess found herself more than a little tongue-tied. While she struggled to regain her composure and conjure up some sort of appropriate response, Devante grabbed the opportunity to ease the awkward moment and turning, politely addressed Renaldi.

"Couldn't get far without these," he explained, jiggling the key ring he still had clasped in one hand. "I came back to get them. Detective Monterey was here and informed me of the situation."

"The situation. Ah-huh," Renaldi replied in a tone that reeked of disbelief. "And are you willing to answer a few questions at the station?"

Devante shrugged with a casual indifference and the words that followed mimicked his compliant mood, but as he spoke, his eyes locked with Tess' and held a promise for so much more.

"I'm all yours."

Chapter Five

It was just after eight p.m. when Kaylen Knight strode into Blood Bytes to check his messages and see who his Jills—an agency term for female clients—were for the evening.

Not that Kaylen's paying patrons were confined to the female population.

Just shy of his two hundred and fifty-third birthday, Kaylen didn't look a day over twenty, his androgynous, angelic appearance making him notoriously fashionable with both sexes.

As fashion went, Kaylen's style could best be described as a kind of grunge chic throwback to the twenty-first century, tossed-together layers seeming to be the key to his distinctive look. His tight, narrow, black latex pants that sat atop silver-buckled boots were contrasted sharply by the salmon-colored button-down vinyl shirt, tucked up into his pants on one side and left partially open to reveal a dark burgundy t-shirt underneath. A silver chain around his neck from which dangled a gothic pendant of black stone and pewter caught the eye, as did the thin silver buckle of his belt. Over all, he wore a shiny black blazer, the sleeves pushed up to show a hint of the pink shirt underneath. Looking decidedly trendy, there was also an underlying disheveled feel to his dress, as if he had just crawled out of bed and thrown on whatever he could find on the floor—which he probably had. Perhaps the insinuation was further heightened by the mass of soft, shaggy, blond-tipped auburn curls that fell helter-skelter along either side of his youthful face. Whatever the reason, tousled as he was, he looked positively delicious.

"Hi there," he purred at the receptionist, the slightest hint of a Southern twang dancing around the words. A Hoosier from Indiana, he had toured around Europe after his turning centuries ago before coming to New York last year. There could still occasionally be found a little straw in his speech. Leaning down ultra-close to his twit-like target, he shot a heart-stopping grin at the front desk clerk and brought his pouty, pink mouth close to her ear. "Whatcha got for me?" he whispered, his smile widening as he felt the young woman's body temperature and heart rate kick it up a notch.

Truth be told, Kaylen absolutely loved giving 'em what they wanted. Okay, well, that wasn't exactly accurate. In fact, when push came to shove, he couldn't give a fuck what they wanted. It was all about him and what he wanted—and what he wanted most was to make them squirm. He loved to watch, with his kind's notoriously detached demeanor, as these morally enslaved mortals fought against but were soon overcome by the crushing and uncontrollable feelings of lust that he could so very easily evoke. Hell, they damn near exploded when he held them with his eyes or when they heard the sound of his voice. Granted, it was deep, silken and sexy—so he couldn't really

blame them—but did they have to give up so easy? What he really wanted was someone who would fight. Play the game. 'Cause in the end, it was all just a game to him—and no one was better than him at playing it.

Having been with the agency since its opening—first in Italy nearly three years ago and then just a few months ago in New York, Kaylen's reputation for being hot, horny and more than a handful was securely unchallenged. Sure other immortal escorts in the industry were utilizing their supernatural powers to very systemically and quite effortlessly roll their clients' eyes back in their heads left, right and centre, but Kaylen was special. *Talented*. Not only was he hyped as being the best there was, he was also reported to be a copious lover—prepared to do anything to anyone, anytime, for as long and as hard as they wanted it. Some even whispered that his thirst for sex was greater than his thirst for blood—a virtual impossibility for a vampire—but one thing could not be disputed. Despite his nearly cherubic countenance, Kaylen Knight was an unabashed, absolute sex machine and the agency's number one stud. That was, until Devante Matiero showed up.

Not quite two months ago, the mysterious and somewhat aloof Devante Matiero, quickly took over the title of their most requested escort—an honor previously held by Kaylen. Without dispensing any details as to his personal history including how and why he landed on Blood Bytes' doorstep, the dark haired, intense-eyed vampire was immediately branded as different by fellow escorts and clients alike. Known for taking the high ground in all matters, Devante soon developed a reputation for being elegant, elite and positively ethereal in the bedroom—the devilishly delicious deliverer of an experience like none other. Not only had Devante become Tamela Hawthorne's favorite, a title Kaylen had once held, but by choosing to service a very select few customers, Devante's status as Blood Bytes most desirable stud soon grew to legendary proportions—a fact that made Kaylen Knight's blood boil. Turning his attention back to the wide-eyed receptionist and his reason for being there, he abandoned his deep-seated resentment and seductively attended to the matter at hand.

"Baby, I'm waiting," he coaxed, playfully nipping at her earlobe. "Now y'all don't want me to get impatient, do ya? 'Cause then I might just have to spank your pretty little bottom."

The young woman gasped, her eyes widening in both shock and sexual stimulation, her lips quivering as she gawked at the vampire's beautiful, smooth face, while likewise, he watched her, silently noting her awestruck expression.

Oh God how it made him want to bend her back over that desk and give it to her good, urging little *eeks* and *ahhs* from between her painted lips as he pounded her into paradise, but Tamela would fire his ass on the spot if he did. Uptight, arrogant and a total bitch to deal with once riled, Tamara was the decisive deterrent but even so, the thought still crossed Kaylen's mind to fuck the establishment and go ahead and fuck the receptionist.

The young woman looked down to nervously sort through several papers on her desk, soon shakily retrieving Kaylen's client list for the night from the pile.

"C'mon sugar," he muttered lowly, running his fingers down the length of her arm to her hand and the paper that was vibrating within the tight clasp of her grip. "C'mon and give it to me—huh?"

"I'll give it to you and I don't mean in a good way."

Kaylen straightened and sighed deeply before flashing an ear-to-ear grin at the sight of the quickly approaching figure, the fast advance of the luscious female punctuated by the click of high heels on the marble flooring. "Evening, Tamela. Why, you look real pretty tonight."

"Save it for your Jills, Knight. And lay off the hired help. I'm tired of replacing the receptionist every few weeks."

"Ah now boss, you can't hold me responsible for that."

"I can and I do. You got the last girl so flustered she couldn't even answer the phone right."

Kaylen shrugged. "Hey, I thought Knight Bytes sounded good."

Tamela shot him a frosty look that would give most people hypothermia from across the room.

"Listen, it's not my fault that they find me..." he glanced down at the girl who was watching the back and forth flow of the conversation between the two vampires like a spectator at a tennis game, "...attractive." With a lop-sided sneer, he winked at her.

"Yes it is and you know it. I mean it. Quit turning it on."

Kaylen did his best and most convincing simulation of innocence, his eyebrows shooting heavenward in a comical attempt at appearing surprised. "Turning what on?"

Tamela ignored the question. "I'm not joking Kaylen. This is your last warning. I don't think I need to remind you of our arrangement."

For a split second, the threat infuriated Kaylen and his large blue eyes flashed and deepened into a dark and dangerous royal blue—the change of eye color a vampiric trait that signaled a strong shift in emotion. Tamela had the goods on him—a trick from way back that got out of hand—and it was something that he had permitted her to hold over him. For now.

Lowering his gaze, he fought to regain his self-control and when he next spoke, his voice was deceptively modulated and pleasant.

"No, no you don't."

"So we agree? The staff's off limits—right?"

He glanced up and grinned that disarming man-child smile.

"Yes, ma'am."

Tamela turned to go but ever needing to have the last word and push the envelope just the slightest bit, Kaylen called out, his querying tone causing her to stop and slowly revolve around to face him. "Oh boss?"

Tamela looked at him expectantly.

"Just wondering... As owner of Blood Bytes you're technically speaking not staff, so does all this off limits business apply to you too?"

To this, Tamela actually threw her head back and laughed—a deep, throaty echo that sounded anything but amused.

"Oh Knight. Not in a million years."

Pivoting back, she strode into her office and shut the door.

Again, that slow, sexy, Southern smile lifted one corner of Kaylen's mouth as he muttered quietly under his breath,

"I can wait."

He had once been at the top of her list and he would be once again. But for now, the night was young and so was he. There were places to go and people to do.

Turning his attention to the set of date deeds he had in his hand, Kaylen saw that his night was going to be a full one with no less than nine eager beavers queuing up for his still much sought after services, not the busiest he had ever been by a long shot but it would keep him hopping.

Sorting through the sequence of papers in his hand and eyeing the names of the client on each, he spoke aloud, more for the benefit of the receptionist than himself.

"Now let's see who tonight's line-up of the luckiest people on the planet are..."

Chapter Six

One hour later, Tess and Renaldi were down at the precinct, walking down the blazing white hall en route to a briefing with another pair from the homicide unit who were to conduct the interrogation of Devante Matiero.

"Hey I meant to tell you earlier," Renaldi said motioning to the choker around her throat. "Your sonic mind-block indicator went black back at that POI's place."

A black mind-block meant only one thing—the microscopic batteries contained within the miniscule mechanism were dead, thereby stopping the energy wave necessary for obstructing mental intruders.

With a groan, Tess squeezed her eyes shut.

The POI Renaldi was referring to could be none other than the devastatingly gorgeous Devante Matiero. While this important information was now arriving a few hours too late for Tess to keep her former inner most thoughts, not to mention, uncalled for and unexpected desires, out of Devante's reach, it did however explain how the vivacious vampire had managed to infiltrate Tess' private mental musings.

"Thanks," she said flatly, switching to the system's auxiliary battery supply as the two came face to face with the other detective team that was set to question Matiero. The second unit had both just come from a progression of tactical maneuvers at the south side base—a mandatory monthly exercise for all members of the Force. Consequently they were dressed in standard strategic gray and white attire, but that's where the similarities between the two partners ended.

Mader was a short stout man with a receding hairline and a nasty scar running down his left pockmarked cheek. Routinely used for undercover work with the drug squad, the twenty-year veteran on the Force could damn near scare anybody straight by his looks alone. Of course his reputation for a tough-as-nails approach and a short fuse didn't hurt either.

By contrast, his professional other half, Perreault, was the polar opposite. Cleanshaven, neat to a fault and absolutely anal about doing everything by the book, the relative rookie had had more than one clash with his older more experienced colleague but somehow they managed to work well together in a classic combination of good cop, bad cop.

Some on the Force suggested that the only thing that kept Mader from escalating his quickly becoming notorious conflicts with Perreault beyond that of a verbal tussle was the fact that the latter was a vampire, thus making it exceptionally unwise to advance any altercation to a physical level. Not only could Perreault snap Mader in two without so much as a thought, but the media circus around such an occurrence would be hard for the Force to live down. With approximately one third of the cops in New

York being of the undead variety—the highest ratio anywhere in the world—if a dispute ever did take place between a human and immortal on the Force, someone, somewhere would play the ol' prejudice card and all hell would break loose across the country.

The scent of freshly-brewed lemojave—an intoxicating mix of coffee and lemon—wafted down the brightly-lit hallway as the four stood going over the findings at the crime scene, along with what information—of which there was precious little—was available on Devante Matiero. In fact, for all intents and purposes, it would appear that the last person to supposedly see Sara Greenwood alive didn't even exist.

"It's like he has no past," Perreault said his thin lip twitching as if to suppress a sneeze. "That is, before two months ago when he showed up and registered with Blood Bytes."

"Wonder what the interview process is like for that place—huh?" Mader said with a loud booming laugh that burst out in a single-syllabled *Ha*!

Tess ignored the abrasive senior partner and focused on his professional other half.

"What do you mean no past?"

"Just what I said. The guy is a ghost. There is no record of where he came from and no paper or computer trail linked to his name, his personal security code or his retinal scan."

"He couldn't have been born two months ago," Renaldi said, stating the obvious.

"Why not?" Tess asked, her sarcasm drawing a light smile from Perreault before he continued on.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. There's not a shred of information anywhere on this character."

"Assumed name?" Mader said.

"Do you think?" Perreault countered.

"Unless the finders department of the Force is woefully inadequate," Renaldi said, holding his hands up in self-defense at the chorus of guffaws that met his comment, "there must be something somewhere on the guy. If not, then he must be using a false alias and if so, the real question then becomes why." Renaldi's face brightened. "Hey Perreault, can you use any of that voodoo mind shit of your people to uncover the reason?"

Tess inwardly rolled her eyes. Renaldi may be a lot of things including diligent, hardworking and committed to pulling the pieces together, but politically correct he wasn't.

Perreault just shook his head at Renaldi's prejudicial pick of words before answering. "Not if he's blocking me, which I'm sure he will be, but I'll do what I can."

The old vampire block. Where humans had specially designed appliances to keep others from taking a trip inside their noggins, their immortal counterparts simply had to put up a psychological wall to deflect the admission of others. Neat trick.

Whether because of the reference to mind reading or in spite of it, as further discussion of strategy and motives continued Tess found her own mind drifting. She knew Devante was being contained but a few steps down the hall in the interrogation room and in an odd, indefinable sort of way, she could feel him. It was nothing that made any sense, hell, she couldn't even verbalize the sensation if asked, but she could sense his presence somewhere deep within her. While the feeling wasn't entirely unpleasant, she strongly suspected he was merely using his vampiric prowess to, not so much pick her brain, but rather to place himself spiritually within her so she could *feel* him somehow. Forcing herself to concentrate, Tess turned her attention back to the group.

In addition to Devante, the four detectives also exchanged notes on the homicide unit's recent interrogation of Chase Telmor, just as he was led past them in a crumpled heap en route to the DNA lab. Still trying to secure his smoke store alibi, the second team didn't have the evidence to classify the victim's fiancé as a suspect just yet, but the gut reactions of the interviewing unit felt there was something more than meets the eye with the distraught groom-to-be, particularly as his father, Senator Jonathon Telmor, was raising absolute hell over the whole incident. With files and notes, feedback and intuitions swapped, the second investigative team poised to conduct their second interrogation of the night, broke away from the tight circle and walking down the hall, entered into a small room.

Tess and Renaldi had a date at the coroner's office but as they passed the examination holding bay, Tess abruptly veered off, entering through a nearby door, Renaldi's not-so-soft inquiry at her unexpected departure following her as she went.

"What? Where ya going?"

"Just give me a minute."

Once inside, Tess took the four steps up to the second door that led into the narrow observatory. Pulling it open, she entered the room, breathing a sigh of relief as it closed behind her. Across the way and slightly below her she could spy the interior of the interrogation chamber. Now with several feet of cement and two-way glass between them, for the first time since she had met the mysterious Devante Matiero she felt safe and secure enough to scrutinize the hell of out him and maybe, just maybe, uncover the reason why he set all her alarm bells ringing and not all of them disagreeably.

The compact stuffy space was dark and empty except for the large viewing window that took up two-thirds of one wall and the beefy, broad shape of their superior, Captain Warner.

"Monterey," Warner curtly nodded.

"Captain."

Tess moved to his side and together they peered into the questioning cavity on the other side of the glass. Equally void of furniture, it consisted only of a long metal table and a set of four metal chairs placed in pairs on either side.

By now, Mader and Perreault had entered and after briefly introducing themselves to Devante, they took the two chairs nearest the glass and sat down with their backs to Tess and the Captain to face the figure opposite them. Mader in his usual brusque and unpolished manner, plunked down a thin file folder in front of himself, casually leafing through its contents.

Seemingly unaffected to the point of appearing bored, Devante looked exactly as he had in his penthouse earlier but only now, he wore a long dark overcoat that served to, for the most part, hide his fabulous shape. Sitting quietly, he waited for the proceedings to begin.

Leaning forward, Mader inched his chair toward the table, the movement creating an ear-piercing high screech along the linoleum floor—the sound effectively drowning out the hushed entry of Renaldi into the observation deck. Moving to take a place just behind Tess, his whispered question of "What are ya doing?" startled her and she gasped aloud, the sound drawing a wary look from their superior.

"Quiet," she hissed, pointing emphatically toward the chamber and the verbal examination that was just about to begin.

Below, Mader placed a black recording device in the centre of the table and pushing one of the many buttons on the thin recorder's face commenced questioning the pretty nearly perfect POI—or at least, pretty nearly perfect in appearance.

"For the record, please state your name and place of residence."

Cool and confident, Devante answered in a steady even tone that matched his gaze as it fixed upon the older cop's face.

"Devante Matiero, 722 Manhattan Manor."

"How long have you lived there?"

"Approximately two months, give or take a few weeks."

"And what was the address of your former residence?"

"I previously lived in Florence."

Perreault's eyebrows shot up.

"I take it you're not referring to the one in South Carolina?"

"No."

"You're a long way from there now Mr. Matiero," Mader continued. "What brings you so far from home?"

"It's not really my home. I just lived there for a while. I like to travel."

"So it would seem. Tell me, why aren't you in our landed immigrant file?"

Devante deadpanned him.

"I don't know."

"All aliens are registered there upon entry into the United States but strangely enough, you didn't show up as a visitor or a resident. Can you explain that?"

"No I can't. Glinch in the system maybe?"

"Maybe," Perreault said softly, "or maybe you're flying under our radar. Why would you want to do such a thing?"

"You tell me."

The two vampires eyed each other respectfully in the silence that followed. Then Perreault continued.

"I'd rather you take a shot at your explanation for this, ah, discrepancy."

Showing little or no emotion, Devante only shrugged, the pressure the immortal half of the detective duo was applying to him seeming to have no effect.

"As I said before, I have no idea why I am not in your system. I came here a couple months back."

"Why?"

"I already told you, I like to travel. I thought New York would be as good a place as any to..."

"Hide out?" Mader prompted, inching his massive form closer to the table.

"...visit," Devante replied. "I wanted a change."

"I see," Perreault said. "How long after you arrived here did you begin working?"

"About a week."

"Without a personal security code or retinal scan?" Mader asked.

"I applied for both at my new place of employment and was told it would be handled by them. When I heard nothing further, I assumed it had been."

"And who is your employer?"

"Blood Bytes Inc. They didn't submit the code and scan on my behalf?"

"Oh they did," Perreault said, "but that doesn't help us with your whereabouts before your time with Blood Bytes."

While he did a pretty good job of concealing it, Tess could detect a trace of disgust in Mader's voice, the disdain he felt a little more apparent in the question that followed.

"What is this Blood Bytes anyway?"

"It's New York City's most prestigious escort agency."

"For bloodsuckers?"

Clearing his throat, Perreault jumped in and taking the reins, tried to redirect the potentially inflammatory comment.

"What my associate means to ask is if Blood Bytes is a vampire escort agency."

Unfazed, Devante answered Perreault, however his eyes remained rooted on Mader.

"Yes it is."

"See now I never did understand what exactly that is," Mader queried, a decidedly snarky pitch to his voice. "In this sort of 'relationship' who are the real vampires—the escorts or the clients?"

Devante smiled then but it was an expression that failed to reach the rich dark brown of his eyes. The long sharp points of his regular eyeteeth just skimmed the curve of his bottom lip in a way that was both frightening and seductive in a sort of potential preview of things to come. When aroused in any way, be it lust, anger or fear, these teeth would elongate and grow to twice their current length, ready to pierce the flesh of anything they came in contact with.

"The escorts."

"You can say that again," Mader mumbled under his breath. Ignoring him, Perreault resumed the questioning.

"Can you tell me, Mr. Matiero, where you were last night between the hours of midnight and three a.m.?"

"At the living unit of a client's."

"What was her name?"

Just then a sleek, tanned man, European in dress and appearance, stepped into the room, effectively halting the proceedings mid-session. Striding toward the table, he eyed Mader, then Perreault before extending his hand and smiling warmly.

"Excuse me gentleman," he began, his soft voice carrying a hint of a French accent. "My name is Jon Renier and I am Mr. Matiero's attorney. I believe, by law, I am required to be part of this conversation."

"Pleasure to meet you Mr. Renier and thank you for joining us," Perreault began, motioning toward a chair beside Devante. "Please do take a seat. This is just a preliminary chat with your client—nothing official. We're merely trying to determine his whereabouts and interaction with the victim of a recent homicide."

"I can see that. Oh. Is that a tape recorder?"

Perreault spread his hands out before him in the universal sign for *whoa, back off, take it easy* and generally speaking, *slow down*.

"Now, don't go jumping to conclusions. We're just trying to get the facts down accurately."

"Excellent idea."

"But this is not a sanctioned interrogation and therefore, there is no formal need for you to stay."

Mr. Renier, who had already taken a seat, shot a starched look at Perreault.

"But by all means, feel free to stay if you wish."

Tucking in the fuchsia cravat at his throat into the double-breasted dark jacket that wrapped his slight frame, the well-dressed lawyer smiled.

"I intend to. Thank you."

"Can we continue?" Mader posed with just a hint of irritation.

"Please," Renier replied with a wave of his hand.

Mader returned his attention once more to Devante who throughout the momentary interruption compliments of his attorney had been sitting very still and collectedly.

"Now. The woman, your client. What was her name?"

Devante hesitated.

"I'm not sure that I'm at liberty to say."

"We have already consulted Blood Bytes and secured the name of the woman but for the record, we require you to confirm her identity."

Mr. Renier nodded his agreement and indicated to Devante that he was free to supply the information requested.

"Fine. It was Sara."

"Sara what?"

"Greenwood."

"And what was the purpose of your visit?"

Devante looked at his attorney for a moment before answering, the slightest bit of uncertainty once again preceding his response.

"I think you can figure that one out."

Mader's face turned a bright shade of crimson and he swallowed hard, clearly struggling with the overwhelming desire to beat the living daylights out of Devante.

"Yeah? Well you know what I think? I think you'd better answer the goddamned question."

Mr. Renier leaned over and whispered something in Devante's ear. Straightening up, the latter once again locked eyes with the volatile detective.

"I was there to provide a service."

Mader's sharp exhale was interrupted by Perreault, who shooting a hard look at his professional partner, directly took over the inquiry.

"We appreciate that Mr. Devante, but can you be more precise?"

Again Devante exchanged words with his attorney and this time, Mr. Renier posed a question.

"You want to know the details of their arrangement?"

"We want to know why your client went to this woman's living unit."

"He already told you that. To provide a service."

"What kind of service?"

Mader blew up.

"Oh for Christ's sake! Am I the only one who's starting to get dizzy from this merry-go-round? Now we know you're an escort and we know Ms. Greenwood was your client but we still need *you* to state for the record why you went to her unit last night."

Mr. Renier began to speak but Devante held up a slow hand to silence him, then looking directly at Mader provided the group with the obscure answer.

"I went to Ms. Greenwood's living quarters to have sex with her."

"Thank you!" Mader replied dramatically.

"And she paid you for this?" Perreault confirmed.

"That's generally how the business works," Devante answered acidly, a note of cynicism dancing within the response. Ignoring it, Perreault proceeded.

"Had you visited this woman for this purpose before?"

"No."

"Had you visited this woman for any other purpose before?"

"No."

"Had you ever met Sara Greenwood before last night?"

"No."

"So how did she hire you?"

"Word of mouth."

"Excuse me?" Mader posed sharply.

"My picture and profile is not on the agency's site. I work strictly on a referral basis."

"Referral basis. How's that work?"

"Like any other kind of referral scenario. Former clients recommend me to other potential clients. The word just gets around."

"I'll bet it does."

"Okay, could you walk us through your evening with Ms. Greenwood step by step?" Perreault took over. "You arrived at her unit at what time?"

"Just before midnight."

"Then what happened?"

"She invited me in and we talked for a few moments."

"Talked?" Mader sounded sceptical.

"Yes."

"About what?"

"She was a little nervous, so we discussed how things were going to go down."

Was that a Freudian slip, Tess wondered, or did he purposely choose such a seductive expression? While she was certain one or both of the interviewing detectives would have picked up on the turn of phrase—especially Mader—neither one remarkably stopped to acknowledge or question Devante's use of words.

"Then what?"

"Then we got down to business."

"How long were you..." Perreault paused to clear his throat. Was it possible he was embarrassed by the subject matter? He did look uncomfortable but Devante only regarded the younger cop with an even unflinching gaze.

"Getting it on," Mader offered, shooting an irate glance in Perreault's direction. "How long were you getting it on with this client of yours?"

Devante didn't falter.

"Two hours and thirty minutes."

"Non-stop?"

"Continuous, yes."

"Wow, impressive," Renaldi's whispered comment filled the viewing room where he, along with Tess and the captain stood watching the dialogue.

"Ssssh!" Tess said without turning around.

"Just like that?" Mader persistently pried into the details of Devante's last trick on the other side of the glass. "Two hours and thirty minutes exactly?"

"To the minute."

"You're sure of this?"

"Positive."

Mader's face screwed up in a comprehensible show of incredulity.

"Now how could you possibly know a thing like that? Whaddaya keep a stop watch by the bed?"

For the first time since the questioning began, Devante looked up past his interrogators, his gaze piercing the two-way glass to lock on Tess, the serious eyes completely void of any emotion. Swallowing hard, Tess could feel her heart rate pick up under his unwavering stare, even though it was a virtual impossibility for him to see her through the guarded glass. She could also feel his presence within her again and with it this time, came a passing wave of *his* discomfort at the personal grilling—an uneasiness at the bright spotlight that was being shone on this sensitive and normally confidential area of his life.

"We're waiting," Mader prompted, the comment serving to pull Devante's penetrating gaze away from Tess.

"I am very precise about my work."

"No shit."

"And you were..." again Perreault seemed to struggle with the sensitive nature of the case, "intimately involved for the entire duration of your visit?"

"Yes, except for the few minutes at the beginning which I already told you about."

"Right. Now run that by us once more. You went to Ms. Greenwood's around midnight, chatted for what? Ten to fifteen minutes?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Then engaged in sexual activity until two thirty a.m. after which time, you left. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"What condition was Ms. Greenwood when you left her?"

"Condition?"

"What shape was she in?" Perreault tried to clarify.

Mr. Renier, who had been sitting quietly the entire time, suddenly leaned forward and raised an objection to the question posed.

"How on earth is my client able to assess and determine another person's status? He is neither a doctor nor a psychiatrist!"

"Granted," Perreault conceded. "We're not after the cold, hard, irrefutable fact of the victim's physical or emotional well being. Rather we are interested in Mr. Matiero's perception of and opinion about how his client appeared to be feeling when he left."

"I'll answer that," Devante offered, ignoring the slight frown that crossed Mr. Renier's face. "She was elated."

Elated. What a nice word, Tess thought silently, and not one you hear every day. The sound of the word on his lips seemed to take on a deeper, darker meaning than simply excited or thrilled and as she watched Devante shift his weight slightly to lean back in a more comfortable and infinitely more alluring pose, she found herself wondering what other phrases would morph into something quite different when spoken by his marvellous mouth.

"I meant her physical state."

"Oh. She was... satiated."

Another excellent sounding state that, when flowing from his mouth, seemed decidedly more desirable than before he spoke it.

"Oh for God's sake," Mader blew up again. "Was she alive?"

"Very much so. Exhausted, but alive."

Despite leaning close to her ear, Renaldi spoke so low, Tess had to strain to hear him.

"So what do you make of this guy?"

"I don't know. He's very obviously a master at playing it cool so he could be hiding a ton and we'd never know but..."

"But what?"

"I don't know. There's this other part of me that kind of...believes him."

"Yeah and I bet I know which part."

Tess jerked around to glare at him, her whispered voice slicing the air like a knife.

"Not all of us have one-track minds like you Renaldi."

"Hey, can we focus on the action down there?" Warner's chided comment quieted down the heated interaction.

In the room below under the blisteringly bright florescent overhead lights, Mader was continuing to grill Devante. Flipping through the file folder that contained info and images of the case, he then very purposefully switched the tone and direction of the interrogation.

"Tell me, Mr. Matiero, do you ever venture into any sort of alternative behavior?"

Mr. Renier directly intercepted the question.

"My client's lifestyle has no bearing on this case."

"Possibly not. However we have every right to inquire to the nature of his encounter with the victim."

"The details of his encounter with the victim can be discussed, but his personal practices in general, or practices with other clients, are off limits."

"I could argue the latter as it may indicate a possible precedence of behavior with his clientele. However for today's meeting, we will stick to his interaction with Ms. Greenwood. Therefore, Mr. Matiero, you don't have to tell us whether or not your work at Blood Bytes with other clients may or may not involve alternative behavior. However, you do need to tell us whether or not your encounter with Ms. Greenwood involved actions of that nature."

"Actions of what nature?"

"Bondage, whips, that sort of thing."

Once more Devante's gaze floated up lazily and locked on Tess, the dark orbs shifting for a split second to a soft tan shade that she was shocked to correctly interpret as the transitory loss of composure. Quickly recovering, he answered in his usual candid manner.

"I never do anything my client doesn't want me to do."

"Good to know but that doesn't exactly answer the question."

"May I suggest you ask my client a specific question as opposed to a generalized information hunt?" Renier bristled.

"Fine. Did you tie up Sara Greenwood?"

Devante paused, that slight wavering on his part urging an empathic rush of awkwardness within Tess and yet, for the love of God, she didn't know why. With every beat of her heart, she detested everything this guy was and stood for. Oh yeah, he was hot, hunky and absolutely to die for, with a smile that would make Mother Teresa swoon and a body that any Calvin Klein underwear model would murder for. Amazingly he didn't seem to be the most arrogant individual Tess had ever encountered—a small miracle in itself—but then again, he had to think pretty damn highly of himself to do the kind of work he did. And let's not forget he, in all probability, just offed one of his clients. Why on earth she should feel this inexplicable sense of compassion was beyond her. Closing her eyes, she awaited his response to the

question as to whether or not he had used restraints on the victim. At his anticipated answer, Tess' heart skipped a beat.

"Yes, I did."

Mader and Perreault exchanged a quick look before Perreault resumed.

"To what did you tie her?"

"The bed in her rest corner."

"What did you use to restrain her?"

"Scarves."

"Yours?"

"No, hers."

"You just happened to find four silk scarves in her place?" Mader asked.

"No, she had them out. I told you, it's what she wanted."

"What else did she want?"

Devante looked down at a point on the table, his voice growing a little softer.

"The usual."

"Now you're just gonna have to enlighten us there 'cause I strongly suspect what you consider usual is a little bit outside of the norm."

Tess felt the change in Devante seconds before it became apparent to the others. Suddenly infuriated, his black eyes flared while his chiseled handsome face grew dark with resentment. Leaning across the table, he lowered his voice to a menacingly low tone and when he spoke, he spat out the words from between gritted teeth, his eyeteeth now protruding well below his bottom lip.

"Foreplay and fucking—that's the usual, or is that deemed freaky and foreign by you, you fat fuck?"

Standing so fast and with so much force that his chair shot out from underneath him and clattered noisily against the back wall, Mader hauled off and punched Devante square in the face, the loud crack of the blow resonating in the cement-walled room. Tess' audible gasp and Warner's bellowed "Jesus Christ!" erupted at exactly the same time immediately afterward.

"Easy!" Perreault shouted, also getting to his feet and moving quickly to pull his partner back and away from the suspect and his lawyer with ease.

"I believe this interview is over," Mr. Renier calmly announced as he rose. Only Devante remained seated, casually wiping at the blood that poured from his nose with the sleeve of his coat.

"That as shole..." Mader started to protest but Perreault, in a show of obvious strength that shone a spotlight on this vampire identity for the first time in the interview, forcibly guided his partner to the door.

"Outside!" With a concentrated huff and a shaky smoothing back of his hair, he then did his level best to rectify the horrible misconduct.

"Look, this has gone terribly wrong. There's absolutely no excuse for my partner's behavior and you've every right to bring this to a close for now. We do have more questions and I must advise you that we will require some DNA samples from your client."

"What's that going to prove?" Devante asked. "I told you I was with her."

Mr. Renier offered the explanation to Devante who eyed him curiously.

"They need to compare your samples with the evidence found at the scene. It's standard in such a situation. Actually it could work in your favor."

"How do you figure that?"

"Depending on what they retrieve from the victim's body and her room, for example, the presence of another DNA donor, then the search broadens with the potential for you to be eventually eliminated as a suspect. But for now, come. We're done here."

With a wordless nod, Devante rose to his feet and followed his lawyer to the door. Holding it open, he lingered momentarily before slowly pivoting around to look one last time at Tess, their eyes locking in silence for a heated moment. A thin stream of blood slid down from Devante's nose to trickle over the curve of his top lip. With a slow sweep of his tongue, he licked at it, his eyes burrowing into Tess as he did so. Then turning, he left the room empty and Tess attempting to slow her hammering heart.

Chapter Seven

"I'm telling ya," Renaldi began as he shoved the remnants of a cherished ancient delicacy from the old world into his mouth with one hand and steered the airborne police cruiser with the other. The hot dog was a fat rolled strip of pressed pork or beef nestled between two pieces of cooked wheat and then slathered with onions, butter and a thick golden liquid with a tangy bite. "This guy is playing you like a violin."

"Yeah? Well it takes one to know one."

"Aw, c'mon Monterey. Gimme a break, will ya?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Why? Because I'm tired of you giving me the gears every time I turn around. It's been over a year and..."

"No, about the suspect. Why would you say he's playing me?"

Renaldi raced into the far right air lane without signaling, the high-speed illegal maneuver drawing an auto-warning from the overhead street intercom.

Transport unit number 667A99W, illegal lane change witnessed, photo and summons sent to Detective Darwin Renaldi, Precinct 2, New York Central.

Renaldi reached over and punching a sequence of numbers into the dashboard ticket monitor, effectively reversed the recently issue ticket. With a sharp exhale, he finally answered her question.

"Oh gee, let me think. Well for starters, the guy's a paid-for-hire ho. He knows how to play the game and probably, in his own defense, does it so unconsciously by now that he himself doesn't even know that he's doing it."

"I don't know about that, but go on."

"Secondly, he's in one hell of a pickle. Chances are he just flatlined his last paying customer and now he's prepared to do whatever it takes—including making you fall for him—to get away with it."

"Maybe. But it doesn't really matter what he's prepared to do because whatever he's selling, I ain't buying."

"Yeah right," Renaldi cackled in his horrendously gauche way. "He's a disgusting specimen of a pig and you wouldn't touch him with a ten foot pole."

"No," Tess replied eyeing the tall black marble portico of the coroner's office as they pulled up to the air dock. "That's you."

Once inside, they donned their scrubs and entered the examining room, soon after coming upon Shelley Marquese, chief medical examiner and diagnostician extraordinaire. Tall, lean and lanky, Shelley had the perfect body for long-distance running but had by choice chosen to spend her days and some of her nights dealing with the dead. With the puckered brow that was a frequent addition to her long face, Shelley stood over the corpse of Sara Greenwood. As always the brightly lit but cold examining chamber carried the unmistakable and nauseating combined scent of formaldehyde, decomposing flesh and latex.

"Hey Shelley," Renaldi called out.

"Hi kids. Y'all know I love to see you but would one of you mind telling me where the frickin' fire is?"

With autopsies normally reserved for daylight hours, New York's finest slice-and-dicer, as Renaldi called her, was not in the practice of conducting an examination at ten p.m. But Captain Warner's orders insisted the job be done within twenty-four hours of the body's discovery. To Shelley's query, Tess could only shrug.

"I don't really know all the ins and outs of it. What I did hear is the fiancé's family, some well-connected political bunch from down South, are pressuring the department to resolve this quickly."

"Hmmm," Shelley said, pursuing her lips together. "Gives you guys another avenue to look down, doesn't it?"

"For sure," Renaldi piped up. "That guy was acting pretty weird."

"He'd just lost someone he loved," Tess said, trying to push down her irritation at his insensitivity. "You wouldn't know what that feels like."

"And why wouldn't I?"

Bonus. Renaldi walked right into the trap. Sometimes, Tess thought to herself smugly as she prepared to give him yet another good dig, he just wasn't very bright.

"'Cause you need to have a heart to love someone."

Ignoring the far-from-good-natured banter between the partners, Shelley leaned forward, her dark hair pulled back in a bun, her protective goggles giving her serious amber eyes a sort of walleye-fish look as she pulled and positioned the overhead laser dispenser into position.

"All right dear. Let's see what happened to you."

"Tell me something," Renaldi whispered in Tess' ear as Shelley made the first incision.

"What is it?"

"If I'm so out to lunch on you and this Matiero guy, then what exactly was going on between you and Casanova last night when I walked in?"

"What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?" he mimicked in a soft, girlish voice. "C'mon Tessandra, I'm not blind. By the looks of things, you and Vampire Valentino were getting ready to get it on."

"Oh, give it a rest, would ya Renaldi?"

"I'm serious. If you don't believe me, just ask his maid. She saw it too. Jes," he began in an affected Spanish accent, "ju and Senor Matiero were jus dying to..."

"Fuck off!"

"Exactly."

Shelley raised her head and studied her two colleagues. "You kids need a minute?"

"No we're fine. Sorry. Please. Proceed."

With that, Shelley punched a bunch of buttons located on the side of the examining table on which the body lay. Numbered markings that ran up and down both sides of the flat surface would give Shelley the coordinates for where to direct the incising laser.

"Goggles," she reminded the two detectives who quickly retrieved the plastic eye guards in each of the outfits' side pockets and put them on.

A slow buzzing sound was soon followed by a brilliant orange ray of electronic power, the thin line shooting from the overhead distributor into the cadaver's flesh. Starting at one shoulder, the beam went down to the mid-chest area, up across to the other shoulder and back to the mid-chest point again before moving straight down to the pubic region, its journey leaving a large Y-shaped opening on the body with little or no bleeding resulting from the invasive slit.

"Besides," Tess whispered under her breath, "what's the story here Renaldi? If I want to screw this guy every which way from Sunday, what do you care?"

"I don't want to see you get hurt."

The *Oh Pa-leeze* look on Tess' face would have been comical if it were not tinged with the slightest hint of pain.

"Oh right, I forgot. That's a pleasure reserved strictly for you."

Renaldi opened his mouth to respond but Tess waved him off, effectively silencing him with a sharp *Ssssh*!

"Not a lot of blood," Shelley mumbled as the machine completed the introductory incision.

"Maybe bloodsucker Billy got carried away, drained her and forgot to give her a BBP," Renaldi said.

BBP. That was short for its street name — blood back pill. In actuality, hemostrozignen tresamplimidifide was a powerful drug primarily available in hospitals to greatly accelerate the human body's blood reproduction. Used in place of a transfusion or any situation in which a great deal of blood was lost, it was quite factually a lifesaver.

"Could be. At this point, it's hard to say. Since a dead body has no blood pressure except that produced by gravity, there's no bleeding to speak of after death."

"So if he killed her first with, say, a blow to the skull, that might explain why there was little blood from her wounds."

Shelley nodded.

"Possibly. But there is no evidence of external trauma to the head so far. If something turns up once we get inside that points to the brain, we'll take a look there then," she said. "And to do that, we would make a second incision across the head, joining the bony prominences just below and behind the ears. What's great about this kind of opening is when this section is sewn back up, the mark would be concealed by the pillow on which the deceased's head rests."

"So I could club Renaldi like a baby seal and after you got through with him, no one could tell?" Tess asked hopefully.

"You got it."

Tess leaned close and said in a low voice, "We gotta talk."

"Can we just get on with this?" Renaldi asked sourly.

By now, the room was filled with the pungent odor of the flesh around the incision that had been burnt to a crisp by the powerful laser.

"What is that stench?" he asked.

"It's from the superficial fascia."

"The what?"

"The hypodermis or third layer of the skin. The region is used mainly for fat storage and it is the liquidation and evaporation of those fat cells by the laser that you are smelling."

That was one of the things about the medical examiner that Tess liked the most. With a solid number of years under her belt in the field and a continuity of published books on her work, Shelley could easily bury anyone beneath miles of technical jargon and superior scientific knowledge, but that was never the case. Attending an autopsy with Shelley was more along the lines of going to coroner class 101.

With an opening now created over the abdominal cavity, Shelley retracted the soft tissues in front of the chest, swearing softly as one slippery segment of flesh evaded her grip.

Shooting a quick glance in Renaldi's direction, Tess smiled to herself at the somewhat queasy expression on his face. Remembering his tendency toward a weak stomach she seized the opportunity for a little payback.

"How's that dog sitting?"

"Shut up," he snapped.

Punching a couple more buttons, another laser beam—this one neon green in color, appeared to cut through the cartilages that join the ribs to the breastbone. After the ray ceased, Shelley leaned down to more closely examine the ribs themselves.

"See here," she pointed to a couple of thin dark lines situated on one of the upper spokes. "These are new fractures."

"New? How new?" Tess asked.

"Very recent. Within the past twelve to fourteen hours."

"Caused by what?"

"Blunt force trauma."

"What do you mean? Like a punch or kick?"

"Could be," Shelley nodded, peering more intently at the marks. "Or could be from the paramedics' attempts at cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Sometimes they break the ribs trying to jumpstart the heart."

In a weird sort of way, Tess secretly hoped that was the case. It wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility that Devante had, as Renaldi suggested, gotten carried away and had gone a little animalistic on the woman, forgetting to give her the BBP afterwards to heal her wounds. But the notion that he purposely beat the victim sent a shiver of loathing down her spine that she neither could nor wanted to reconcile with the good-looking companion.

Using a manual device to spread the lower region of the abdomen, Shelley then set out to free the large intestine.

"Aren't you going to go in order?" Renaldi asked faintly.

Shelley stopped and eyed him.

"In order?"

"Yeah, from the top down. You know, commence in the chest and do the heart, then the lungs, like that."

"Honey, it's all coming out so it really doesn't matter what gets pulled first, now, does it?"

Renaldi gulped.

"I guess not."

Inserting her gloved hands into the abdominal cavity, Shelley began drawing out the large intestine. It took some time to remove the yards of limp, white, wavy tissue. This particular expulsion never failed to turn Renaldi a light shade of green.

"Aren't you glad you didn't have lasagna?" Tess murmured to him, suppressing a laugh as he abruptly turned and raced from the room, his sudden departure drawing a questioning look from Shelley. "Men are such wusses."

Wordlessly Shelley nodded in agreement before continuing. Moving back up, the chest organs, including the heart and lungs, were next manually removed after being liberated by strategic blasts of the laser, than weighed on a large grocer's scale and set aside for future inspection.

"This may be something," she said with a concentrated frown as she studied the weight on the overhead scale.

"What?"

"Her heart is a little enlarged. Nothing major but enough to warrant a second look. I'm going to run some tests and check for bacteria."

"Is that likely?" Tess asked.

"It's not impossible. At this point, we don't want to jump to any conclusions but we also don't want to rule anything out."

Next to be freed from the body was the thyroid and adrenal glands which were weighed on a chemist's triple-beam balance, sliced into small sections and then saved in a preservative solution. The remainder of the organs went into a biohazard bag, which was contained within a large plastic container situated at the end of the examining table. Following that came the exploration of the bile ducts and then removal of the liver.

"This is interesting," Shelley said as she held the floppy organ in her hand. Tess leaned forward to get a better lock at the knobby sinewy segment.

"What?"

"Her liver is too light, too orange and a bit too big."

"Maybe she was a drinker?"

"Maybe. Or this discoloration and size abnormality could be an indication of the administering of an external toxin."

Tess' startled expression showed up even behind the green productive glasses that covered most of her face.

"Poison?"

"Possibly," Shelley replied, unfazed. "We're going to have to do a biopsy. I'll poll some other areas to cross reference."

The extraction of a number of samples for chemical studies including blood, urine, bile and even the fluid of the eye followed.

"All this can work to rule out, or in, medicine, street drugs, alcohols and/or contaminates."

Shelley then turned her attention to the removal of the neck organs, large airways and lungs—all done in one piece through a very finicky and meticulous dissection.

"Our lady was a non-inhaler," Shelley said, noting the pink color of the conjoined organs. Dissecting the pair with a long knife, she examined the large airways and the great arteries of the lungs, Shelley evaluated the air space within based on the texture and appearance. "Looks pretty good here. I can just imagine what mine look like!"

A notorious five-a-dayer for most of her adult life, Shelley was known throughout the department for two things, her irrefutable detective skills on the coroner's table and her habit of using the mildly-addictive inhalants that had been the rage for the past hundred or so years. If state laws didn't prevent it, she'd probably have a puffer blazing up and going while she worked.

Moving down to the urinary system, Shelley skillfully directed the laser beams to dissect the kidneys, urethra and bladder before removing them by hand. "Sometimes we leave these organs attached to the abdominal aorta," she motioned with a plastic covered finger. "Me? I like to get them out into the light of day."

The digestive system came next including the esophagus, stomach, pancreas, duodenum, spleen and small intestine.

"I'm going to save a portion of the gastric contents to examine as another possible site for pollutants. Outside of a rape check, which I'll do after I bag and record all this," she gestured to the line-up of organs on the side table, "that's all we can do here now."

"Sounds good. When do you think you'll have the tox screens on everything back?"

"Usually could be done in an hour or so. But right now? I'd say a day or two. We're backed up pretty good and short staffed in here."

"Can't Carson or Gale give you a hand?"

"Carson is overloaded with the samples collected at the scene but Gale? God I wish he would give me a hand if you know what I mean. He's such a sweet little thing I could eat him whole."

"Shelley!" Tess said more than a little surprised at the normally reserved older woman's confession. "He's like twenty years old."

"What's that got to do with it? We all need a little loving once a while. In the end, if you like him and he likes you, what difference does age or any other kind of difference make?"

True enough.

"Then why don't you just go for it?"

Shelley pushed her goggles up on her head and stared at Tess.

"I don't believe in mixing business and pleasure. I like my job and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize it. Besides, I find him so darn distracting now. Can you imagine what it would be like if I boffed him? For the love of God, I couldn't even stand to be in the same room with him!"

"Shelley!" Tess laughed, Renaldi arriving as if directed by some divine providence, just in time to catch the tail-end of Shelley's sentence.

"Can't stand being in the same room with whom?"

Loving yet another chance to egg him on, Tess pretended she wasn't aware Renaldi had entered and turning to Shelley, answered in an overly conspiratorial tone of voice.

"Oh I know just what you mean! It's just terrible when you can't stand working with someone. Oh, hi, Renaldi."

Again he read the slam for what it was and maybe even felt it, for instead of firing back like he usually did, Renaldi just smiled weakly. Wordlessly, he then turned around and walked back out of the room, leaving Tess to feel not gleeful and gloating like she usually did after delivering a good swift dig to the nether regions of Renaldi's ego, but strangely enough, she felt a little twinge of regret at willfully hurting another's feelings. Even if that other person really deserved it.

Curious as to what this change of heart meant, Tess found herself wondering if she was entering into a new phase of her journey with Renaldi—one that transcended the

bitterness and burning need for vengeance and moved into the quiet soothing waters of the final chapter in the story.

She dared to dream.

Chapter Eight

Sunday morning

The next morning, barely having slept a wink—or so it felt—Tess stumbled out of bed, exhausted and adorned with the most sensational pair of bags under her eyes.

Anytime she'd closed her eyes and drifted off into a semiconscious state, she was absolutely bombarded with erotic images of Devante Matiero—the mental visions, no doubt psychically sent by the vampire himself—exceedingly real in all ways.

If he wasn't driving his steel-like hardness into her from any one of a number of imaginative positions, forcing her from one explosive resolution to another, he was waging wonderful war against every single opening on her body with his skilled tongue and moan-producing mouth, her body trembling with each shattering dream release to the point where she would awaken to feel the sheets soaked with sweat and her wet, pulsing femininity engorged and nearly painful with lack of fulfillment. Up she'd get for a glass of water, a change of nightclothes and on one occasion, a quick pee before going back to bed where the whole sensual cycle would start all over again.

Damn Devante for sending his hocus-pocus-mind-voodoo thing her way. If Renaldi was right and that suckerslut was using his magnetism to divert and sway her, he had better be prepared for a fight. Hot or not, Tess was not going to fall over—either figuratively or literally—for any man.

That decided, first things first. She needed a distraction from the feelings that still shot through her body and a cold shower, not necessarily in that order.

After much hemming and hawing, Tess forced herself to go for her usual early morning run along the river, the dusty colorless light of dawn adding to her already grey mood. Upon her return, she checked in with Renaldi who was doing some background work on Blood Bytes and the bitch who ran it. He was also going to spend some time sniffing around in an attempt to find out something more on Devante Matiero. As was customary with partners working an investigation, they would split up, each following a couple of different leads and gathering what related information they could before regrouping and comparing notes every other day or so.

After their brief vista-viewer conversation, Tess chose the winter igloo setting for her shower, the icy water further serving to diminish her libido and brighten her understandably sluggish state. From past experience she knew that anything warmer would have only lulled her back into a slumberous condition.

With another standard department uniform delivered to her unit the night before, Tess donned the navy attire and headed for the office of Senator Jonathon Telmor—the victim's fiance's father and the primary pressure behind the family's request for a quick and quiet resolution.

A call from Captain Warner en route alerted her to the fact that the senator's son's convenience store alibi had been located and, in fact, checked out, effectively eliminating Chase Telmor as a suspect. With him confirmed to have been out buying smokes at the time of the murder, there was no possible way he could have been simultaneously at home killing his bride-to-be, unless Carson's estimated time of death was way off—but that was pretty much unheard of. The veteran was notorious for nailing T.O.D.s practically to the minute.

But this late-breaking news did not in any way effect Tess' plans to meet with the senator. Regardless of the fact that his son was apparently in the clear, it was routine to speak to family members, friends, co-workers and basically anyone even remotely connected with the deceased in the habitually hard-to-find hunt for a suspect and their motive.

The senator's headquarters were located in an upscale Manhattan tower kitty-corner to Central Park and just a couple of blocks down from where, ages ago, The Dakota—the former home of and shooting site of the slain ex-Beatle John Lennon—once stood. Now completely gutted, that once gorgeous elite condo building was now a multi-level entertainment complex. Massage parlors existed beside virtual reality sport sites where one could play alongside their favorite hero, exotic games rooms that featured sensory-laden safaris and underwater adventures could be found next door to uninterrupted cubicles where intellectual pastimes of skill and wit were played out between two or three participants.

Taking the skytram lift up to the 700th floor, Tess followed the petite, middle-aged receptionist of Senator Telmor's office into a private room. Standing at the windows looking out over the city, Tess noted how the odd beam of the early morning light had managed to poke through the overcast sky to dance off the surrounding buildings, but still did little to brighten the dingy day.

Once more reaching inside the right breast pocket of her uniform, Tess fumbled around for her identification folder that held her badge, an irritated breath escaping her lips as she tried in vain to locate the missing article. Moments earlier, she'd been unable to produce it for the front desk, utilizing her uniform and identifying her classified weapon instead as a means of verification.

Switching sides, she dug deep into the other pouch located on her back hip. Nothing. Where in the hell did she leave her ID? Thankfully the receptionist, noting Tess' telltale attire and laser, ushered her in without the necessary identification, offering as they went, "That's okay honey. I recognize you. I saw you on the news last week about the nuclear power plant explosion. Say, you look much shorter in person."

A sharp sound interrupted her thoughts, causing Tess to abandon her search for her badge and turn toward its source.

Walking toward her with an open Hollywood-type smile was Senator Telmor, his hand outstretched as he offered her a cordial but professional greeting.

"Detective Monterey."

"Thank you for seeing me so quickly and on a Sunday, Senator. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Yes, well," he hesitated, seemingly unsure of what to say next. Then turning he indicated the slight, nervous-looking little man behind him, who anxiously pushed at his wire glasses that persistently slid down to the edge of his nose. "This is my aide, Benjamin Matheson."

"Mr. Matheson."

Where the senator's handshake had been warm and relaxed, there was a wet noodle feel to Mr. Matheson's grip that automatically made Tess' skin crawl. Seeing her reaction to the harmless looking individual, Tess smiled at him directly determining she would keep her eyes and ears especially open while in his presence.

Moving to the chairs located to his right, the senator waved Tess on. "Please, sit down."

Taking the seat opposite him, she crossed her legs and switching on her recording device, pulled it out in plain view, noting that Benjamin hovered a few feet from the senator's side, almost as if he were prepared to jump out and defend his employer should Tess attack him in any way, shape or form. While many would view the behavior as loyal and professionally protective, there was an undercurrent of something else in the assistant's hanging-around manner that insinuated something quite different from allegiance to his boss.

Turning her attention back to the senator, Tess leaned forward and set the recorder she had just pulled from her breast pocket on the edge of the desk.

"I should let you know that I will need to record our conversation."

"Is that necessary?" Matheson piped up a little too sharply for Tess' liking.

"I'm afraid it is. Standard procedure."

"No problem," the Senator replied, holding up a hand to silence Matheson who had opened his mouth to speak—the signal holding a strength and definitiveness about it that visibly revealed he was not to be questioned on the remark. "I've nothing to hide."

For his part, Senator Telmor was a big beefy man, somewhere, Tess surmised, in his mid-to-late forties. Excessively well dressed and groomed to perfection, his dark hair and serious tan eyes presented a pleasant enough exterior. But there was an underlining tension to his manner that gave the impression he could snap at any moment, given the right, or possibly wrong, stimuli.

"That's good to hear. Well as I mentioned earlier, I just want to ask you a few questions about Sara Greenwood."

"Fire away."

"How long did you know Sara?"

"A year, maybe a year and a half. Chase had been going out with her for only a few months when he brought her home for the first time to meet the family and announce their engagement." "Wow, so it was a bit of a surprise."

"What was?"

"To meet your son's new girlfriend for the first time, only to discover that she is going to be your daughter-in-law."

"Was."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She was going to be my daughter-in-law," he made the odd distinction. "Yes, I suppose you could say that I was surprised by Chase's...choice."

Something was definitely cooking here but it would take a whole lot of digging before the slick politician who had made a career of just letting things slide right off him, would give up the goods. Tess made her best and warmest attempt at a sincere smile as she resumed shoveling.

"And did Mrs. Telmor share your feelings?"

"I would imagine she did. We didn't discuss it."

Another blazing oddity.

While Tess wanted to veer off onto the subject of the senator's wife and her reaction to her son's nuptial news, she knew that Benjamin, who radiated a kind of hate-tinged angst, would more than likely directly put a stop to the questioning. The purpose of this impromptu meeting was for the senator to shed whatever light he could on the victim, not his wife and his speculations on her thoughts, before being whisked away to his next political fundraiser.

"So, after that first meeting with Sara, did you see her often?"

"Not really."

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"Maybe once or twice."

"Over the course of a year?"

"Yes."

Tess wasn't entirely sure how to tactfully phrase this next question so just took a deep breath and asked away.

"In the past, had your visits with Chase been fairly infrequent as well?"

The senator paused and smiled that starched and practiced beam again, his eyes filling with that old I-know-exactly-what-you're-doing look. When he finally answered, his response was naturally understated and diplomatic.

"Chase and I have seen each other more often at other times but this past year, our schedules didn't permit it as much as we both would have liked."

Their schedules created the division or Chase's preference in a wife? This was going nowhere fast, so Tess decided to employ a different tactic.

"Senator Telmor, did you like Sara Greenwood?"

The senator and his adviser exchanged a very quick glance, a twitch in the latter's eye catching Tess' attention. Returning his focus to her, Senator Telmor sighed and leaning forward to relax his elbows on his knees, he began in a good ol' boy kind of manner.

"Let me be frank with you. No, I wasn't especially fond of Sara. But Chase loved her and I love him, so I had no alternative but to support my son in whatever and whomever he wanted."

Mind you, if Sara was not around, that would eliminate the problem. Wouldn't it?

"What exactly was it about her that you didn't like?"

Another deep breath came from the senator, his gaze shifting to the recording device before slowly moving back to Tess.

"Off the record?"

Without missing a beat, Tess reached over and flipped off the switch. Lucky for her, she had the audio equivalent of a photographic memory so whatever the senator was about to divulge, she could and would remember word for word.

The senator's decision was obviously making Matheson very uneasy. Rocking slightly from foot to foot, he began to gnaw at the nail of his left pinkie, his eyes boring into the side of the senator's head in trepidation. This reaction did not go unnoticed by the senator who, unruffled, suggested Matheson get a glass of water to help ease his helper's supposed symptoms of "the flu".

Tess was about to comment that the flu wasn't generally known for making people jumpy and nervy but chose instead to agree with the senator's attempted explanation for his employee's manner. As for the senator's request to keep what he was about to tell her just between them, Tess assented with a slight smile.

"Shoot."

"When Chase told me he intended to marry Sara, I naturally had a little background check done on her."

"With her authorization of course."

Senator Telmor tipped his head to one side, his expression shifting from one that exuded executive confidence to that of a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Now, now, it was nothing illegal, I can assure you. Just a routine look into her past, her family, her...lifestyle."

"I see. And what did this 'routine look' uncover?"

"Sara had a certain..." again the senator wrestled to find the correct words, "appetite."

The most pressing question however was how best to react to this possible insider news. Should she bring it all out into the open or act unaware and see what the good senator volunteers? Before Tess could decide, the decision was made for her.

"I'm sure your investigation has revealed that Sara had company the night she was murdered."

So he did know. Maybe not such a big surprise. For centuries, the inner mechanisms of the world of politics and all its many parts and people had been a remarkable exercise in manipulating facts and uncovering truths. With covert bodies and operations in existence everywhere, those in the political arena, especially the well-connected ones, were ever able to find out the dirtiest, darkest secrets imaginable and unearth them for all to see. However what followed was a little bit of a bombshell.

"And it wasn't the first time."

"Oh?"

"My sources revealed that for some time now, Sara liked to partake of this sort of...indulgence."

For some reason, Tess felt a little wrench of something along the lines of jealousy sprinkled with a bit of disappointment. Not only was it becoming apparent that Devante had "visited" the woman more than once, but if that were true, it meant he had lied to her.

"I see. Did Chase know about it?"

"Yes."

"And he was all right with it?" Tess asked, trying to keep the judgment and disbelief both out of her voice and off her face.

"So he said. Claimed it was one of these open type relationships. Utter bullshit if you ask me."

"Chase wasn't in the least bit resentful?"

"He said he wasn't. Said it was good for their...romantic life. Spiced things up."

"Did you disapprove?"

"Of course I disapproved but what could I do? Chase fell for the floozy," he said, his voice rising dramatically.

"Senator, perhaps you should calm down. We wouldn't want others to hear," Matheson said.

"I don't give a fiddler's fuck who hears me," Telmor boomed, directly standing up and stalking over to a waist-high cabinet across the way and pulling out a crystal tumbler and a bottle of a green colored alcohol. Throwing a mouthful in the glass, he tossed back the booze in one easy shot. Returning to his place opposite Tess, he loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shiny suit jacket then sat down having regained some degree of restraint. "Look," he began in a far more collected tone of voice, "what they had agreed upon was between the two of them. It was nobody else's business."

"Including you?"

"Yes, including me. But that was precisely the problem. Sara was making it everyone's business."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just say she wasn't exactly the most discreet person in the world."

"So she told a friend or two?"

"A friend or two? Hell, she regularly shot off her mouth about her vampire trick at Bodies Beautiful and Harrid's Hair Haven."

The former was a spa and morphing centre where you could either create the body you wanted the old-fashioned way, by working out, or take a short cut and auto-create the appearance of your dreams. Similarly, Harrid's which had become known around the world for its development in hair growth, was the beauty salon equivalent that gave people of all ages the do they had always wanted regardless of what they had to work with when they walked in.

Tess immediately remembered Devante's admission that his clientele base was created exclusively by word of mouth referrals.

"So she spoke of Devante Matiero to others?"

"Who the hell is that?"

The senator's abrupt question confounded Tess. Guiding him back a few steps, she reminded the senator of what he had told her only moments earlier.

"The escort she was with the night she was murdered. You had said she was not alone."

"Correct. But I never heard that name you just said."

"I'm sorry. I must have misunderstood you. I thought you said that the other night wasn't the first time Sara had employed—"

"That's right," the senator said with renewed annoyance. "She practically had a tab at this Blood Bytes place."

"Right. Blood Bytes Inc. Devante Matiero is an escort there."

"He may very well be but I don't see what that has to do with Sara."

Was this guy daft or did he just have a hearing problem?

"He was the escort that was with her the night she died."

"Oh really?" the senator's bushy eyebrows came together in a puzzled look that made him look like he was about ten years old. "Now that is weird."

"What is?"

"Her regular guy is a stud by the name of Kaylen Knight."

Chapter Nine

Sunday afternoon

A return trip to Blood Bytes, whether virtual or in person, along with the other must-visits on her investigative list would need to follow soon Tess determined as she drove midair through the downtown core. And if what Senator Telmor had said about Sara shooting off her mouth was in fact correct, then that news warranted a trip to both of the victim's makeover haunts.

But as it was still early in the day, Tess recalled the agency hours and opted instead to switch up her schedule a little.

After a quick bite at a busy downtown lunch port, Tess went into the precinct to get caught up on some age-old necessary evil, paperwork. In this day and age many things had been sped up, but unfortunately the world of police record keeping still required a degree of manual transference of recorded files from one hard drive to another, which translated into a number of hands-on hours, something Tess generally preferred to do on her own without the chatter, banter and generic bullshit that frequently went down at the precinct.

Walking past the front metal detector doorway, she raised a hand in greeting to the female security officer, astonished to discover the identity of the woman as she lifted her head as a monotone beep rhythmically sounded.

"Hey Desi."

"Hey Tess."

Desiree Ranchart, a part-Puerto Rican, part-black weapons specialist and Tess' best friend, who routinely liaised with the government was normally out in the field tracking down and bringing to justice those responsible for the Third World's domination in the arms race. To see her sitting watching illegal blips on a computer screen indicating foreign objects on the bodies of those who passed underneath the high-tech archway of security was an out-and-out shock.

"What are you doing here? Slumming it for a change?"

"Now don't you be giving me no lip, girl," she said, "And nice try, sending me off on a tangent, your B2 vaporizer is showing up. Don't you know by now you're supposed to take that baby off and pass it around the other side?"

"Yeah, I keep forgetting. Here," she added the temporary guard her weapon. "But seriously. What brings you in?"

Desi pointed with a wildly flamboyant gesture toward the computer terminal in front of her.

"This damn thing. I've been trying for the past hour and a half to classify and register a new pinhead grenade in the system so some asshole can't stroll in here with his iddy-biddy toothpick of an explosive and blow us all to kingdom come, but do you think this mother will recognize the code?"

Tess shook her head spreading her hands out as she passed through the plastic portico.

"Better you than me."

"Uh-huh. Don't forget your vaporizer. Say, you up for a drink later?"

"Nah, I got too much work to do."

"Girl, if you don't use it, it's gonna dry up."

"I know, I know," Tess laughed, heading on down the corridor, Desi's parting words following her as she went.

"One of these days I keep hoping you just grab the bull by the horns and start riding again."

Barricading herself in a quiet corner of the investigation division, Tess soon began hammering away at the keyboard, the entire afternoon speeding by as she processed the case's dreaded ton of transferable data. Umpteen departments needed the information she had collected to date and while automated forwards had been set up, other highly classified areas required codes, passwords and specific department authorizations. Sitting in front of a line of computer screens in one of the data entry cubicles, she was pleasantly sealed off from outside distractions. Even Renaldi was thankfully absent, appropriately enough having gone on some wild goose chase tracing information about a dark vehicle seen speeding away from the victim's residence around the time of the murder, or so his visual message reminder had said.

For over four and a half hours, Tess accessed the mountain of information and interviews she had been amassing since the start of the case, including those regarding the victim, evidence and both persons of interest. Tess was reviewing all the recorded information from her mini-recorder that had been transferred online and as the assorted dialogues were collected and transferred. In sequence, starting from her most recently gathered and going backward, there was her interview with the senator, the autopsy notes from Shelley Warner, Devante Matiero—both in the precinct and at his home, Tamela Hawthorne, Chase Telmor and lastly, an unexpected exchanged between Carson and Gale regarding herself.

With a heavy sigh Tess tuned into what had been the whispered conversation between Carson and Gale at the crime scene clearly revealing the young man's romantic interest in her. By discouraging him from attempting to woo Tess, Carson had effectively thrown down the gauntlet with his "she's not available" statement and given Gale's declared determination, Tess would have to be prepared for at least one valiant attempt to woo her.

Right on cue, a voice from behind startled her.

"Hey Tess, whatcha doing here?" Gale's cheery question served to break up her concentrated effort at getting everything wrapped up by five. She turned and looked at him, noting the bright, flushed face.

Oh no.

Tess adopted a blasé attitude, quickly looking back at the computer screen in front of her.

"Hey Gale. Oh, you know, paperwork."

"Ah yeah. Pain in the ass, isn't it?"

To this, Tess only nodded wordlessly, trying to communicate that she wasn't really in the mood for small talk but somehow Gale didn't pick up the hint.

"Are you almost done?"

"Yeah, close."

"Well, I was thinking, you know, if you're not busy and you know, have the time, maybe you could, I mean, you and I, well, we, could go for a drink or something..."

Crap.

She should have said no. Now she was going to have to confront his, whatever it was, infatuation and she didn't want to. Gale was a great kid, cute as a button and sharp as a tack but there just was no way, not now, not ever.

Tess looked at him for a lengthy moment. How had she missed this before? Was she too wrapped up in herself and her work or had he just suddenly decided that she was the greatest thing since sliced bread? Regardless, she was stunned deep down and very flattered but mostly just stunned. Bracing herself, Tess gently responded.

"Yeah, you know, I do have something on the go."

"Oh."

Though he averted his eyes quickly to hide the emotion that shone within, his disappointment was still palpable, radiating in a wave of hurt pride with so much force that Tess felt as if she'd had the wind knocked out of her. "Related to the investigation," she quickly added, wanting not so much to give him hope but rather to ease the rejection a little. Besides, it was the truth, or she hoped it would be. With nothing to do or no one to do it with, she might as well dig into the case and do some after hours work. "You know how it is. While on the job, there's no time for anything else."

This throwing of a crumb, no matter how small, seemed to appease him a little.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, maybe after it's all over?"

The aspiration in his voice was so strong that now Tess was the one who had to look away. How should she answer? She didn't want to lead him on but on the other hand, she didn't want to squash his feelings like a bug on a windshield. Maybe leaning toward something indeterminate was the way to go.

"We'll see."

"Yeah, I understand," he said, a strong light blazing in his brown eyes as a comforting air of maturity amazingly radiated from him, communicating to her that somehow he really did.

"I'm sorry, Gale."

"It's really no big deal," he grinned. "You're beautiful and I dig you but if you're not that into me or..."

"It's not that."

"And/or you're not over someone else," he continued ignoring the defensive gasp his last few words created in Tess, "it's cool. But listen to me for a second. Whoever this guy is and whatever he did to you, it's in the past. There's no point in crying over spilt milk."

"Where'd you get that one? The vocal archives of your great-great-great-great-grandmother?"

Gale only shook his head, the amethyst stud in his nose twinkling in the light.

"I just would hate to see you waste all of this," he motioned up and down the length of her body, "on someone who is too stupid to realize what he's got. Don't save it for someone who doesn't want you Tess. Give it to someone who does."

Ah. So this was where he was going.

"Meaning you?"

"Well, you know, if so inclined." Gale did a cute little cha-cha-cha step to physically punctuate his round about invitation. "But seriously. Don't waste it. If it's not me, then take a chance with someone else but don't lock up your heart because of one asshole. There's someone out there for you and when he shows up, all I'm saying, is don't push him away."

Bending down he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and left.

He was a good guy with very obviously a good heart and his words would ring in her ears for many days to come. But for now, there was still work to be done—for a start she had to catch a killer.

The very last entry on the tape however was an even bigger surprise than Gale's confessed feelings to Carson. Recording a remote phone conversation between a man and a woman, Tess immediately recognized Renaldi's voice and determining the conversation's place in the transcript queue realized it took place when Renaldi was in the kitchen while she was in the bedroom with Carson and Gale at the crime scene.

As the words of the transferred dialogue appeared on the computer screen in front of her, Tess pressed the *print* function and retrieved the printed out version of the two-way talk. Yanking the transcript of the two-page exchange from the nearby printer, she reread what she had seen on screen only seconds earlier. With Renaldi's voice having been registered with the system, the transcript recognized him as one of the speakers, but could not identify the other party.

Renaldi. How are you babe?

Female Voice. Better now that I'm talking to you.

Renaldi. So are we still on for Monday night?

Female Voice. I don't know. Are you ready for me?

Renaldi. Oh yeah. I think I can handle you.

Female Voice. Do you now? We'll just have to see about that.

Renaldi. When and where? You just name it.

Female Voice. What about Charmaine?

Renaldi. What about her?

Female Voice. I understood you two were a bit of an item.

Renaldi. Sorta, but that doesn't mean we both can't have a little fun on the side.

Female Voice. I see. I'm not interested in being a sideshow. I'm always the main attraction.

Renaldi. Baby, you play your cards right and I'll bump you up.

Female Voice. How kind of you.

Renaldi. I mean it. Me and Charme, we're not serious, but you and me? We could get very serious, you know what I mean?

Female Voice. I'm glad to hear that because I always play to win. No silver ribbons for me.

Renaldi. I hear ya. So how 'bout it? Feel like going for the gold with me Monday?

Female Voice. I could swing it.

Renaldi. My place then? At ten?

Female Voice. I'll be there.

The transmission ended, leaving Tess with her mouth hanging open. That incredible slug. First he went and screwed around on Tess with another woman and now he was doing the same to said stealer of boyfriends—not that his current girlfriend didn't deserve it. You know that old saying "what goes around comes around?" Well it was coming around and Tess could barely drum up any kind of sympathy for Charmaine Renata, the vampire escort from Blood Bytes Renaldi had taken up with. But it was still quite astounding to realize that Renaldi was trying the same trick twice. Surely he wasn't that unfeeling?

Or was there more here than meets the eye? Was Renaldi perhaps working some angle that he had yet to share with Tess and the Captain. If so, it wouldn't be the first time. He had a history of playing one side against the other in the interest of bringing down the bad guys. Understandably, this tactic always left Tess with a hesitancy to trust him. Not that he hadn't given her other reasons before to doubt him as well.

Whatever the situation, working beside Renaldi was going to be doubly difficult now and Tess couldn't decide whether she should confront him with her latest findings or simply ignore them. After all, both he and his love life were no longer any of her business and she certainly had no obligation to Charmaine. Until further information

could be uncovered about the transcript, Tess decided it was probably best and safest for all involved if she said nothing about the incriminating conversation and went on to handle as much as possible of the investigation on her own.

With the last segment forwarded to the appropriate departments and safely stored in the system, Tess glanced up at the overhead time indicator that floated over the automatic hidden doorway to the records room. The sun had gone down which meant one thing only...her primary POI would be just getting up.

Picking up the receiver and dialing the number for Blood Bytes, Tess asked to be connected with the agency's madam. After what was apparently becoming the routine amount of threatening and tense silences from Tamela Hawthorne, the call finally produced Kaylen Knight's address, complete with the snarky disclaimer "But he won't be there." Another round of verbal tooth-pulling resulted in the disclosure that it was the escort's night off which in turn brought out the reluctant admission that he regularly frequented a vampire hangout on the west end called The Black Rose on such rare occasions.

Armed with that news, Tess decided she would go there in search of the victim's preferred paid companion. If she didn't get a face-to-face with the vampire himself, surely she could collect some information.

But before she did anything else, Tess would have to get her badge. Unexpectedly struck with the notion of where the elusive item was, she steeled herself for the recovery mission that lay ahead.

Chapter Ten

Sunday night

Tamela Hawthorne hung up the receiver or more truthfully slammed it down from her conversation with that pain-in-the-ass detective Monterey. Bitchy, ballsy and downright brazen, the woman cop whose partiality for running the show could only be compared to her own, was like a bulldog with a bone—she just wouldn't stop until she picked the damn thing completely clean. The detective's persistence was truly bothersome, taking up some of Tamela's precious and closely guarded time answering a bunch of mundane questions that would undoubtedly result in absolutely nothing. But so be it—bring it on, Tamela thought with a stallion-like head toss that sent her long, dark tresses sliding about her shoulders as she reached behind the keyboard's sliding pull-out drawer and depressed the hidden button.

Getting up from her desk she moved across the room to a gigantic work of art on the west side of the office that actually posed as the invisible door that led into a spacious secret compartment. Once inside, Tamela inspected the rows of clothing and footwear that lined the three walls of the room, other items tucked away in a group of drawers that ran like a border along the base of the massive walk-in closet. But her thoughts were still on the importunate female detective—importunate at least to Tamela.

All throughout her life, Tamela's interactions with mortals, be it for culinary purposes or like in the old days before she started her own agency, client visits, had pretty much been confined to one-time events. In her line of work it was considered to be an occupational hazard to see the client more than once, lest one starts to develop "feelings" for one's paying customers—a completely preposterous idea if ever Tamela heard one! Still, it was a policy she herself adopted and never strayed from, the "for one-night only" rule following her into all her other communications with those next down on the food chain.

Apart from that strictly-adhered-to personal law, Tamela had always been bored to tears by the human simpletons she encountered. Easily used and abused, they were mindless and useless distractions but to find someone with a bit of spunk was actually kind of refreshing. It was rare to interface with one possessing a little bit of grit. In that way Detective Monterey was presenting her with a valuable commodity—a challenge.

As her hand came to rest on a fire engine red leather corset and thong set, Tamela, with a combination of irritation and begrudging admiration, couldn't decide if she should off the perky policewoman for her irreverent doggedness, or welcome her with open arms, making her an honorary member of the Mistress Macabre Club—a place where control was the name of the game.

A card-carrying member of the clandestine society secretly associated with Blood Bytes for over thirty years now, Tamela had jumped at the opportunity to express the more demanding side of her personality when Cherry, the founder of the Club and a friend of a friend first introduced her to the scene all those years ago. While Tamela had amateurishly been dominating the males in her life for centuries, both in and out of the bedroom, she really flourished under the expert tuition and firsthand guidance of Cherry. Long gone were her after-the-fact tinges of shame, or her before-the-act apprehensions. Now Tamela celebrated a raging assuredness and acceptance of herself as well as those she "managed". Better yet, she found a sense of power and freedom in her dark little dalliances that she could not get fulfilled anywhere else. Never considering her particular fascination with the game a *bonafide* need, Tamela readily classified her attraction to the "sport" as she called it, as a thrilling and easily satisfied desire.

And for those who were tempted to question her choices, she, bristling with aggression and forthrightness, would remind them that like so many other people around the world, she was merely providing a service—and one there was a great demand for. Indeed, the city was chock full of males who not only desperately wanted a strong woman to take the lead and dictate their every move but more than that, got off on the said supremacy. Who was she to criticize the wants and needs of others?

Pulling the outfit from the hanger, she slipped out of her "business" attire and replaced the sexy but, at least by her standards, safe outfit with the tight revealing set that barely covered her backside. In fact, if she bent over just the slightest bit, the full flush of her femininity could be easily seen. Perfect. The corset's underwire push-up bra had her bursting out all over the place, her ample bust swelling like two creamy white balloons straining against the imprisonment of the tight bodice that was fastened up the front with black laces. Ideal. Selecting a pair of elbow-high red gloves, red stiletto ankle boots, a pair of fishnet stockings and an exotic red mask decorated with black feathers on either side, she was good to go. Right on cue, the receptionist's voice followed the sharp tinkling sound of the intercom.

"Ms. Hawthorne?"

"Yes?" she called out as she closed the art-covered closet door and walked to her desk, hitting a couple of keys on the computer's keyboard.

"Your eight o'clock is here."

"Send him in, then lock up and leave."

 $\hbox{``Yes Ms. Hawthorne. Thank you.''}\\$

The name and face of the man about to enter her office appeared in mid-air and raising her eyes from the keypad, Tamela looked at the holographic image as it rotated in slow motion for a quick second before looking back down at his file information.

Joe Smith.

For Christ sake.

One thing was already apparent, the guy lacked imagination. In addition to that, chances were he had a little missus somewhere, a brood of kids and a respectable if not dreary job in the outskirts someplace, maybe an educator or tax reviewer. To some people, it would seem as if he had it all but quite obviously he didn't, otherwise he wouldn't be stopping in for a little corrective care at the hands of his efficient and qualified facilitator.

The north-facing door that led to the reception area opened and in he walked, looking precisely as Tamela had envisioned, middle-aged, average and innocent-looking. But the truth was, he wasn't innocent and it was Tamela's job to reprimand him for it.

"Hi," he said a little tensely, his eyes bugging out of his head at her luscious form as he walked toward her a little uncertainly. "I'm Jo_"

"Shut up!"

The force with which Tamela had spoken, froze him on the spot and silenced his attempted introduction. Startled, he stared at her slack-jawed.

Ah. A virgin. This was going to be fun.

"You don't speak to me unless I tell you to."

Closing the man's file on screen, Tamela slunk around the side of the office and moving around behind him, shut and bolt the door.

The man continued to gawk at her, his pupils dilating within his wide-eyed gawp as he swallowed hard. Turning on her heel, she led the way across the room to another door adjacent to her secret closet and located on the east wall.

"Come here."

With his pulse and breathing radically elevated, he looked around the dungeon-like space that was embellished with wrought iron candelabra and flickering wall sconces. Resembling some sort of medieval torture chamber, the dark, dimly-lit room was furnished with a variety of restrictive devices and assorted accountrements made of wood, leather, chains or an amalgamation of each, those on the walls would provide a vertical imprisonment, the others in the centre of the room, a horizontal or semi-prone one.

One wall was entirely devoted to instruments of correction, from an impressive collection of whips to a startling arrangement of belts, brushes and prickly ended rods. Additionally there was a special section for all kinds of erotic jewelry.

Leaping up to alight on a single barstool with a high back situated on a raised viewing area by the wall of apparatus, Tamela crossed her legs and tilting her head to one side, regarded the man through her masquerade-esque mask.

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"Take 'em off."
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"Huh?"

Tamela snapped her fingers.

"Your clothes. Now."

With a deer-in-the-headlights sort of expression, the man submitted, shakily removing his garments and folding them neatly, placed them in a pile at his socking feet. Standing upright, he automatically clasped his hands discreetly in front of himself.

"Uh-uh," she shook her head. "Hands by your side."

The man hesitated.

Big mistake.

Jumping from her perch, Tamela meandered over to the rows of contraptions and running a long finger seductively over some of the items on display as she perused her options, she finally selected a soft leather whip with a feathering of six strands on the end. What she really wanted to use was the cat o' nine tails and make the rotten little wimp pay for disobeying her but her licentious craving would have to wait. For now. Best to ease him into it.

Turning she saw the man still had his hands anxiously clutched before him, a slight sheen of perspiration breaking out on his forehead and above his top lip.

"Come here."

He did, walking awkwardly toward her, all the while still shielding himself from her eyes.

"You're being a very bad boy," she said in a low icy tone. "And you know what happens to bad boys, don't you?"

The man swallowed again, his eyes large with anticipation, his breath coming now in shallow short gasps and while she didn't look down, Tamela would have bet her life that he was so hard he could cut glass.

Pushing him toward a large leather vaulting horse in the centre of the room, Tamela forced the man's torso down so he was bent over it, his head and arms dangling down to the ground, his doubled-over body facing the entryway to the room, his backside bare and spread out in the most degrading of posterior positions. After securing his feet and hands with leather restraints that would not allow him to stand up or shift to either side, Tamela inserted a soft bit of cloth into his mouth and securing it behind his head, took her rightful place behind him, lightly whipping the air only inches from his skin, the sound causing him to squirm in anticipatory pleasure.

"You didn't do what I told you, did you?"

"No," he muttered through the fabric.

"That's unacceptable."

"Yes," he croaked, a clear plea in his voice.

Holding it backward so the strands were in her hand, with the handle of the whip, Tamela traced very light figure eights, first on one cheek, than the other—the mere feel of the shaft of the instrument on his skin, causing him to suck in a croaky breath of air and jerking, struggle against his arrests.

Reversing her grip, Tamela began flicking the frayed end of whip against his flesh, first lightly in a back and forth motion that moved from one side to other, that didn't

even make his skin pink. Very slowly she increased the pressure and speed, the escalation in intensity drawing a succession of muffled moans from her captive client that, along with his boisterously bucking motions bespoke of his intense pleasure.

Raising the whip high in the air and holding it up, she regarded his red rear end.

"Do you want me to stop?"

The man vigorously shook his head from side to side, a stifled "No" trying to make its way out from behind the silk gag.

Lifting her gaze up and out over the form of her prone patron, her eyes fell upon the screensaver of her computer in the office beyond. Drifting across in a line of familiar were the agency's top escorts in a pretty procession of Blood Bytes' best. They were the fairest, the finest and the fuck-iest on the planet and best of all, they were hers. The row wrapped the girls' section with a beautiful shot of Charmaine Renata before switching to the first string of males, the group consisting of only two individuals, Kaylen Knight and Devante Matiero.

As the virtual parade came to rest on the agency's dynamic duo, Tamela's lips tightened into a thin cruel line, her face contorting into rage as she brought the leather utensil down as hard as she could.

Chapter Eleven

Tess raised her fist to rap on the closed door but it swung open before she even made contact with the smooth black surface to reveal Devante, who looked surprisingly suave not to mention charmingly old-fashioned in a cream-colored suit and maroon shirt, dashingly offset by a gray tie and shoes.

"Detective," he said lowly, "I wasn't expecting you. I was questioned earlier today." Something in the way he spoke though indicated quite the contrary but this time she had come prepared. Well before leaving the precinct for his loft, Tess had initialized her sonic mind block. Clearing her throat, she did her best to discount the distraction of his attractiveness and the pulsating sexuality that radiated from his every pore.

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"Sorry to barge in on you like this. Are you going out?"
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"No."

"Oh."

She eyed his elegant get-up once more.

"You dress like this for a slob night around the house?"

"I just got in."

"Busy night?" she quipped a little too quickly, immediately regretting the divulging sharpness in her voice.

And what was that grinding feeling in the pit of her stomach? It felt like, no, couldn't be—but there it was again grating at the deepest part of her core, the sickeningly twisted sensation of irritation at his work and where it would take him. What the hell? Why should she care if he banged every broad between here and Broadway? As she stood internally examining the emotion, Tess had no idea why she should care, only that, most astoundingly and for God only knew what reason, she did.

Through her hazy sight she thought she could detect an expression of awareness within the penetrating gaze and despite her best efforts, Tess couldn't hold Devante's eyes. Glancing down she scuffed at the floor with her foot, pretending to purposefully be absorbed by the attempted removal of something from the sole of her shoe. Looking up at him once more she could still ascertain his handsomeness through her vision made hazy with a torrent of conflicting emotions.

"Are my whereabouts part of the investigation?" he asked throwing down the verbal trump card.

Busted.

Blatantly, Tess lifted her head and looked him square in the eye.

"No."

Devante's gaze remained fix on her for a time and then he made a slight motion of acceptance with his head.

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"I was at a wedding."
"Really?"
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She didn't mean to reveal her amazement but she couldn't keep the astonishment out of her voice. For whatever reason, it struck her as quite astounding that Devante would even know someone who was entering into the matrimonial bed, so to speak. Somewhere along the line, maybe even unfairly so, she had assumed that he and his kind just spent their lives screwing around, preferring to remain footloose and fancy-free as opposed to loving and committing themselves to one person.

In response, Devante extended one arm up to lean against the side of the doorframe, the movement revealing a black stone and diamond cufflink nestled in the cuff of his shirt. Although barely noticeable, a slight frown darkened his brow.

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"You sound surprised."
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Trapped again. Oh well. No point in lying about it.

"I am."

"Why is that?"

Again, this was a smidgeon awkward.

"I don't know, I just..."

"What?" he prodded, his eyes darkening as one eyebrow shot skyward.

"I just didn't think you'd know anybody who'd..."

"Who could what?"

"Fall in love."

Oops. That didn't exactly come out right.

She really meant to say that she didn't think in his line of work he associated with many people who were in committed relationships and entertained the idea of marriage. But somewhere between the distance that spanned the thought in her head and the words exiting her mouth, she had drastically edited it down.

"Yeah, you're right. Us whores just want to skip the whole emotional element and vows and get right down to the fucking part. You sure got us all figured out."

Regardless of the residue of magnetism that lingered in the air, Tess clearly felt the anger-tinged pride that bristled within the statement. She also instinctively sensed that Devante had chosen such strong language as a means of driving the point home.

Apart from both clues, Tess noted that his pupils had darkened to black, obviously revealing his mindset. It had taken her years to decode vampires' eye-color change but she now could read them like a mood ring. Lightening or lessening of shades indicated fear, concern, illness or grief, a lateral shift in color in which the hue grew to encompass similar shades such as jade turning emerald implied desire, love and arousal, and darkening of any color traditionally meant anger, hurt or despair.

Conscious of the nerve she had struck, Tess tried to right her *faux pas*.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Sure you did."

"No, really, Mr. Matiero..."

"Devante. I can't stand fucking formalities."

Tess was tempted to say that his profession was comprised of that very thing but given the searing look he was presently directing her way, thought better of it.

"Okay. Devante it is," she softly agreed, hell bent on diffusing the situation. "Look, believe me, it was not my intent to insult you and I certainly didn't come here to fight."

"What did you come here for?"

A wave of sexual energy coursed between them and in such close proximity Tess realized it would be far easier to just give in to the moment and jump him then keep her professional and personal distance. Regardless, she chose to stick to that which had brought her to his loft, alone, late at night. Holding her uniform's evening coat open with one hand, mostly because she didn't trust her own voice, she pointed to the empty pocket inside.

Devante's gaze dropped to her right breast, lingered there a little too long and then drifted back up to her face.

"Very nice," he said seductively. "But I'm not sure if you're inviting me to touch you or you want me to get something out of your pocket, or both."

"My badge," Tess said, her voice cracking only slightly. "I'm pretty sure I left it here."

With a slow smile, Devante walked over to the hallway table and pulling open a drawer, withdrew a shiny brass insignia situated within a silver steel folder.

"You mean this?"

"Yes. That's it. Thanks."

Taking it from his hand, Tess turned, almost making it all the way to the door when his voice stopped her.

"Is that the only reason you came by?"

Pivoting slowly around, Tess could only stare at him as she searched her soul for the answer. It was, wasn't it? Pure and simple she had needed to get her ID before she went to that vampire club but the possibility that another motivation for her early evening visit existed, privately pestered her.

When she didn't answer, Devante took a few lazy steps toward her and unhurriedly fenced her in with his arms on either side of the door.

"Hmmm?"

Leisurely he tilted his head to one side and watched her through dark twinkling eyes filled with a burning I-want-to-fuck-you-right-now look.

Despite its unhurried feel, underneath the sexy suggestiveness, Tess couldn't help but additionally perceive his closeness as threatening. He was a danger to her and if she didn't put some distance between them right now, her feelings were also a danger. Stepping back, her body now squished against the door, Tess' hand involuntarily moved to her laser gun.

Devante's gaze dropped down to where her fingers rested on the bronzed barrel, only to raise them to her face once more, a co-mingled look of surprise and confrontation playing across the striking features.

"Are you going to shoot me?"

The fact that he was getting a kick out of all this set her blood boiling and immediately she was snapped back into charge, her response to his question being hard, fast and self-assured.

"If I have to."

"Gosh, that would...sting."

Tess was well aware that even a well-placed laser blast wouldn't kill the vampire, but it certainly would slow him down a bit, especially on the ultraviolet setting which would blister and burn the immortal's skin almost as badly as if they walked out into the sunlight. While some might take his comment as purely sarcastic and she wasn't fully prepared to discount that possibility, Tess additionally sensed a sort of playfulness within the words. Although she was flat out pissed off at his little I'm-gonna-make-you-want-me ploy, she felt a transitory, albeit begrudging, amusement at his words. But in the most understated thoughts ever, now was not the time nor the place to be swayed by a little flirtation. Pushing down the emotion, she put on her most professional face and tried to sound severe.

"Count on it. Now back off."

Things might have been okay if Devante had complied but instead he merely stared at her as if he was daring her to either fuck him or fire.

Gazing into his black eyes, a flash of a fleeting fantasy flitted across Tess' mind as she mentally tore off his tie, grabbed hold of the collar of his shirt and tugging with a sudden jerk, ripped the garment apart to send buttons flying in all directions. Blazing a path of kisses down his mid-section, she repeatedly pressed her half-open mouth against the bulge in the front of his pants, leaving wet marks on his fine dress pants, a cursory glance up his torso to his hungry dark stare that penetrated her almost as completely as that which she kissed was primed to.

Snapping back, Tess endeavored to return to the present, but it was awfully hard to leave such a great mental journey. Dazed but determined by all the sensory temptations afforded by his alarmingly adjacent body, Tess hardened herself, resolved not to be lured by a mere streetwalker. With her infuriation at his overt allure freshly renewed, Tess found the heat that boiled within her quickly switching from desire to anger. Yanking her weapon from its holster, she pointed it directly at Devante's chest, the warning that followed spoken in a low, steady tone.

"Don't come any closer."

A momentary flash of toffee within the midnight of Devante's eyes revealed he had been struck with a strong feeling and if the transitory expression on his face was any indication, Tess' spunk had shocked him. Fuelled by an uncharacteristic fury and one that was directly mostly at herself for falling prey to the infamous charms of a vampire, she carried on in a voice that shook only slightly.

"You know, I gotta tell you—this little hot-to-trot act that you're working at—well it's not working for me. So how about dropping your whole come-on routine for a change? I'm here on official police business and your flippancy is putting me in a difficult position."

Flippancy? she inwardly challenged as she focused on steadying her trembling hand. Who talks like that?

Devante continued to watch her with that tranquil immobility that his kind was renowned for. In spite of his emotionless face, deep down, he was surprised—a definite rarity for him—and for a couple of reasons.

For starters, the immediate thought that flashed in his mind as the woman's last word rang in his head was that he would like to put her in a whole lot of positions. Never one to get off on his work, he was stunned to feel genuine attraction to this woman. Moreover, for the first time in recent history, Devante had the sense that he didn't want to seduce this woman like the others, but rather was incredibly curious to see how she reacted to him, void of his immortal charm swaying her thoughts and feelings. Not that he could. Even more miraculously, his supernatural allure didn't appear to be working on her—at least not to the extent it normally did—something he had never experienced in all his many days and the existence of a mortal immune to his ways was making him damn interested.

"Sorry," he replied softly, holding his hands up in a classic stick-'em-up pose. "Just trying to keep things light. You're making me nervous over here."

Somehow Tess seriously doubted that. If anyone was panicky, it was her and with good reason, she thought, quickly lowering her gaze at the smile that appeared on Devante's face. When she next looked up, their eyes locked in yet another searing blaze of sexual chemistry, the jolt of fire between them quickly causing the grin to vanish from Devante's face as Tess' gasped.

But the breath caught in her throat as she saw the light in his eyes change from a perceptible lust to something softer and infinitely more heart-stopping—almost as if he had known what she was thinking and it had stirred him. There was something else in his gaze now, something deeper and more powerful that worked to weaken her silent resolve and it hinted at a feeling that far exceeded the boundaries of sexual attraction.

Praying to whatever gods would listen that Devante would not do what she suddenly so wanted him to do, Tess wordlessly watched as Devante's gaze leisurely dropped from her eyes to gradually travel down the length of her nose, only to come rest on her lips. With a lazy forward movement that seemed to be in slow motion and

served to bring him chest to chest with her, Devante stared at her parted lips, so wanting to feel them against his, a flicker of a frown showing his confusion and uncertainty at the overwhelming desire. Slowly he brought his eyes back up to hers, the penetrating dark gaze with its open and sweet sincerity, completely disarming her. With nearly a decade on the Force, Tess had become a flawless judge of character in humans but the test that now stretched out before her was could she trust her finely honed skills of intuition when it came to the undead and chiefly the Dead Man Charming directly in front of her?

Her gun, still aimed at his torso, vibrated so badly that she had to use her free hand to steady her grip. Once more clearing her throat, she did her best to harden her gaze without making direct eye contact again, instead intently focusing on the bridge of his large, straight nose.

"Take a step back Mr. Matiero," she warned.

When he wordlessly complied, she slowly lowered her piece.

"You can put your hands down now."

Again Devante did as he was told while his eyes never left her face.

"Nice try," she all but whispered. By now, she had relaxed her glued stare and let it slide down the floor for a second before returning to his face." But your vampire tricks aren't going to work on me. And furthermore, I would really appreciate it if you wouldn't contact me nocturnally."

Devante looked both baffled and entertained by her little rant.

"Nocturnally contact?"

Tess scoffed, her eyes squinting and her mouth falling open in a classic expression of "Oh yeah, right."

"You know what I'm talking about. I don't need any of those sense-surround porno images sent as a way of seducing me. Besides being a lame attempt at distraction, I don't find them even remotely sexy," she said, lying through her teeth. "Now if you'll just excuse me, I'm off to The Black Rose."

Spinning on her heel, Tess bit her lip and halted abruptly, perplexed as to why she had volunteered her professional agenda. It was not her way to announce her comings and goings to any man, most especially a potential suspect.

"Why are going there?"

"None of your business."

Tess winced, her back still to him, grateful that at least he couldn't see her face. What the hell was going on anyway? She was acting like the sort of woman she detested, like some kind of jilted lover with no earthly reason for her bizarre behavior. This man was a POI who could and probably would very easily be upgraded to the status of suspect very soon. Their interaction was strictly professional and therefore her manner in his presence must be as well. Taking a deep lungful of air, Tess willed herself

to gain control. Circling to face him once, she gave a quick terse nod. "It's official police business."

Devante regarded her for a lengthy period before speaking.

"Got someone to watch your back?"

"I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you can but it's a pretty rough place."

"I'll be fine."

"Okay," he said, his tone of voice bearing more than a bit of caginess as he very obviously and reluctantly allowed the conversation to come to an end. "Oh and Detective?"

Tess had opened the door and gone through it when his questioning tone halted her yet again. Circling back around, she waited.

"About your dreams last night? I hate to disappoint you, but I didn't send them."

Chapter Twelve

The Black Rose was what used to be referred to as a jazz club. Generally patronized by the undead, a handful of cocky mortals could be found on any given night within the veiled spot, lured there either by a dare or a dream or sometimes both.

From its only entrance situated in a poorly lit alley on the north side of the city, the vampire bar could easily be missed by any passersby not in the know. Resembling a warehouse door like any others in the filthy and largely uninhabited industrial area, one could just as easily assume it was the doorway to a machine shop or parts store.

Getting out of her uni-cruiser, a distinctive cop transport unit that was specially designed for single passengers, Tess left the airborne vehicle in the skyscraping, multi-level vehicle port. Flashing on the anti-theft device with a flick of her wrist control implant, she made her way down the hundred-plus floors to the ground level via the dashdropper module.

Taking a quick breath Tess psyched herself up. Even some fifty feet away from the door, the subtle scent of her blood was already revealing her true species to the bar's loungers inside along with the faint aroma of apprehension broadcasting the fact that she was new to the place. Completely contrary to plan, what she really hoped to achieve by her chosen attire was that she was the type of mortal—confident and informed—that was accustomed to patronizing pubs such as this. She wasn't.

In fact there was only one other time in all her years with the Force that Tess' job had taken her to a sucker spot—as it was routinely referred to—and it was an occasion she was sure never to forget.

It had been a routine Thursday night and she was on the graveyard shift—an ancient euphemism that she jumped onto and retained from the first moment she read it. When the call came in of an *ITR* in progress—an injure, take and run—Tess gave chase to the fast-footed *poper*—potential perpetrator—who had just lasered some poor bastard and stolen his motortron. Pursuing him for several blocks Tess finally drew closer to the swift figure, following him into Vincent's. The guy was so jacked up on the latest designer drug, readily available on any street corner along with the morning paper or a K224 blaster, that he actually thought it would be a good idea to hide out in a private club exclusively reserved for its bloodsucking clientele. More than restricted, it was an especially *special* vampire club.

Owned by flaming fangster, vampire activist and founder of UVNA—United Vampires of North America—Vincent Mortalini, who openly flaunted both his alternative sexuality and voracious vampiric nature long before it was fashionable, Vincent's was the first club of its kind in New York. With a growing list of undead members who were both bored and disgusted with the reigning "Can't-we-all-just-get-

along?" mandate of the governing human populace, Vincent's catered to those old-fashioned traditionalists from the vampire world who still hungered for the thrill of the hunt. Offering clandestine scavenger hunts of mortals, "live" auctions for scrumptious caged humans and infamous orgy-like feastings that drew near-orgasmic reactions from the bloodthirsty crowd that chose to watch the action, it would be fair to say that rarely did a *homo sapiens* cross the club's threshold and manage to cross back out in one piece.

While vampire-on-human murder was deemed illegal, thanks to Mr. Mortalini's solid connections in the Department and even all the way up to the Supreme Court, nothing was ever done about the occasional missing person who was last seen entering his swanky tavern. It was common knowledge that any human visiting Vincent's was taking their life in their own hands but Tess could not let her fear stand in the way of apprehending such a scumbag as the poperb she was pursuing. So with her heart in her mouth, she pulled the door open and went in after the runner, hoping her affiliation with the Force would grant her a sort of immunity.

The interior of the place was cloaked in darkness. The shapes of bodies moved practically invisibly around the perimeter of the room and it took Tess a few moments to decipher the white faces of the supernatural smattering slowly emerging first, floating headless-like above their often dark attire. Conscious of the various pairs of eyes that burrowed into her with a forbidden desire, Tess moved to the slightly better illuminated counter where, much to her surprise, a human tended bar.

"Hi."

"Hi!" the tender answered, clearly shocked at her presence. "You shouldn't..."

Tess held up her hand, flipping open her ID folder to show off her badge to both him and those who were closing in behind her.

"Did you see a young guy come in her just a few seconds ago?"

"I see a lot of young guys in here."

"Human guys?"

The barkeep shook his head, pointing diagonally over to the far side of the room.

"He went that way."

Sweeping her gaze around the small space, Tess searched for the slimeball she had been chasing, her perusal taking in the various goings-on.

A couple of steel cages dangled from the ceiling containing the equivalent of the old-style mortal go-go dancers—one a young woman, the other a young man. Both scantily clad, they held tight to their steel pens, their fleshy fingers wrapped around the bars of the dance prisons they inhabited as they pulsed and pounded in slow suggestive movements to the trance-like ambient music.

Far beneath them in the centre of the room, a crowd had gathered, their backs to Tess. Nervously toying with the blaster that was strapped to her upper thigh, she made her way across the dim space to the border of the circle. Rising up on her toes, she peered over the shoulders of those in front of her.

Down on the floor of the vampire only hangout, on the small ironically man-made wooden platform that rose but a few inches off the ground to create a kind of ministage, two hot-to-trot male vampires were giving it and good to a human female, or so it sounded from the gasps and groans erupting from the woman's lips. While one vampire was drawing blood from his bite on her inner thigh as seen from where he had pushed up her skirt, her one leg suspended and jerking over the solid squareness of his shoulder, another one had gone traditional, sucking hard on her outstretched neck, her shiny silver shirt ripped open to reveal her bra. Sighs and soft murmurs of appreciation could be heard rippling through the vampire mass that pressed in on the titillating floor show—their fascination with the action momentarily distracting them from Tess' presence. Some even turned to each other in their state of stimulation, slinking over and slipping a slithering arm loosely around a neighboring waist to nip at necks and give little love bites to exposed shoulders and wrists upturned in invitation, eyes blazing and breaths panting as the scent of blood filled the air. As long as they had someone on which to address their need for oral fixation Tess was safe.

But then the lone female vampire directly in front of her with no close body on which to nosh turned slightly to one side, her cool golden eyes trying to sneak a peek at Tess before fully completing the rotation of her body. Then another immortal figure stirred and turned and another, each one slowly pivoting his or her beautiful body around to face and focus intently on Tess, until the entire pack had rotated around and was standing, staring at her.

Fumbling for her badge, she brought it up and holding it high overhead announced in a clear, if slightly tremulous, voice, "New York Force. I'm not here for any of you. Just followed a *poper* in—a human—and as soon as I find him, we'll...

A high-pitched scream, clearly that of a man's, blasted out into the room to stun Tess silent, stopping her spiel mid-sentence. Looking in the direction of the pain-ridden yell, Tess tried to determine its origin, the throng magically parting to give her a better view.

Off in the far corner and sitting spread-legged on a chair was the individual she had followed into the joint, his mouth agape, his eyes open and staring. With a bevy of bloodsucking beauties working, one on each of his wrists and others each side of his neck, Tess was certain that the reason for his strangulated screech came at the fangs of the vampire who was planted between his legs, her head bobbing up and down, as she worked hard to suck the last bit of blood out of that tender masculine body part from where it had last rushed to. But from the disappointed looks on the faces of the four vampirettes who pulled away from his slack form, along with the one who, kneeling at his feet, turned away wiping the blood from her mouth with the back of her hand, both the guy and his misguided erection were no more.

"Never mind," Tess called out as she backed away from the group, her badge-wielding hand still high. Normally she would proceed, examine the body and ask questions but not with this crowd, not in this place. All things considered, she had best count her blessings and leave with her life.

Bumping into a few immortal bodies on her backward course to the exit, Tess merely smiled and flashed the badge in their direction, following each potential confrontation very quickly with a breathy "Pardon me. I'm just leaving."

She was almost at the door when a flash out of the corner of her eye caused her to turn in the direction of the sudden and expected blaze of light. A striking blonde vampire had just lit one of the old-style nicotine sticks and with a sharp exhale, blew out the white cloud of smoke. With a sensual smile she tilted her head to one side, allowing her dark-haired companion to nuzzle or drink from her neck. From this angle, Tess couldn't tell which action was going down and really couldn't care less. All she wanted was to get the hell out of there in one piece. If she did, it would be a story she could tell her grandchildren one day, about how she had gone solo into Vincent's one dark and chilly night and emerged moments later, living to tell her unbelievable tale of triumph.

Just as Tess was about to turn her attention away from the amorous couple, the man lifted his head and with a soft laugh leaned forward and kissed the blonde—one of those serious and all-encompassing kisses that clearly revealed the two weren't brother and sister. Finally pulling away, he turned to reach for his drink, his eyes lifting to meet with Tess' and paralyze them both.

It was Renaldi.

At the time she spotted him in Vincent's with *that woman*, as she had come to think of her, Renaldi was not only Tess' partner on the Force, but also her lover.

And that's how she found out the man she loved with all her heart was not only cheating on her but was whoring around with a fucking bloodsucker. Adding insult to injury, later on Tess would further discover that the woman was also an escort for Blood Bytes. It had all happened thirteen months ago, but the memory was as real as the scent of dirt and dust from the street and musty fumes from the nearby waterway that wafted through the air outside The Black Rose as Tess stood preparing herself to go in.

Not one for the bar scene, at least not of late, Tess wasn't entirely sure what exactly she should wear to best blend in with the type of human who went to such a place. There was virtually zero chance of fooling the vampires present into thinking she were one of them so she might as well aim for a mortal who was a regular, if there was such a thing.

Abandoning her usual tight and constrictive police uniform, Tess opted for a sleeveless shift with a plunging V-neck made of black chiffon that fell in overlapping floating panels to the ground. Cinched in at the waist with a wide gold belt and completed with a pair of gold Greek sandals, it flawlessly displayed her curvaceous shape. Her flaming red hair had been pulled up into a loose, anything-will-do collection at the back of her neck, tiny little strands of her fiery tresses falling about and framing her pale face, the startling green of her eyes almost glowing in the moonlight. A dusting of gold over her face and shoulders and a good amount of gold-flecked black nail polish

on fingers and toes as well as black liner around her large eyes put her on the fast track to fabulous.

Stepping inside, Tess allowed her eyes a couple of minutes to adjust to the unexpected brightness. While it was practically pitch dark outside thanks to the season's earlier sunset, the interior of the club was ablaze with neon color, despite the old myth that vampires shunned the light.

All around were lightning bolt shaped appendages hanging on the walls, illuminating the floor and even suspended from the ceiling in shocking shades of lime, tangerine, yellow and hot pink.

A misty fog caused dry ice hung in the air and crept eerily along the floor and up about a third of the black walls from which poured the subdued sounds of a jazz trio—the interior speakers that drew from the amplifiers on the main floor effectively hidden from view.

Her immediate thought was that Devante was crazy. *This place is rough?* As she gazed around at the subdued and stylish crowd, Tess thought to herself that clearly she and Devante had totally different concepts of what a dangerous joint was.

Before she could decide in which direction to head, a vampire hostess in an alarmingly bright white outfit stepped up to her.

"Table for one or are you meeting someone?"

Hmmm. How should she play it? She could hit it straight and directly broadcast the fact that she was seeking out Knight. Then again, she might be further ahead if she hid her true motivation for being there, pretending to have been drawn in for the fun and games and see what information she could incidentally weasel out in the process. Of course, the undead had that nasty habit of telepathically sorting through humans' thoughts as easily and efficiently as one separates and determines the contents of their laundry bin—that is without her trusted sonic mind block which, with fresh new batteries, would keep all psychological probers at bay. Still, Tess decided that a vague response that incorporated both possibilities would ultimately be best.

"Well, I am alone for now but am hoping not to be," she said with a sly smile. The gorgeous greeter winked.

"Gotcha. Right this way."

Instead of placing Tess in a viewing cubicle—a small table situated at the club's rear, encapsulated in its own little cement block and partially concealed in sultry shadow—the long-legged vamp took her right to one of the triangular stands at the front of the small scaffold on which a bass player, keyboardist and drummer jammed, laying down lick upon lick of an ancient piece from another time and place.

The place was only half full—partially due to the fact that it was a weeknight but also, because it was only about nine o'clock. Closer to midnight, one wouldn't be able to move in here regardless of which day it was. Checking out the mix Tess' best guess was that the crowd was split in a seventy-thirty ratio of vampires to humans.

A dark sleeve tipped with gold satin crossed Tess' line of vision to lay a glass coaster atop the cork surface.

"What can I get you?"

The waiter, a vampire youth, was stunning but very clearly unimpressed with his job, the hour and Tess, not necessarily in that order.

She was about to chirp "what do you recommend?" but caught herself just in time. Such an asinine question would brand her a virgin to the nightspot and her unfamiliarity with the jazz joint was the last thing in the world she wanted the others in the place to know. She ordered the only cocktail she knew.

"Purple punch."

Tess repressed a shudder as the recollection of her last encounter with the alcohol and narcotic-laced cocktail came back to her once more. While she had only consumed one to Desi's three that particular night when she and her friend had "celebrated" Desi's divorce, Tess still easily felt the effects of the drink, her vision and her speech blurring a little as her normally staunch inhibitions slowly eroded. Thankfully Desi's much harder and faster decline warranted they leave and Tess had never touched a drop of the delicious, devilish drink again. However tonight it was a good safe choice that wouldn't attract any attention and besides, she had no intention of actually drinking it.

"Say," she reached for the waiter as he turned to go, "have you seen Kaylen tonight?"

"Knight?" the waiter said, his eyes twinkling with a kind of hidden delight at the sound of the name, his personality abruptly changing from disinterested to intrigued. Tess pointed at him in a "You got it" manner.

"The one and only."

"No, not yet. He usually comes in this time though."

"You sound like you know him."

The vamp guy scoffed and grinned, showing a dazzling row of white teeth accentuated by the points of his two canines.

"Not as much as I'd like to."

"I hear ya," Tess replied, leaning toward the waiter and motioning for him to draw nearer. When he did, she let her voice dip down low and sultry. "So tell me. Is it really true what they say about him?"

"That all depends on what you're referring to but chances are, if you're talking about anything to do with his work, the answer is yes."

"So he *is* the best there is then?"

"Biggest and best. At least he would say so. There have been a few whispers this last little while though claiming that there is one guy who leaves our boy in the dust, if you know what I mean."

Devante, no doubt.

"But Knight would fucking flip his lid if he heard that. He can't stand being topped. He's killed people for less."

Interesting.

"You don't say. So what do you think? Does he dislike his competitor enough to, oh, I don't know, make problems for him?"

"What kind of problems?"

"I don't know, mess with his life, try and get him in trouble, that sort of thing."

"Maybe. If it were something that would ruin that guy's rep as the hottest hunk on two legs, then I'd have to switch my vote to definitely."

Even more interesting.

This Kaylen Knight, whoever he was, sounded like he had an ego as big as his schlong. That, when coupled with the fact that he had a death grip on his status as the greatest lay in New York, gave him motive to either off Sara if he had found out about her switching to another flavor, specifically Devante, or possibly even setting up his one and only rival by casting a bad light on him with something as incriminating as a murder.

Having dropped that last little bit of gossip with a nudge of his shoulder against Tess', the waiter spun and wordlessly walked away.

The band wrapped up its set and after announcing its imminent return in "just a few", the three vampires strode from the stage and headed for the bar in the back. It was unclear whether or not the lead singer had been referring to drinks or minutes with his departing words, but either way, Tess was left to toy self-consciously with her drink while she tapped her toe to the techno dance tune that filled the air, the change in musical styles bringing on an obvious change in the club's mood. Where before it was reserved and understated, an electric current of excitement fired up the inhabitants as a few couples made their way to the dance floor and began getting down.

"Wanna dance?"

The question came at her from behind. Looking over her shoulder she gave the once-over to the hunky young vampire with reddish-brown hair who stood, his head cocked to one side, awaiting her response.

"Ah, I'm not much of a dancer."

"Drink then?"

As a form of reply, Tess smiled, jiggling her glass slightly so the nitrogen flakes in it sizzled and sent a puff of frosted air up over the rim.

He leaned down closer to her now so she could see the pulsing depths of his sparkling silver eyes.

"Then, let's go into the back room for a bit."

The back room at The Black Rose. For those in the know it was notorious. For her part, Tess had heard a few rumors.

Unlike Vincent's that hung everything out in the open for everyone to see, The Black Rose's owners insisted on a more discreet atmosphere and reputation, therein the back room was born.

Literally accessible through a black curtain that hung like some promised gateway to hell, or considering what took place, heaven—the famed rear area hosted a wide variety of activities and transactions. Sporting a semi-circular lobby area utilized primarily for pre-pastime conversations and negotiations, the be-couched spot gave way to a long hallway dotted with open private stalls easily viewed thanks to the steel-framed wall-less structures down either side. Small but large enough to accommodate up to three people in an assortment of shapes, sizes and positions, the virtual partitions were used for everything from sex and drugs to bloodletting and quite often a combination of all three. Occasionally the residents of one booth would, in their unchecked enthusiasm, spill out into another one and a whole new party would take place. In an odd sort of way, the mingling that went on in the back room, far exceeded that of the individualistic and conservative tone of the main lounge up front. Given that fact and the reason for her being there, expressly to gather the goods on Kaylen Knight, Tess could think of no better opportunity to obtain what she sought.

"Sure."

The vampire seemed pleased with her response. Reaching down he offered his arm to her, which through the fabric of his light jacket, was warm from a recent chowing-down on someone, somewhere. Leading Tess toward the black curtain he guided her, literally, into another world as they moved under the ornate archway from which the velvet was draped.

Tess had thought Vincent's was shocking and scandalous but in some ways it had nothing on what was spread out before them once on the other side of the fabric divider. Where the other had specialized in vampire titillations, here there was something for everyone.

In one quick glance down the hallway with its open-chambers flanking the long stretch, Tess saw two different threesomes doing drugs, three pairs having sex and a couple beating the crap out of some poor bugger—all of which were comprised of various combinations of humans and vampires.

Another hasty look to her left at the entrance to the action revealed two male vampires pinning a human male against one wall. While one gave him a blowjob—and what a treat that would be because if anyone knew how to suck, it was a vampire—the other blew his mind, allowing his human buddy the rare chance to taste immortal blood. Licking the neck of his vertical captor, the mortal man shuddered and moaned at the dual pleasures.

Diverting her gaze, Tess pushed down the sense of inappropriateness and embarrassment that threatened to expose her, but not quickly enough. The tense tightening of her hand on the vampire's arm, along with her increased heart rate gave her away. He stopped and looked at her.

"Change your mind?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

"Good," he said with a grin that was intended to make her fall over backward and pull him atop her. "Cause I've been dying to get you alone."

Once again, Tess had to work at hiding her automatic emotional response. Wondering if she had in fact gotten herself into something she couldn't handle, she only nodded in response and let the vampire lead the way down the hall. The shriek of someone as an electric prodding device was pressed into their flesh made Tess jump a little but she refused to look, choosing instead to focus on the startling multicolored neon floor that changed colors underfoot precisely every four seconds.

"Let's go in here," the vampire said, escorting her into the second last portal on the right. Not surprisingly their "neighbors" were quite interesting.

On one side of them a guy was shooting something into his groin, probably a penile implant booster, and on the other, two human women creatively intertwined gave a demonstration of mutual oral stimulation to the lone male vampire who sat silently observing them.

"We can do better than that," the vampire grinned, tilting his head in the direction of the female couple.

"Better?"

"They're trying to get him off but I guarantee that after I get done doing what I'm going to do to you, he won't even be watching them."

Oh shit. She was in trouble. *Big* trouble. This wasn't going at all as she had hoped. What she really had envisioned was chatting up a few people between engagements and somewhere along the way learning something about the agency's number two heartthrob. But as was often the case, she only had herself to blame. She had waltzed in here alone, without advising anyone, not even Renaldi, of her whereabouts tonight. She could be bound, gagged and violated in a million different ways by the luscious licker who was screwing her with his eyes at that very moment and there was no one to help her or stop him.

"What's your name?" she smiled weakly in an obvious attempt to stall as the vampire took slow marauding steps toward her.

"What difference does that make?"

"None, really. I just want to know what to scream when I, you know..."

Hey, that was pretty good, Tess thought, especially considering how fucking terrified she was at that very moment.

He liked that—both what she had said and that she was scared. There was no aphrodisiac like fear. Laughing softly in a way that came out as more of a growl, he sexily concurred.

"And you're going to. A lot."

The vampire was right in front of her now, so close that his soft breath brushed against her cheek as she spoke.

"Oh, that's good to know. Thanks. That's what I am after all doing here. I mean, why else would I come?"

Tess cringed. What a stupid thing to say but how was she to respond to a guy who just promised her and thanks to his supernatural skills, could deliver, the single most sensational sexual experience of her entire life.

"Oh you'll come all right."

Tess giggled uneasily.

"Well, just in case, you want to yell out my name, it's Tess."

"Yeah, I know."

Oh oh. Nervously Tess touched the centre of her sonic mind block.

"It's working," the vampire said as he glanced down at the device. "The word gets out when a cop is in the place. So tell me," he leaned so close his lips nearly touched hers and posed seductively, "What can I do to you detective?" a lazy, one-sided grin revealing he had very purposefully screwed up the question to intentionally turn it into a steamy sexual insinuation.

Tess held her breath. Clearly he had learned not only her name but her profession as well. Was it possible he also knew the real reason for her late night visit to the Black Rose?

"You mean *for* me?" she corrected hotly, irritated by his vampire-on-the-make manner.

"You still haven't told me who you are."

"You don't know? And here I was under the impression you wanted to meet me."

Stepping back, he reached for her hand and after planting a courtly kiss on her knuckles, rose to stare into her perplexed eyes.

"I'm Kaylen Knight."

Just then a loud electronic ringing filled the air and seconds later, every living soul, as well as the non-living ones, was drenched to the skin.

Chapter Thirteen

Renaldi rolled off his vampire girlfriend Charmaine Renata onto his back with a heavy sigh as he closed his eyes. The feel of her hand on his thigh caused his eyelids to flutter open and he stared at the shifting colors of the ceiling overhead, relishing her touch which, while intimate, was non-sexual.

"Wore you out baby?"

Her voice, low and throaty, normally gave him an instant raging hard-on but having just unloaded everything he had into her in an intense nearly painful explosion of lust, nothing and nobody was about to rouse him from his present limp state.

"No, I just got something on my mind."

"Something or someone?"

He was thinking of the case and the latest clue that the vehicle spotted outside Sara Greenwood's living unit speeding away turned out to be registered to Blood Bytes. Further investigation uncovered the fact that the vast majority of escorts there utilized one of the cars from the agency's fleet when working, this news adding yet one more strike against Devante Matiero.

Turning his head, Renaldi looked at Charmaine. No two ways about it, she was a beauty. With silken waist-length platinum hair and serious aqua-colored eyes, one rarely ever dropped their attention to below her neck. But if and when they did, they wouldn't believe their eyes. Her excessively large breasts were only emphasized by her unnaturally tiny waist, which gently gave way to the rounded swell of her hips. Bronzed and beautiful, her legs as part of her six foot two inch frame seemed to go on forever and the hairless centre that lay between them was pure and simple ecstasy by any man's standards. His eyes dropping down to the slick smooth folds, he was tempted as he had been from time to time before to ask if having the soft down that covered her feminine furrow ripped out by its roots hurt as much as he suspected it would. Somehow, though, it never seemed the right time and when push came to shove, it was really none of his business nor did he have a preference one way or the other so why not just leave it alone.

When he didn't answer, Charmaine persisted.

"Since you've been working this case with her, you've been...different."

Renaldi knew she was talking about Tess but really didn't want to revisit the issue of his former relationship with his current partner to his present squeeze yet again, so chose to play dumb instead — a strategy that rarely failed him.

"With whom?"

Charmaine sat up and propped one hand on the side of her head as she scrutinized him. Her expression spoke volumes, explicitly that she knew he was doing his damnedest to avoid talking about Tess. With an inward groan, he realized for the umpteenth time, that there was no use trying to lie to a vampire.

"Okay, okay. Different, how?"

A clumsy stillness followed in which Charmaine looked at him hard for a time, her own eyes starting to swim with liquid. Finally she asked in a quiet voice, "Do you still love her?"

"What?" Renaldi bolted up straight out of bed and turning, noted Charmaine's injured state.

"Oh Jesus! Love her? I never did. I've told you that."

"Yeah you have."

"So what are you saying? You don't believe me?"

"It's not that," she shook her head from side to side, the white-blonde strands floating and falling about her narrow face. "I know you aren't lying to me."

"Then what?"

"Darwin, sometimes we don't really know how we feel about someone until they're out of our lives."

Charmaine brusquely brushed away a tear that had trickled down over her fair lashes and slid down her cheek, cursing softly at the show of weakness normally reserved for flimsy-feelinged mortals. With another sigh, Renaldi leaned into her and softly stroked her hair with his hand.

"Look, you have got to believe me on this. I wasn't in love with her when we were involved and I'm not in love with her now."

"Then why did you start things up with her back then?"

Renaldi shrugged.

"I dunno, I guess, because she was there."

"Nice."

"No I mean she was there *for me*. It was a bad time, I was confused, I needed someone and she was there."

"And now?"

"And now, we're partners. We work together, solve cases together but that's where it ends."

"With no residue of what was?"

Renaldi hesitated and Charmaine jumped on his uncertainty.

"You see! There is something there."

"You're right," Renaldi said softly, "There is. But not for me."

"Meaning?"

Renaldi looked at her intently, jabbing his finger in emphasis on his chest that was covered with a dusting of dark hair.

"I've moved on, no problem, like it never happened. But her? She has never forgotten it and does her best to make sure I don't either."

Charmaine sat up now too and inching her way back so that she could lean upright against the cobbled headboard, took a sip of the red liquid in the narrow cylinder beside the bed. The blood was cold but the flavor was still there. Swallowing, she set the glass down and watched him as he similarly propped himself up against the backrest.

"Can you blame her?"

"What are you kidding? Of course I can," he said, his voice rising slightly as he raked a hand through his hair. "Look, I never made her any promises, there never are any in these things. You just take your shot, roll the dice and hope you come up a winner. It's all a game and in the end, you play the hand you're dealt."

He ended huffily, crossing his legs at the ankles and his arms over his chest. Charmaine smiled.

"I guess there's some truth to that, but in Tess' case, she couldn't see all the cards before she placed the bet. You should have told her."

Renaldi stared at her in disbelief.

"I can't believe my ears. Are you actually defending her?"

"Darwin, you have to admit you weren't entirely upfront with her."

"Oh this is great!" he said with an exaggerated melodramatic wave of his arms.

Charmaine noticed the shift in his shaft and with one long finger stroked him from tip to base, her touch taking him from zero to sixty in a matter of seconds.

"Baby," she whispered as she moved down and began blowing lightly up and down his erect length, "I'm glad you're past her but don't be a dick," her last word accentuated with a flit of her tongue over the now-bulbous top of his pulsing rod. "You have to take responsibility for the role you played."

"I didn't do anything wrong," he said from between clenched teeth as she continued to tease him with her tongue.

Charmaine ceased sharply, looking up the length of his body to observe him coolly. In that one second, Renaldi knew that if he didn't concede, Charmaine would up and leave the room therein leaving him and his pounding hardness without any hope of that unspeakably pleasurable release that would come via the sweet suction of her hot mouth. She was stubborn that way.

She was also right.

He had known from the very beginning that he was playing Tess. Sure she'd given him some love and support at a time when he really needed it but from the word go, he had known her commitment to him far exceeded his to hers. Where and when and how it would play out, he had never given any thought to, nor really cared to. All he knew was he was getting what he needed and for a time, Tess was getting what she needed, or at least thought she was. That is until reality was revealed and he walked away, leaving her to question him, worse yet herself with the biggest casualty being her questioning the validity and point of loving another person ever again.

"All right," he murmured only a little resentfully, a deep frown creasing his forehead as he spat out his begrudging confession "I used her, I fucked her over for my own personal gain. I was a selfish arrogant jerk, a real prick who should be drawn and quartered for my insensitivity and crimes against womankind. And yes, one of these days I will tell her the truth—all of it."

"Promise?"

"Yes. Promise. Are you happy now?"

"Yes baby," she said slyly as she hovered over him, "That was very good. Now speaking of pricks..."

As the satiny snug feel of her mouth closed around him, Renaldi closed his eyes, eager for the passion she would evoke in him to supersede the guilt he had unsheathed.

* * * * *

Afterwards, with Renaldi snoring up a storm, Charmaine inched her way out from underneath the arm he had slung over her and picking up her clothes that were strewn about the room as evidence of their impassioned and impatient coupling, she dressed quietly in the darkness. Silently reaching for keys to both the suite and her transport vehicle, she exited her living unit and pulled the door closed behind her without making a sound.

The drive across the Throgs Neck Bridge—a suspension bridge carrying Interstate 296 over the East River, was relatively unpopulated this time of night. While the majority of people took to the air as their preferred means of transport, Charmaine always liked to keep her wheels on the ground. Maybe that was because she could get airborne anytime she literally put her mind to it.

Connecting with the Throgs Neck section of The Bronx with the Bayside section once known as Queens, the bridge was one of the city's oldest structures. That could be the reason she was so fond of it she surmised as she sped across the bumpy grated surface. She absolutely hated anything that was younger than her and given her triple-digit age, there were plenty of people and things that fit that bill.

Entering into a deserted district that had once housed a dynamic and thriving arts scene, Charmaine looked in dismay at her surroundings as she pulled her vehicle up to the curb and stopped. Filled to the rafters with dilapidated brick buildings rife with sooty broken windows and crumbling once ornate facades, the area was a worn down, dirty version of what it had once been.

Within a matter of minutes a second vehicle, pulled up behind hers, the glare of headlights illuminating her face in the rear view mirror.

Getting out she walked over to the idling transport unit and bending down peered in through the passenger window before getting in and closing the door behind her.

"How's it going?"

Charmaine shot the speaker a sharp look.

"I'm not here to make small talk. Have you got my money or not?"

"Of course, right here," he said, patting the vinyl bag that lay on the seat between them, the clear plastic revealing scads of thousand dollar bills. Slowly his hand inched over to rest on her thigh. "But what's the rush? Why not stay awhile and...chat. I would like to thank you personally for doing such a fine service for your country."

Charmaine reflexively grabbed his fingers and twisted them painfully, the motion drawing a loud shout from the man. "I think the money is thanks enough but I appreciate the kudos, Mr. Matheson. Maybe I should call the senator myself and tell him how "grateful" you were prepared to be on his behalf, of course."

Matheson's face went white, a thin line of perspiration jumping on his forehead. Twitching, he wiped at it as he pushed up his wire eyeglasses as he attempted to smile.

"That won't be necessary Ms. Renata. Senator Telmor is a very busy man. I certainly wouldn't bother him with such frivolous details."

"Frivolous details? You call hiring someone to kill his future daughter-in-law frivolous?"

A blaze of anger flashed in Matheson and the strong emotion which he fought to suppress shone clearly in his eyes similarly his voice as he struggled to sound collected.

"I told you before, the senator doesn't always know what's best so as his personal aide, he entrusts me to make certain decisions for him."

Charmaine deadpanned him.

"So he doesn't know about this?"

"No and I would suggest we keep it that way."

"Or what? Are you going to have me killed?" Charmaine leaned close, her lips drawing back to reveal her fangs as she spat out the last word. "Don't you realize who you're dealing with?"

"Of course," Matheson swallowed hard, avoiding Charmaine's eyes as he pulled away from her. "That's why I have taken precautions."

"What precautions?"

"I have recorded every conversation we've ever had, including the one in which you agreed to kill Sara Greenwood in exchange for a quarter of a million dollars."

"Half a million. And I know you recorded it. What do you take me for? That still wouldn't stop me from killing you, rummaging through your home and office to locate the tapes and destroying them."

"Ah Ms. Renata. You are bright, beautiful and yes, deadly. But unfortunately for you, not technically savvy. You see, I have buried a link via a private computer code in the mainframe of the New York City Births and Deaths Electronic Department."

"So?"

"Unless I personally go in and remove it, when my death is registered, the computer will automatically send the linked information containing our very special "relationship" to a particular recipient."

Charmaine knew the answer before Matheson said it but she just had to hear it coming out of his ugly little mouth.

"Who?"

He smiled ghoulishly.

"Why, your beloved Detective Darwin Renaldi. And just what do you think he will do when he finds out the vampire whore he's been banging is actually a murderer? I knew it's been said that all guys think with their dicks but my guess is, this particular Dick will put his personal feelings aside and book you like the common criminal you are."

Snarling, Charmaine leapt across the seat and grabbed Matheson by the throat, effectively and effortlessly cutting off his air as her hand tightened around his windpipe. With a strangled plea, Matheson stuttered, spittle flying as he urged her to reconsider.

"Stop...think...am I wrong? I think not."

With an annoyed huff, Charmaine released him with so much force that he struck the back of his head against the driver's window. Erupting into a lengthy coughing jag, Matheson fought to catch his breath as he rubbed his aching neck with one hand.

"You fucking little gnat," Charmaine said lowly, straightening her top and running a hand along the length of her hair.

"Sorry," Matheson choked out, "but I had to protect myself."

"And you think this is the way to do it?"

He nodded, wiping the spit from his chin with the back of one trembling hand.

"It is and there is nothing you can do about it."

"No?" she reached forward and grabbed the bag with the money, "We'll see."

With that, Charmaine got out of the vehicle and slamming the door, made her way back to her own transport unit. Once inside, she fired up the engine and sped off.

Touching one of the buttons on the window control panel, the glass slid down to admit the cool night air into the driver's shell and blow through her long tresses.

She was potentially in big trouble.

If that lousy little slug Matheson was telling her the truth then he did indeed have her by the short hairs, as Renaldi would say.

God only knows what her mortal lover would do if confronted with the conversational records of her and Matheson's little chats but Charmaine felt pretty certain that Matheson's guesstimate of Renaldi's reaction was accurate, regardless of his feelings for her. As hard as it would be he would do the right thing and turn her in.

And all for nothing.

As she headed back across the bridge en route to Renaldi's Bronx living unit, she knew she would have to find a way of getting her hands on that computer code and internal link. Somehow, there must be a way and once she did and her involvement was safely under wraps, she would kill the bastard for trying to blackmail her. That would be her second screwing over of Benjamin Matheson.

But for now she just relished in her first.

Sure she had agreed to off Sara Greenwood for a pretty penny. There was no honor among thieves and after centuries of clawing and fighting her way to the top of the food chain, Charmaine was determined to stay there by whatever means necessary. If that meant taking out the odd client—and by taking out, she didn't mean on date—so be it. Charmaine had nothing against Sara but business was business, so when Matheson approached her that night at The Black Rose, Charmaine thought, what the hell. It would take her a decade to make that kind of money with the agency so why not fast forward a bit?

However what Matheson didn't know was that Charmaine never got the chance to do the deed. She had planned to "accidentally" bump into Sara at one of her beautifying boutiques and seduce her into a get-together where she would proceed to pounce on the vampfan and suck the life clean out of her without the after-the-fact replenishment of a BBP—the woman was known for doing both sexes—but someone had beaten Charmaine to the punch and slain the woman before she could put her plan into effect. Matheson, in all his stupidity, assumed Charmaine had kept her part of the bargain when in fact, he had just handed her half a million dollars for doing absolutely *nada*.

In that respect it was a glorious night and if, or rather when, she got her hands on Matheson's hidden information link, her worries about their exchange being revealed to Renaldi would be toast.

Having arrived at her cop lover's complex and pulling into the carport outside of his living unit, Charmaine realized that there was only one piece of the puzzle still missing.

Who really killed Sara Greenwood?

Chapter Fourteen

Tess parked in her condo's vehicle port and cutting the ignition, sat for a moment, trying to calm her still-trembling limbs as a flood of relief and the after-the-fact nerves coursed through her. Still soaking wet thanks to the club's overhead sprinkler system that had been set off when the fire alarm was pulled, Tess was drenched, freezing and trembling. Sitting still in the transport unit's dark interior she vibrated as she recalled the events of the evening to date.

She had, in fact, managed to sidestep getting fucked every which way from Sunday by Knight, managinging to squirm out of his pretty insistent lip lock just as the fire alarm sounded. However her meeting and conversation with him prior to that point had provided her with a ton of information, some of which she wasn't entirely happy to learn.

According to Knight, he had "visited" Sara Greenwood numerous times previously but on the night in question, he was with another client which he claimed could be corroborated by both the agency and the male customer he had serviced.

That was all fine and good but what did need to be looked into were time lines, specifically, when Kaylen arrived and left his trick. Just because he had a date that night didn't mean he couldn't have gone over and killed Sara Greenwood afterwards. And from what that waiter at The Black Rose had said, Knight had plenty of motive for killing one of Devante's clients and effectively framing his professional competitor for murder.

Knight had also said that in that sly smug manner of his that he himself had no reason for disposing of a client—Sara Greenwood or anyone else. "When a woman's opening her veins and her legs for you, why in the world would you want to put an end to that?"

Why in the world indeed. Certainly Knight had a point. What possible reason would he have for killing Sara apart from jealousy of Sara's newfound affinity for Devante? But Knight didn't seem the jealous type—that would imply he actually had some feelings for Sara Greenwood which having experienced him in person, Tess was confident the escort was not capable of. The only feelings he had were for himself. Of course there still remained the possibility that Knight was envious to such an extent of Devante's popularity that he decided to do in the undead heartthrob by framing him. That was a possible concern.

Most worrisome however was the last bit of information Knight lazily spat out like a bolt from the blue. With a wicked laugh, Knight "accidentally" let slip that Devante supposedly had some dark secret that he was desperate to keep hidden, or such was the talk around the agency. Playing the devil's advocate, Knight just couldn't resist posing the "What if?" scenario, openly wondering what Devante would have done if Sara Greenwood knew of said confidential matter. With no indication what this enigmatic mystery of Devante's was, or even that it existed, Tess was tempted to dismiss it altogether but the investigator in her had to uncover all stones until the truth was revealed. So even if she didn't want to believe something, she was forced to entertain the prospect of it until it was proven not to be.

Stepping out of the transport unit, Tess began the long walk along the interior port, her bare feet slipping in her sopping sandals, the flimsy dripping fabric of her chiffon dress clinging to her body so to show her lacy underwear and curvaceous shape. With her hair now hanging in sodden strings down either side of her face, Tess wiped at her still-moist skin, the overhead illuminator light flickered on as she went, buzzed, then went out to leave the area in virtual darkness.

Her pulse reacted to the sudden change in visibility but she could see the skytram pod some yards ahead, the brightness of the area in which it sat offering a sense of security from the surrounding dimness she was presently in.

Sensing more than hearing the presence behind her, Tess whirled about and squinting, peered into the darkness that stretched out before her, her fingers automatically moving to the laser that was normally on her hip. Thanks to her club outfit, she came up empty handed. Her weapon strapped to her inner thigh was concealed under the yards of black chiffon of her dress but there was virtually no chance she could get to it without announcing the attempt.

Just then a slight movement to her right caught her attention and jerking around, she let a wail out of her at the blur that came at her from the darkness, stopping just short of running into her.

With a combination of relief and fear, she eyed the being in front of her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she spat out breathlessly in a mix of anger and relief. Taking an unconscious step backward, her hands, which had risen up as if to ward the figure off, relaxed back down to her sides.

"Sorry," Devante said, following her lead and backing off a bit as well. "I didn't mean to scare you." His gaze fell down the length of her body. "You look...wet."

Tess, ignoring the remark, wouldn't let go of her annoyance.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to make sure..."

Tess tensed. With Kaylen's words of Devante's mysterious past and possible motive still ringing in her ears, her heart rate increased at the realization that with each step closer to the truth, she was putting herself closer to danger. But in a funny sort of way she didn't care. Right now she was ice cold and steaming mad, furious at the likelihood that Devante had been lying all along

"Make sure what? That I didn't get word of your little secret back to the Department?"

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"What secret?"
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"Oh c'mon Devante. You're hiding something and we both know it."

To her complete and utter amazement, he admitted his deception. Sort of.

"It's not what you think."

"What isn't?"

Devante gave her a belligerent look as if to say "Yeah, like I'm going to tell you" before carrying on.

"You're just going to have to trust me."

Tess actually laughed and doubling over in a feigned fit of hilarity, utilized the movement to burrow under her limp dress and retrieve the weapon from its holster high on her leg. Straightening her arm out she pointed the laser gun at Devante for the second time that night. He didn't budge.

"This is becoming tedious."

The air of arrogance within the statement incensed her.

"Is it really? And I'm finding your song and dance routine boring as all hell so how 'bout we drop it once and for all. You never did answer me. What are you doing here?"

Devante motioned with his shoulder in a semblance of a shrug.

"I wanted to make sure you're all right. Especially after your encounter with Knight."

Tess stared at Devante, his words and their implications slowly sinking in.

"Did you follow me?"

"You needed back up."

"So you took it upon yourself to be the one backing me up?"

"I didn't want you to get hurt."

"I told you, I can take care of myself."

"Yeah it sure looked like it. If I hadn't of pulled that fire alarm, Knight would have nailed you 'til you passed out."

"I doubt that."

"I don't. The guy's dangerous."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Should I be afraid of you?"

When Devante didn't answer, Tess kept pushing, bluffing her way into a eliciting a reaction from Devante.

"Maybe I should review the details of your double life with my superiors?"

[&]quot;You tell me."

[&]quot;I don't know what you're talking about."

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Devante took a step toward her.
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Another step brought him nose to nose with her.

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"No?"
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Tess opened her mouth to speak but no sound would come out. Instead she just moved her head from side to side in a slow negative manner which, much to her horror, was in direct contradiction to what she was feeling inside.

With a soft smile, the very first he had ever given her, Devante tilted his head to one side and descending on her mouth pressed his lips firmly against hers. The soft, warm touch of his skin distracted Tess and for one brief moment, her guard let down and without thinking or wanting to, she returned his kiss. That momentary lapse in judgment and control was all he needed. Moving his mouth in such a way as to slightly open hers, he kissed her more fully—not a hard, fast probe but rather a slow, sexy urge-you-to-burst kind of kiss that moved like fire from her lips down to her toes and back up again, coming to rest in the most feminine part of her body, where it sat, pulsing and pleading for penetration.

Tess wanted to give in to the sweet pull of his lips on hers and even more to find out firsthand just how fantastic Blood Bytes reportedly spectacular stud really was. But, somewhere up through the throbbing yearning desire came Renaldi's warning of Devante's true intent toward her—basically that of using his sensual skills to throw her off track. Breathlessly, Tess pulled away from his burning kiss, angrily twisting out of Devante's embrace, the sudden movement tugging at the material of her dress which slid off one shoulder as she pushed full force against his chest with her hands and laser to send him stumbling back a couple of steps.

"That was dirty," she said excitedly, as fury and a little touch of hurt sparked in her eyes. "In case you don't know, it is illegal for me to have any interaction, especially this kind, with a suspect."

Devante slowly reached over and easing the fabric back up into place, almost not noticing the small scar on her left collarbone as he did so.

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"I do know. I'm sorry."
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[&]quot;You have nothing on me."

[&]quot;Oh yeah? And what makes you say that?"

[&]quot;Cause if you did you would have gone straight to the precinct with it."

[&]quot;Is that so?"

[&]quot;That's what I would do if I were you. Unless..."

[&]quot;Unless what?"

[&]quot;Unless, you were...conflicted in some way."

[&]quot;Don't flatter yourself. There's no conflict here."

[&]quot;Then why do you keep doing this?"

[&]quot;Doing what?"

Tess only glared at him. He knew damn well what he was doing, pushing her buttons to make her fall head over heels for his fabulous form.

To this, Devante only shook his head slowly and looked down for a moment before returning his gaze to her face.

"Maybe I'm acting on what I know we both want."

"Not both of us."

"No?"

The challenge hung in the air and Tess knew what he was saying was right. Yes, she wanted him, yes, she felt compelled to throw caution to the wind and give into the wacky and wonderful throes of attraction but damn it, she just couldn't do it. Not only was he a person of interest, a possible suspect in a murder case, he was a vampire, an escort and last but not least, a male who had the potential to break her heart.

"You're wrong," she breathed out defiantly, contradicting her true feelings. "I don't want you, I don't need you and I certainly don't trust you. But when it comes to me, the one thing you can count on is this. I don't give a damn how well you kiss. If you murdered Sara Greenwood, I'm taking you down."

With that, Tess whirled on her heel, leaving Devante to smile at the knowledge that his mouth on hers had pleased her enough to make mention of it.

Once safely inside her condo she dissolved into a crumbled heap on the floor. Fuck that guy for making her knees shake. She would give anything if she could get one hard piece of evidence to either put him away or clear him completely.

Intent on that, Tess called Renaldi. Frustrated that her conversation with Knight had yielded nothing, she was hopeful that Renaldi's earlier digging had uncovered something, anything on Devante. Dialling his number she waited for the vista-viewer to click on. It did and she could see a sleepy-eyed Renaldi blinking drowsily into the viewer.

"Fuck Monterey. Do you know what time it is?"

"Yeah. Listen, please tell me you got something on Devante Matiero today."

"Your loverboy?"

Tess ignored the comment and chose to wait him out.

"Ah, Matiero. No. Nothing. This guy might as well be dead, which technically speaking, he is. How'd you make out with Knight?"

Tess started a little at Renaldi's way of putting the query until she realized he didn't mean make out in the same respect as she was thinking.

"Same thing. Clean as a whistle."

"Don't put words in my mouth. I didn't say Matiero was clean, just said I couldn't find anything on him."

"What's the dif?"

"Do you really want me to explain the difference to you at three in the fucking morning?"

"Clean up your language and no I don't. I just meant it generally speaking adds up to the same thing."

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"IE we got nothing."
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"Ok. Just wanted to double check."

"Monterey," he said quickly before Tess could disconnect.

"What?"

"You okay?"

"Sure."

"You sound weird. I mean, weirder than normal."

"Coming from you that's a compliment Renaldi."

A long silence followed and Tess locked eyes with Renaldi, sensing more than seeing his discomfort.

"All I'm saying is this case is kind of off."

"Weird?"

"Yeah. So you know. Just be careful."

Tess had worked side by side with Renaldi at the precinct for almost five years and side by side with him in the bedroom for over one and she had never heard him plead caution in either locale.

"Now you're sounding weird."

"I mean it Tess. Watch your back."

Tess suppressed the irrational tremor that coursed through her.

"Renaldi, what are you up to?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know exactly. I just get this feeling that you're not telling me everything.

"I could say the same about you."

Touché.

"Look, for the sake of the case, let's call a temporary truce," she suggested.

"Why temporary?"

Tess shot him a hard look that said she wasn't ready to fully forgive his behavior. Not yet.

"Okay," he conceded. "I've got a couple of things to wrap up tomorrow but first thing Tuesday morning at the precinct let's get together and compare notes. Say nine?"

"Fine."

"And Tess?"

[&]quot;Right."

She waited. Renaldi sighed, looked down, grimaced, then back up. His words, when they came were so low that she barely heard them. But she did.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

As if she didn't know.

"For everything. When this is all over, we should talk and clear the air once and for all."

Then reaching over, for the first time since they had split up, she allowed him to be the one to break the connection first.

Remembering Renaldi's questionable recorded conversation with the mystery woman, as Tess turned off her vista viewer she couldn't help but wonder if somehow her partner had bitten off more than he could chew. His behavior was odd, even for him and she could tell without a shadow of a doubt that something was brewing. She would get to the bottom of things when they met up early next week but until then, Tess was not only going to have to take matters into her own hands to solve this one, but was going to have to go to extreme measures to do it.

Chapter Fifteen

Monday morning

The next morning, Tess was preparing to make a couple of stops to follow up on what the senator had said when her vista-viewer chimed, alerting her to an incoming call.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she flicked the remote for the screen initializer and up from the table popped the face of coroner Shelley Warner.

"Morning Tess. How goes the battle?"

"Oh you know Shelley. The usual scraping, scratching and tail chasing."

"Yep and after what I have to tell you about your girl Sara Greenwood, you're going to be going in circles even more."

"Oh?"

It was not like the trusted medical examiner to offer up her own option along with her findings, so Tess found herself exceptionally fascinated by the woman's last remark.

"You remember how I send there was something funny going on with the liver."

"Yeah."

"We got the tox screens back and my suspicions were correct. Well, one of them was."

"Uh-huh," Tess said slowly, waiting for Shelley to unravel the rest of the situation.

"Your victim was not a drinker. Her liver was enlarged because she had received a fatal dose of secobarbital."

"Secobarbital?"

"It's a barbiturate derivative drug available as either a free acid or sodium salt, the acid being a white amorphous powder that is soluble in water."

"Where would she have come into contact with that?"

"That's the thing. No place. This is not an easily accessible compound. It was discontinued manufacturing back in 2001 when secobarbital overdose was the most common method of doctor assisted suicide. So, not to steal your job over there, but I'd have to say that it was obviously given to her, without her knowledge for the sole purpose of killing her."

"That's quite a statement Shelley."

The coroner put her hands up and shook her head.

"I know, I know and you know me. I don't lay it out as black and white unless it is."

"So are you saying there is literally zero percent chance that the victim accidentally inhaled or touched or ingested this drug?"

"It would be ingested as the lining of her esophagus and stomach also revealed trace amounts. And yep, that's pretty much what I'm saying. 'Course you're free to snoop around her home, her workplace, wherever she frequented and see if you can find anything or anyone with links to this contaminate but I'm just trying to save you some valuable time because my guess is you won't find anything."

"I appreciate that Shelley and I wish it were that easy, but you know I have to look everywhere."

"I know. I'm just giving you a heads up to what you're going to, or in this case, what you're not going to find. This gal didn't eat a bad salad or get slipped something at a club. Given the rarity and expense of secobarbital, this was purposely put someplace she would never suspect it—nor taste it for that matter, because secobarbital has a very strong flavor—and given to her with one intention only."

"I believe you but now comes the hard part," Tess said, standing up as she headed toward the table to switch off the viewer. "Finding out who and why."

"Now I'm no detective," Shelley said with a gruff little laugh, "but I'd say this next little tidbit will eliminate one entire group of individuals and therein pretty much cut your search in half."

"How do you figure?"

"Well along with the contaminate, the only products found in the victim's stomach contents was a breakdown of a couple of alcohol-based liquids used in cocktails and the capsule casing from a BBP."

Tess whistled softly.

"That's right. Whoever fed our girl her lethal amount of secobarbital, more than likely cut the compound into her blood back pill. And I don't think I have to tell you which specific segment of the population uses BBPs."

"Nope," Tess said, her heart sinking a little at the confirmation she had been hoping would never come.

"Yep. I would say it's 99.9% certain your killer is a vampire. But that's not all."

"What do you mean?"

"Carson is knee-deep in bodies after that gang takedown in Jersey so asked me to pass along his findings to you."

"Let 'er rip."

"Well as expected, some of the hairs found on the victim were from your numero uno POI—what's his name again?"

"Devante," Tess replied dismally.

"Right, Devante. Surprisingly though, my rape kit on the victim didn't turn up any seminal fluid from your man. Very strange actually considering that he was there to, ya know, so you would think we would find evidence of their..."

"That is strange," Tess said, a sense of renewed hope flooding through her at the prospect that Devante had not actually slept with the woman.

"If you think that's peculiar, hang onto your hat. From what Carson uncovered, your man was not the only one there that night."

"Huh?"

"Yep. Other strands of hair collected at the scene point to a second party at the party."

Ménage a trois perhaps?

"Male or female?"

"That's the thing. We have been able to determine gender on human hairs for eons but this doesn't work with our neighborhood bloodsuckers. The only thing we can determine for sure is that the secondary set of hairs do in fact belong to another vampire."

"So there were two different people there that night."

"Right. Apart from the victim, that is."

"Is there any way to establish the identity of the second person?"

"We running the DNA profile through our databanks now. If and when we get a match, you'll be the first to know."

"Okay, thanks Shelley. I'll talk to you later."

"Ten-four."

So this latest finding confirmed Devante's presence in the victim's unit, which he had already admitted, along with another immortal, more than likely Kaylen Knight. Officially elevating the status of both PsOI to suspects, Tess felt more and more certain that the murderer of Sara Greenwood had to now be one or the other of the two warring vampire escorts.

After leaving a message on Renaldi's machine advising him of Shelley's official ruling on the cause of Sara Greenwood's death along with Carson's conclusions, Tess proceeded to make a non-productive stop at Harrids that yielded nothing, except the already widely acknowledged fact that Sara frequented Blood Bytes and was partial to Kaylen Knight. From there Tess decided to hit Bodies Beautiful.

Pulling her cruiser up to the exterior hover port that looped around the building, Tess got out and entered through the main entrance of Bodies Beautiful—a multi-tiered, multi-function health farm that from the outside looked like a gigantic orange.

"Change your face, change your body, change your life" was their motto and the vast majority of New Yorkers bought into the concept, especially the famous. The pride of Greenwich Village, the circular carrot colored structure was often alive with whispers of such celebrity clientele sightings as Dame Dally Ho and Markus Martinique, just a few of the country's elite said to have altered themselves within its spherical mandarin walls only to exit a completely unrecognizable and anonymous entity.

Tess herself had gone a couple of times when the revolutionary spot first opened, mostly out of curiosity as opposed to a deep-seated unhappiness with her appearance. Choosing the relatively safe procedures, she changed her shoulder-length red hair to a black bob and a spiky blonde number and a waist-length shocking pink do—all within a month. She even morphed her eye color from green to red for Halloween one year but in the end always returned to her normal state. Hair and eye color was one thing but she would never undergo the shop's more aggressive alterations that could reshape the structure of faces and bodies.

Stepping into the lobby of the enormous salon, Tess was directly bombarded with the audio and visual cues and calls that could be heard and seen on a succession of vista-viewers dead ahead on the hi-tech semi-circular panel that encompassed the room.

"Martin, Party of three, Thigh Reduction and Eye Color Amendment, Please proceed to Service Room 321, Level 24," a disembodied ambient female voice sounded from overhead as a number of images showing the procedures, the staff, the room and the route to it slid across the metal track that housed the viewers.

"Terrance, Party of one, Hair removal, Penile, Biceps and Pectoral Implant, Please proceed to Service Room 773, Level 51."

A sizeable collection of green striped doors that could be viewed at the end of the long hall that split the section in two opened randomly, the multi-floor lifts primed to take the renovators, as they were known, to their destination and their desired new state.

Two APs—artificial personnel—stood flanking the lift area, their android identity given away only by the unnatural sheen of their skin and the plastic-like glitter of their implanted pupils. Occasionally they were mistaken for vampires by the untrained eye, but as strange as it sounded, the undead actually seemed more alive than their robotic equivalents. There was just something missing that very subtly set the two apart. Whatever it was, like vampires, the APs pretty much appeared to be as human as she was, that is except for a handful of emotions including sexual attraction that the scientific world had not yet been able to adequately capture and reanimate.

Heading for the male AP on the left, Tess nodded slightly as the blond shifted his head to watch her approach, the bulging bulk of his torso straining against the orange and green striped jersey to accommodate the movement.

"Good afternoon. How may I assist you?"

As always, Tess was surprised at the warmth of the AP's voice. She'd known more than a few humans who didn't sound as sincere and animated.

Going for a slightly different tactic, Tess strayed from the real reason for her trip to the infamous salon. Putting on her most gossipy girly tone, she leaned forward, whispering in a conspiratorial manner.

"Well, my friend comes here regularly and she has always insisted I come too, practically begging me to change my face, change my body, change my life but I hadn't

been sure until the last time I saw her. She had just had a couple of services and looked unbelievably beautiful! I mean the guys and girls were just staring at her when she walked out.

"But that's beside the point, okay, well not really. You see, it's our birthdays next week—can you believe we were both born on the same day? Anyway, it's our birthdays and I would love to surprise her by getting a renovation just like hers!! Wouldn't that be fun?"

The AP's eyes twinkled.

"Delightful."

"But I have only one little itsy-bitsy problem. I don't know exactly what she got done. If I give you her name, could you tell me what amendments she got done and who did them?"

"I'm sorry but we are not allowed to give out that sort of information."

Tess shot a quick look around them. The other AP was engaged in a conversation and the steady stream of bodies hoisted skyward by the other means of transport, the vertical rows of escalators near the entrance, were looking toward the heavens.

Inching around the pedestal, Tess batted her eyelashes and leaned in unusually close.

"Oh I understand and I would never ask you to do anything you shouldn't. It's just that I really want to surprise my friend."

Stepping up to him and sliding one hand back and around the synthetic guardsman, Tess grabbed one side of his backside and squeezed firmly. His eyes continued to express pleasantness but he frowned, revealing his confusion at her touch.

"I...am...sorry. We are not allowed..."

Tess moved her hand around to the front of his pants and pressed into his anatomically correct form, slowing rubbing up and down as she innocently smiled, but inside she was nervous as all hell. She was playing with fire. If she pushed things too far, the AP, unable to process such stimuli, would blow a gasket and draw attention to both her and her ploy to garner information illegally. In response to her illicit contact, he only regarded her with increasing puzzlement.

"Look I'm sorry. I didn't mean to confuse you. You are confused right?"

"Yes," he said softer now, his voice exposing his uncertainty.

"That's okay. Don't worry about it. I tell you what. You just tell me the name of my friend and who she last saw and then I'll be on my way."

As a final mode of inspiration, she cupped him gently and gave a little squeeze to his virgin package.

"Ahhhh, I..."

"It's okay. I don't want to get you in trouble and unfortunately if you don't help me, you might get in trouble."

"I would?"

He was now clearly bewildered but just as evidently easy to sway.

"Yes. And I know how important your job is to you and that you do it right. You want to do the right thing don't you?"

"Yes."

"I know you do, so just tell what I need okay?"

After a lengthy moment, he conceded.

"Okay."

He looked down at the panel on the podium that he stood behind and after punching in a continuity of commands mid-air to the touchless computer terminal, he glanced back up at Tess.

"What is your friend's name?"

"Sara Greenwood."

Another group of rhythmic movements from his hands and a couple of short beeps announced the arrival of the information he sought.

"Here it is. Hair color, Upper body morph. Her service provider is Tasah, service room 1101, Level 1200."

Directly ceasing her manual enticement, Tess stepped back and smiling, thanked him. As she got into one of the skytrams behind him, she could hear his routine greeting ringing out at another party as the doors closed, "Good afternoon. How may I assist you?"

Up on the 1200th floor, Tess emerged from the airborne capsule, her ears still crackling from the ride. Right ahead was a self-entry station. Moving to the electronic keypad, Tess punched in the service provider Tasah's name and immediately a list of her appointments for the day spread out in front of Tess. Selecting the name of the worker's pre-lunch break service session that day, one Marjin Max who was to have a foot resizing, Tess falsely registered as said client and headed for room 1101. When the real Ms. Max showed up, the system would not allow her entry and she would be redistributed to another floor and service provider for the procedure.

Inside the private service room, Tess removed her boots and foot coverings and took the circular hanging chair that swung from a trapeze-type steel frame. Once seated, the chair automatically raised up, leaving her feet to dangle several feet off the floor. This way, the provider could stand and perform the method at eye level.

No sooner had she gotten herself settled and the compartment's sliding door opened to accommodate the large, bulky form of short, swarthy-looking woman.

"Tasah?"

"Do you like it?" the white-coated porker posed as she whirled about in an effort to show off her chunky, dowdy appearance.

"Ah, well, it's..."

Tasah erupted into laughter, the rolls around her stomach and chin jiggling as she clapped her chubby hands together.

"I know, I know. Isn't it great? Looks nothing like me, does it?"

While Tess had absolutely no idea what the original version of Tasah looked like, she was just going to have to take the woman's word for it and play along.

"No. Would never have recognized you."

"You either Marjin. Who did this last morph for you?"

Hell. Without knowing any of the other staff, Tess was going to have to rely on another vague response that she hoped would sail right over Tasah's head.

"Oh I forget her name. She's new."

"Darla?"

"Could be. I can't recall."

"Hmmm," she looked Tess up and down. "Maybe we should can her ass. You look the shits."

Insulted, Tess toyed with the idea of firing back a "Look who's talking?" but the woman sped on, jumping ahead to echo her thoughts.

"Guess that sounds funny coming from me but you know, I just wanted to walk on the other side of the road for a bit you know. In the past six years since I've been here, I've had the biggest boobs, the longest legs, every nose, chin and mouth known to mankind and a rainbow of hair and eye color. For a change, I want to look..."

"Average?"

"I don't know about that but what I was aiming for was real."

To that last comment, Tess couldn't argue. It was true that, with the ability to alter and enhance at their fingertips, the masses had become incredibly beautiful and built, with the option of changing their outer shell as quickly and easily as changing clothes. But there was a price to pay and while the average human being was now exquisitely gorgeous beyond words, there was a pronounced sense of falsity evident within the flawless features and sculpted forms.

Certainly Tess' waist wasn't exactly ten inches less than her bust and hips, her teeth were not perfectly straight, nor was her nose and her nails had an annoying tendency toward chipping in the cold weather. She was flawed, pure and simple and was doubtful anyone would ever call her perfect, but she was who she was and proud of the fact that she looked pretty damn good without any artificial means.

"I think I know what you mean."

"But enough about me. What are we doing today?"

Consulting a flip-style animated calendar that she withdrew from the pocket in the front of her orange lab coat, Tasah let out a little surprised noise, her gaze moving from the notepad to Tess' feet and back again.

"Oh! A foot reduction? Honey, why do you want that? Your feet are weeny to begin with."

"Do you think?"

Tasah slapped at the air.

"Hell yeah. They are gorgeous little tootsies, if not a little plain. How about a laser tattoo of the solar system on the top? You know, to spice things up a little."

"Will it hurt?"

Tasah stopped and eyed her a little strangely.

"You've had laser tattoos before."

Another hurdle.

Tess took a chance.

"Yeah but not on my feet."

Appeased, Tasah moved out and dragged a large metal contraption away from the far wall to hover over Tess' toes. "Same thing. No different."

Straightening Tess' legs and securing them into rigid holders so they were unmovable, Tasah began entering the coordinates and information for the tattoo design into an attached contact-free screen, similar to the one used by the AP downstairs. Seizing the potential opportunity to find out a little more about Sara Greenwood, Tess indifferently began chattering away.

"So I've heard about this place and wondered if you knew anything about it."

"All depends. What's the place?"

"Blood Bytes."

"Oh sure! We do both clients and staff from there."

"Really?"

This was news. It had never occurred to Tess that the notoriously attractive vampires would ever consider changing their infamous beautiful appearances.

"What do you know about it?"

"Not that much apart from the fact that it is the city's most prestigious escort vampire agency."

"Everyone knows that but is it considered reputable?"

"Reputable? Isn't that an oxymoron?" asked Tasah. She chuckled heartily as she flipped a switch and the blueprint for the imprint was superimposed from the overhead monitor onto Tess' flesh.

"Yeah I guess. What I meant to ask was, does one get their money's worth?"

"Honey, from what I hear, you get it and then some."

Tess tried to sound uninformed which, basically speaking, she was.

"Really? And who'd you hear that from? Don't tell me you personally know someone who has used the agency?"

Again Tasah stopped and looked at her.

"Well you know Sara don't you?"

"Know of her is more like it. I guess we're really more acquaintances than anything else. Met at Harrid's a while back."

"Oh yeah. Harrid's. Great place. My niece is a strand streaker there."

"Is she? Wonderful."

"Here we go," Tasah said as she hit a key. A low frequency buzzing began as rays of light shot down to trace the outline that was on her legs with an ultra-fine laser. The sensation stung but was far from painful.

"So what about this Sara? Does she patronize Blood Bytes often?"

Tasah snorted.

"That's an understatement. From what she's told me, she's been through the agency's stable—men and women—at least twice."

"You don't say. Didn't she manage to choose any favorites?"

They shared a catty little titter between them.

"You betcha. Seems Sara was pretty gung ho over one of Bytes' top male draws."

Tess leaned forward in anticipation but pretended to study the cosmic etchings as they were being embossed on her skin.

"Do you know his name?"

"Why? You after a date?"

Tess answered coquettishly with a shrug and a wink.

"I might be."

"She never told me his name but she used to blush and ooh and aah over his mattress acrobatics, not that they ever made it there." Tasah lowered her voice. "Seems this horny little hottie would do her in ten different places and ten different positions before they even made it to the bedroom."

"Sounds like quite a handful."

"And that's the other thing," Tasah said, her eyes widening in emphasis, "apparently this guy was very well endowed. Sara always used to complain, albeit with a smile, that she couldn't walk for two days after she'd been with him."

"Just what every women is after," Tess said, trying to hide the derision she felt as she looked away.

"Not me. He may be a crazed Casanova but I don't go for the jealous types."

Tess pricked up her ears.

"Jealous?"

"Oh yeah, Sara said there was some kind of competitive thing going on between him and the agency's other head honcho. Said he could beat this other guy hands down at anything, including pleasuring tricks and he'd put anybody who said otherwise out of commission"

"Wow. Sensitive."

"Yeah, her knight in shining armor, as she called him, would never be able to handle it if one of his clients dumped him for the other stud on staff."

Knight in shining armor? As in Kaylen Knight? Clever play on words and yet further proof of Knight's motive.

Mentally reviewing the clues to date, Tess speculated once more that as Sara was with Devante the night she was murdered, instead of her regular purchased pleasurer Knight, was it possible Knight's ego got the better of him and upon discovering his regular client had chosen a substitute, he lost control and exacted the ultimate punishment for her disloyalty? Barring that, perhaps he decided to go another route and entrap Devante therein removing his professional competitor.

On the other hand, Devante's only apparent reason for potentially slaying the woman would be if she discovered his supposed secret past, as hinted at by Knight, whatever that may be and if in fact it existed. Then again, who knows the inner workings of the minds of the undead and all the many skeletons in their closets.

So there it was, Devante or Knight. Which one did the dirty deed? There really was now only one way to find out. The plan that was spinning around and around in her head had started percolating in her mind late last night but it had taken her the next eight hours to actually talk herself into doing it. And as strategies go, she was now at the pinnacle staring Step One in the face. Grabbing a handful of courage, Tess took a deep breath and plunged on ahead.

"You know what?" she suddenly piped up. "I feel a little bored with this latest look. I know I didn't book it but could you manage to switch me up?"

Tasah's face lit up.

"You got it girl! I am finishing at lunchtime today so we can go hog wild. Now, do you want to morph just the face and hair or do the whole shebang from head to toe?"

"Oh, the neck up only. I just want a new look for a party I'm going to but you know how it is. I'm sort of attached to my body as is."

"Gotcha!"

"And how long we going for?"

Tess made a few mental calculations.

"Say sixteen hours?"

"Just for the night. Righteo!"

Tess was tired of pussyfooting around the situation and decided that if she was going to get any answers at all, she was going to have to go undercover.

Literally.

Chapter Sixteen

It took Tess most of the afternoon to talk the Captain into her plan. Only after she had agreed to install audio recording devices in the main room and bedroom of her living unit to ensure her safety should her bold scheme go awry did he finally concede.

What the Captain would have really preferred was the dual protection of audio and visual recorders in place so the squad parked outside could both hear and see what was going on but Tess flat out refused. Given the nature of her proposed meeting with Devante, she could just imagine what the surveillance team would circulate about her interaction with the escort the next morning around the hydration cooler.

The other teensy weensy little factor that she couldn't yet admit even to herself was that she wanted this one and possibly only intimate encounter with Devante, whatever it would be and wherever it led, to be, if at all possible, just between them. If she got in trouble—i.e. something she herself couldn't get out of without assistance—Tess would let out an unmistakably clamorous howl, communicating to the vigilante group below that they had better hustle their butts upstairs and save her in-serious-jeopardy ass.

With the necessary funds secured and the rest of the strategy put into effect, by four p.m., everything was good to go. Under the assumed name of Margaret Cutter and now with a completely different appearance, Tess picked up the phone and called Blood Bytes, inquiring about booking a date with first Devante Matiero that night and then Kaylen Knight the following evening. She knew it was short notice but as Devante rarely accepted clients she was sure the offer of doubling his normal rate would be adequate enticement and as for getting Knight so quickly, Tess had made provisions for that obstacle as well.

The blonde bimbo on the other end of the line snickered a little saying that Tess should really allow herself a couple of weeks rest between the two before casually mentioning the astounding news that Knight had a four-month waiting list. A waiting list for a lay? Who ever heard of such a thing?

But Tess had no intention of waiting. With a little sweet talk and a promise to give the young woman tickets to the Frantic Fireballs—the band she recalled the receptionist liked (another item secured via the Department) Tess sweet talked the intellectually-challenged young woman into "bumping" a couple of Kaylen's scheduled clients thus getting her a date with him the next night at ten. An hour later, when the call came in that Tess a.k.a. Margaret also had an eight o'clock appointment with Devante that night at her living unit, Tess tried to prepare herself for what was about to take place.

Moving into the kitchen compartment of her unit, she poured the *gwana*-laced *shazzden* from the bottle, her hands shaking only slightly as the sparkling golden liquid splashed over the rocks within the asymmetrical crystal glass. Tess had retrieved the tall

skinny bottle from way, way, way back in the hidden storage area within the cooking and eating area of her unit. It had been a gift from her Aunt Marlene many birthdays ago and had remained unopened until now. Not much of a drinker, Tess now felt the need to "steady her nerves" as her aunt used to rationalize a quick nip. Lifting the drink to her lips, in one solid draught she shot back the whole thing.

Liquid courage. Isn't that what they used to say in the old days?

Hopeful that the narcotic-based cocktail would provide her with a little composure, no matter how fleeting, Tess waited a moment hoping to feel a sense of calm wash over her. Nothing. Maybe she should take a flotation mind-blank. The sense-soothing virtual massage always wiped the head and heart of any distress. But she didn't have the time. Devante would be there soon. At the thought of him she grew both nervous and excited and slowly drawing in a deep breath felt optimistic as her edginess abated slightly.

Using the array of triangular mirrors that were positioned along the wall in the unit's entry, Tess checked out her new morphed look.

Her hair was now a warm chocolate brown shade that, brushed back away from her shoulders and falling to her hips, looked great contrasted with her now olive skin tone and sparkling amber colored eyes. Her once-petite upturned nose was now a long, straight and beautiful. Where her own lips had been full and pouty, Tess had opted out for a slightly thinner, wavier shape to her mouth and her narrow face had been given more contour and angles.

Choosing a strapless bronze shift that fell to mid-calf, Tess looked down at her newly-tattooed feet—the swirls and lines offset by the warm glittering fabric that floated above them. She completed the ensemble with a pair of danglers—earrings that hung down and grazed her shoulders.

If ever she needed a Purple Punch it was now but she was on police business. A *gwana shazzden* was one thing but the notorious violet concoction was quite another. As tempting as it was to soothe her nervousness with a couple of stiff ones she had to keep her wits about her. Even so at the sound of a knock at the door, she just about leapt out of her new skin.

Was she ready for this? Was this all a very very bad idea? In addition to the surveillance apparatus sprinkled about the unit, Tess had hidden a succession of weapons throughout the place including numerous items of protection in and around the bed. At the first sign of any trouble, she was prepared to blast her way out but would that be necessary? Time would tell.

"Coming," she yelled, immediately wincing at the poor choice of words.

Not yet she wasn't.

While she had no intention of taking the charade all the way to its expected conclusion, Tess also didn't want to blow her cover so would have to go along with however the evening unfolded.

Opening the living unit's sliding opaque door, Tess sucked in a breath at the sight of Devante, hoping she appeared as she should and really was—nervous, excited and

desirous. She had naturally expected to see him on the other side of the door but did he have to look so gosh darn fabulous?

Letting her gaze slide over him, Tess understood even more than she had before why he was Blood Bytes' most requested companion. Without a word of a lie, he was one incredibly dashing specimen, his lean shape the perfect structure to exhibit the pair of oyster-colored leather pants that clung to him in all the right places, making his professed lover-in-waiting suddenly very envious of the sleek cowhide. The sheer turquoise linen shirt under the leather jacket, the same oyster shade as his pants, showed only a hint of his muscular chest but it was enough. With that one peek at his rock hard, ripped torso Tess immediately knew it would feel fantastic pressed up against her.

Without wanting to, she tore her eyes away from his body that was so clearly created for sinning to move her view up. As she had noted before, his sleek black hair that framed his angular pale face created the most stunning contrast with his alabaster flesh, the spell broken only by his incredible dark eyes gleaming now with a catlike fascination that beheld her with a titillating combination of desire and amusement.

"Hello."

"Hi," she said, soaking in the moment while trying to constantly keep one step ahead in the game that was about to begin. "Are you Devante?"

She thought that was a nice touch. Pretend that she had never seen him, had absolutely no idea who he was or hadn't been dreaming of him each and every night since she first laid eyes on his fantastic form.

He smiled then, a knee-buckling grin that she could feel down to her toes, not to mention other parts of her anatomy.

"In the flesh."

Devante handed her something. Looking down, Tess saw that it was Blood Bytes' calling card. What should she do now? She inwardly mused with an uneasiness that was tinged with a steadily increasing enthusiasm. Should she shake his hand? What was the correct protocol? After all, this was, in one respect, a business meeting but any kind of physical contact at this point seemed premature. Then again, there was to be a whole lot more tactile interaction between them and such that would far exceed a mere handshake so perhaps she should extend the traditional greeting. It was simply the polite thing to do—right? On the other hand, maybe it was best kept to the end—sort of a nice-working-with-ya kind of thing?

Devante gave a soft laugh and motioned toward the sprawling space that stretched out behind his indecisive client.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh I'm sorry," Tess replied, feeling the heat rush to her cheeks as he waved off her apology with a backhanded sweep.

"It's all right. I'm used to it."

No doubt. Given the enticing combination of his air and appearance, Tess was certain Devante must routinely field longing lustful looks. Stepping aside, she let him enter her unit.

A long hushed length passed while he merely watched her, leaving her to squirm under the weight of his suggestive stare. Never before had she experienced such a strong and tangible emission of sexual animal magnetism from a person and while tremendously exciting it was also a little uncomfortable. Clearing her throat she glanced down as she edged past him to close the door.

"May I take your coat?"

Devante removed his jacket in a movement too fast for human eyes, his torso brushing against her as he reached around to place it on the high, spider-like rack to her right in an alcove. Slowly and deliberately he withdrew his arm, his fingers leaving a trail of fire as they grazed her shoulder.

"Thanks. I'm really hot."

Now that was the understatement of the century.

"Come in," Tess barely managed to get out as she turned and led the way into the large sitting room.

Wordlessly he followed, his close proximity eliciting a soft intake of breath from her lips when she circled around to face him.

"Oh!"

"Nice place," he said, his view taking in the sleek navy and silver décor and scenic artwork. "Is that Van Gogh?" He pointed to a large work that hung over the silver silk lounger.

"Yes."

"I thought so. He was great."

Tess was impressed. She hadn't encountered many people in her travels who knew of the painter anymore, let alone liked him. She motioned to the shiny seating area that hovered beneath the artwork. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Would you?"

Oh-oh. Had she blown her cover already or was he just being polite?

Sitting down did seem a little counterproductive to what he was there for but who knew how these types of things started. Best to play it open.

"We could. Or not," she smiled. "Would you...like something to drink?"

Devante only smiled and Tess inwardly kicked herself for the stupid question. Of course he wanted something to drink. That was why he was there.

"So..." Tess asked almost timidly "How do we do this?"

She didn't want to sound like a virgin but the truth was when it came to hiring a sexual partner, she was.

Flashing the most seductive of grins, Devante's direct response caught her unawares, his silken voice caressing her as he looked at her in an I-can-see-right-through-your-clothes manner.

"The old-fashioned way."

Holy Dinah! He was laying it on thick.

"Old-fashioned?" she echoed in a whisper.

"Absolutely," Devante said softly. "I give you the ride of your life and you let me suck you dry."

Ever-so-expertly, Devante fought the grimace that threatened to break his cool countenance. Unbeknownst to his clients, he absolutely hated playing the part of wanton, horny gigolo but it was all part of the game. Thank heavens his reputation and consequent price tag was so staggering that not many could afford him.

Tess clenched her fists so tightly she could feel her sparkling ivory nails digging into the skin on her palms.

"Dry?" she repeated, the question coming out in a whispered croak.

"Well, not literally. Not to the point of death. But," he paused, a seductive grin that danced somewhere between angelic and demonic, playing across his face, "I'll get you close enough to see the light."

In spite of her best efforts, Tess felt the delicate, feminine region between her legs tingle and grow wet.

"Then what?"

Devante made a motion very similar to a shrug.

"Then you take the BBP and within a couple of hours, you're good to go."

"Why do you do this?" she unexpectedly blurted out, the question seeming oddly personal in spite of what was about to take place. There just was no viable excuse for why such a good-looking guy would resort to such means to get laid. Quickly she retraced her steps. "I mean, you could get it anytime you want from whomever you want."

"True."

Tess waited. Surely there was more explanation on its way but Devante only continued to watch her with a stillness that made her both nervous and excited. Her heart pounded erratically in her chest and she knew from all she had read about vampires, he could hear it.

Silently Devante regarded her, mulling over his response as the thumping of her heart threatened to distract him. He could give her some role-playing, trumped-up yarn about his overactive libido or how much he got off in pleasuring woman but in the end, he decided to tell her the truth. At least, part of it.

"It tastes better when it's offered."

Tess only nodded, not entirely appeased but she'd have to take his word on that one.

Devante moved closer to her then, his eyes sweeping down the length of her body and back up again, catching on the area just down and to the left of her jaw line before returning to her face. His expression changed and he looked at her very pointedly.

"What?" Tess said, seeing but unable to decipher the look on his face. "Don't you like my earrings?"

He started from his clear reverie.

"What's that?"

Tess touched one of the shoulder-length silver prongs that graced her earlobe.

"My earrings. You were looking at them."

"Oh yeah. They're lovely. And so are you."

"Thank you."

Recovering from that which had momentarily thrown him, Devante decided he was going to have a little fun.

"Different though."

Tess' heart skipped a beat.

"Pardon me?"

"You look different."

What the hell did that mean? Tess focused hard on keeping her voice neutral.

"Oh? Different, how?"

Devante smiled and took another step forward.

"It's just that you're not like any other woman I've ever visited before. You're better. Much better."

Ah now that was good. Not entirely believable but in a pinch, a woman might just choose to buy that kind of line. Even so, Tess couldn't let it go unchallenged.

"Bet you say that all the time."

Devante shook his head.

"No way. Not even once. I never say anything I don't mean. Never."

He whispered the last word and leaned in close as he said it. Tess' mouth went dry and she looked away to break the intensity of his eyes on hers. If she didn't know any better, she could have sworn Devante was speaking the truth. But mentally shaking herself, she seized upon the reminder that this guy was paid to act like he was smitten.

If she was being who she really was, Tess would call his bluff but she had to act and think, like a bewitched client. Instead she fluttered her eyes and grinned girlishly.

"Really?"

His expression grew serious.

"Really."

Another zing of electricity made Tess want to run for cover but that sort of crazy behavior had the potential to alert Devante to the fact that she wasn't who she said she was.

"So?" she swallowed hard, desperately wishing she had downed at least two more *gwana shazzdens* before she opened the door.

"So?" he repeated soothingly, taking another step toward her, the low tenor of his voice causing the hair on the back of her neck to rise.

"I..." she paused.

Devante took another step and then another—a slow, almost predatory progression until he was so close to her, Tess could see the little flecks of gold within his mesmerizing brown eyes. Electric shocks of pleasure registered as his hands reached up to caress her arms lightly. Delicately clutching her biceps, he pulled her nearer. Without deciding to do so, she felt her arms lift to encircle his broad shoulders as she felt Devante's hands skim her waist to pull her against him. His dark hair, positively gleaming in the soft light of her living space, had been freshly washed and carried with it that wonderful clean scent that, along with the soft aroma of his aftershave, the same one she had noticed that first night, did funny little things to her stomach.

"I don't know if I can do this," she whispered feeling conflicting torrents of fear and arousal wash over her.

"You can do it. And trust me," he murmured as he guided one of her hands down the hard rippling front of his chest, "you're going to love it."

Wow. He was good.

"Should we...?" she motioned over his shoulder to the bedroom.

Devante smiled one of those grins that should be outlawed based on what they could do a hot-blooded woman.

"Uh-uh, too far. Let's do it right here."

Devante now pressed up against her, reached down and trailed one pale index finger from her shoulder all the way down to her wrist. Clasping it gently, he turned her hand over so it was facing palm up and bringing it up to his lips, placed a soft kiss right in the center, the sensation of his moist mouth on the tender middle of her hand, sending rivers of sensation flowing through her.

Moving his way up the inside of her forearm, tracing the light blue vein all the way up to the crook of her elbow, he bent down and kissed her flesh, the alternately light and firm pressure of his mouth and tongue amazingly erotic—so much so that Tess actually felt herself swoon at one point and with a soft gasp, braced herself against his shoulder with her free hand. Her hushed utterance drew his attention and he looked up, his dark eyes glittering with a warmth and intensity not unlike the first time they had met.

"I can really feel that."

Devante followed the trail his mouth had travelled with the fingers of his other hand, moving from her wrist up her inner forearm to her elbow in a slow, teasingly light stroke that made her toes curl.

"There's a lot of nerve endings along this area and here," he rotated his fingers very lightly on the inside bend of her elbow creating exquisite sparks of sensuality, "is extremely tender. It's also a choice location for a little..."

Leaving the sentence dangling, Devante dipped his head down and resumed kissing and lightly sucking the very spot, the sweet surprising waves of pleasure so enthralling Tess that her eyes drifted closed and she barely felt the prick of his teeth as he bit fast and light into her flesh, squeezing her surrounding skin at the point of impact to distract and disguise the action.

For Tess, she could tell only that the sensation changed, moving from a strictly external stimulation to one where her very soul felt as though it was being strung up and out. The wondrous feeling continued only for a second or two before Devante stopped and it was only when he raised his head and Tess opened her eyes that she saw he had bitten her. Licking the two marks he had just made, Devante sealed the wounds with his own freshly bitten tongue, his vampire blood closing up the dual cuts within seconds.

Straightening up, Devante walked forward, his body effectively pushing her backward until she was backed up and pinned against the dividing wall that separated the kitchen from the living room. Now holding both of her hands in his, Devante brought them up and over her head where he held them effortlessly with one hand, his other falling down to push up her dress. Pressed flat against him and held captive by his body and hands, Tess couldn't move. Nor did she want to. From where she was standing, she could feel every ripple, every bulge, every breath and that very fact took her breath away.

Bending down he placed his lips on the curve of her right collarbone directly, Tess speculated, in the vicinity of that god-awful scar, but he certainly didn't seem to mind it. Rather he was moving his mouth and tongue over the raised flesh in such a way that Tess struggled to keep both her breath and pulse steady but it was hard. And so was he—the full jutting edge of his excitement pressing into her pelvis on one side while his free hand danced around the front of her panties lightly grazing her in such a way that her hips involuntarily surged forward hungry for more of his touch.

Kissing up the curve of her throat, a repressed cry erupting from him as his tongue flicked the locality of her jugular vein, he released her hands moving both of his to clasp either side of her face. Kissing her slow and deeply, Tess fought to control her responses to his skilful mouth but soon found herself wholeheartedly returning his kiss. And so she should, she inwardly reasoned while twirling her tongue around his and running her fingers through his hair, which felt like freshly spun silk. After all, she was playing the role of paying client. She had hired this guy to do her so wouldn't it look more than a little strange if she didn't return his affections?

Devante's kisses were increasing in pace and pressure and as his hands dropped down to caress her breasts, Tess seized the opportunity to get a little breathing room. Pulling her burning lips away from his, she clutched him to her and began kissing the side of his neck, lightly sucking on the cool flesh, desperately trying to clear her foggy thoughts that were consumed with one and only one intent—and it had absolutely nothing to do with the case.

"I want you," Devante mumbled into her hair as one hand drifted down to cup her backside. "I want to taste you."

Kissing down the length of her body, he kneeled in worship at her feet, one hand effortlessly pulling off her panties. Stepping out of them and grasping his shoulders for support, Tess leaned her head back against the wall behind her, her breath now coming in short sharp gasps.

Was this really going to happen? Was she really going to let it happen? Shooting a glance at one of the sites not far off that concealed the hidden recording equipment, Tess bit her lip hoping she wouldn't vocalize the intense feelings Devante's mouth was creating.

With his lips blazing a trail of exquisite pleasure from her bellybutton straight down, Devante eased one of Tess' legs up and over his shoulder so he could better access the fragile and by now, deliciously drenched zone between her legs. Long slow licks of his tongue alternated with perfectly pressured suction to very quickly and easily bring Tess to a climax. Clinging to him, her standing leg wildly trembled in the aftermath of the orgasm he had brought her to so expertly.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured in the soft down, kissing his way back up as he rose.

His words of only a few moments earlier came back to her, his claim that he never said anything he didn't mean and for a split second, Tess enjoyed the fantasy that this gorgeous guy was not a paid companion who was spewing such sentiments simply because of a paycheck but rather because he had to, because his heart would burst if he didn't speak what was inside him.

But then the moment was gone. She was doing a job here and so, basically speaking, was he. The only uncertainty that remained was what else, apart from the nature of his business, he had in store for her that night.

"Let's get more comfortable."

With a sudden movement, he pulled back, picked her up and taking a quick couple of steps toward the lounger, tossed her playfully on it. They both smiled a little before Devante positioned himself atop her and resumed kissing her intently, his passion instantly inflaming hers. Grabbing her neck from behind, he steadied her as he caressed her throat with his tongue.

"Wait. Have you got it?"

Devante stopped and pulling back slightly looked at her with amusement.

"Of course."

"Maybe you better get it out and ready, just in case."

"Just in case?"

"You get carried away and forget."

Devante let out a little chuckle but nevertheless got up, went to his jacket in the closet both of which were visible from where Tess lay. Retrieving something from the pocket, he came back and opened his hand. A blue pill lay in his palm.

"You sure it will work?"

"I'm sure," Devante said gently.

He was also sure he wouldn't need to use it tonight. With no intention of drinking her dry, there would be no need for the BBP and like all the others, after a few carefully planted thoughts were placed in their mind, they would be left with nothing but the sweetest memories of something that never even happened.

Sitting the pill down on a table that stood to one side, he resumed his former pleasurable position. She was warm and willing below him and he wished more than anything else in the world, that he could complete the act but the cold hard truth was he couldn't. Not tonight anyway.

"Wait," Tess said all of a sudden, afraid of not only what was about to happen but what might happen afterward. Devante pulled back.

"Want me to stop?" he asked in his sexiest voice, the closeness and feel of his body serving to reassure her.

"No," Tess said. And even if it was wrong and unprofessional and illegal and all those terrible words that could effectively end her career, the truth was, she didn't want him to, not now, not ever.

At the feel of his teeth on her throat and she did feel it this time, Tess' eyes shot open for a split second, staring over his shoulder and fixing on the hall closet across the way. The last thing she saw before she slipped into the most incredible mystical place she had ever been was the weapon nestled in its interior holster within Devante's jacket.

* * * * *

After arranging the unconscious figure in her wall bed and pulling the covers up around her, Devante left intending to head back to his loft. But an unrelenting restlessness had him abandon his transport unit for a spell and do something he hadn't done in ages, go for a walk.

Approaching Central Park, Devante hunched his shoulders against the wind, driving his hands down into the pockets of his narrow dark coat that reached to the ground. It was approaching midnight but the world around him buzzed with an activity level that in other places was normally reserved for daylight hours. However New York was not like other places. It never slept and at any time of the day or night, the streets were alive with a colorful array of bodies and the air as much as the street filled with activity.

Fighting his way through the active crowd, Devante sought to straighten out his thoughts and there was plenty to think about. If he was doing the logical thing, he should go home and regroup, calmly contemplating the events of the past forty-eight hours since he'd met Tess and determining his next course of action. But his agitation, when combined with the fact that he was still revved up from his recent unfulfilling interaction, wouldn't let him rest so he chose instead to take to the street like he used to.

Swerving off along a path that led into one of the many forested walkways in the Park, he wondered to himself if the changes he had personally experienced throughout his life were because of or independent of the transformations he had been witnessing for hundreds of years.

While it wasn't always so, drugs, weapons of all kinds and prostitution were not only legal but openly available on every street corner. Painted ladies stood alongside teenage pushers and sleazy-looking derelicts brandishing handguns, explosives and ammunition, each one calling out like carnival workers, alerting the passing public to their stash of good, reasonably priced products.

Product too had also become part of the afterlife or so some enthusiastically claimed. With the world having seen the emergence of a whole new wave of religions, there were more than a handful that not only shunned the traditional concepts of goodness, charity and modesty, but instead worshipped such unspiritual things as wealth, manipulation, social status and of course, the body and all its many desires. The more you had, the hotter you looked, the higher your standing in the community, the better your chances of attaining eternal life. And of course, it didn't hurt to have a parade of sexual partners on your resume.

That last fixation may not be an entirely new obsession for the human race but Devante was grateful of mortals' preoccupation with sex for obvious reasons. Getting in with Blood Bytes gave him the golden opportunity he had been looking for and it was one where he could kill two birds with one stone.

But things were getting complicated, which, if he were pushed, Devante admitted he rather liked. Lots of twists and turns. He hated it when life went along all nice and easy without any challenges or intriguing events and from where he was standing, things were definitely both challenging and intriguing.

Especially Tess Monterey.

What a firecracker. Brash, bold and bright, she was clearly prepared to fight the effect of his immortal charms as opposed to succumbing to them like most humans and Devante liked that. A lifetime of having mortals keel over with one look of Devante's dangerously dark eyes, had made a casualty of his relationships with them, leaving him basically disinterested in any interaction whatsoever. While not aloof nor unfeeling, he just didn't find any just cause for engaging mortals other than the occasional willingly supplied sup.

But Tess was unique therein creating the possibility for problems down the road. From just a couple of meetings with the beautiful detective, Devante could already tell that she was determined and excellent at her work which meant that if anyone could find out what was going on, it would be her.

Under different circumstances, he would love the chance to watch her in action and see how she unraveled the mystery laid before her—experiencing firsthand how that fabulous brain of hers worked and that would just be for starters. From there he would like to separate her from her clothing and do all the types of things he was supposedly famous for. And then some.

The notion made Devante's libido react and the pleasurable sensation registering in his groin dumbfounded him. Mortals were not now and had ever been his bag and if it weren't for modern science Devante would not be able to physically perform. So how was it that he was responding in this manner without a dose of said miracle drug? It just didn't compute. Sure she was sexy in a defiant, pain-in-the-ass sort of way, but there was something else there that made the blood rush to his most masculine of parts.

But none of this mattered. As much as Devante's inexplicable and intense interest in Tess prodded him to see her, talk to her, learn about her thoughts, feelings and overall life before they met and then sex her up until she begged him for mercy—not necessarily in that order—he resolved that it would be best for them both if he kept as far away as possible from Detective Tess Monterey. That, in spite of the fact that she so very obviously was determined to adopt the very opposite attitude toward him, clearly going to great lengths to peel back his layers.

Realizing that this little late night saunter wasn't doing what he had intended, namely to lighten his gloomy mood, Devante emerged from the Park on West Fifty-Nineth Street and headed back to his client's living unit to pick up his transport unit.

Stopped at a crosswalk, he smelled the young woman behind him seconds before he heard her—the delicate hesitant steps timidly drawing near to come to a halt a few feet from his back even as the scent of her warm blood made his mouth start to salivate.

Turning, Devante noted the eager, starstruck expression on her face. She was maybe twenty, pretty and stunning with startling lime green hair and eyes. She was also shivering and with a quick sweep of her thoughts, Devante discovered it wasn't only from the cold.

"Hi."

Devante nodded his response.

"I'm Diana."

When Devante didn't offer his name, she took a step closer.

"Are you thirsty?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He had heard her the first time but wanted to be sure the stranger was proposing what he thought.

"Are you thirsty?" she repeated, this time, drawing her hair back and tilting her head to one side to reveal her bare neck visible under the collar of her shimmering blue jacket.

Looking back at the streetlight, Devante responded over his shoulder.

"Thanks but no thanks."

"Oh please. I'll give you a freebie."

Devante looked at her again, mildly fascinated. If this wasn't a pro looking to exchange blood for money—something a growing number of human hookers did to up their monthly take—then what exactly was this girl's game? Patiently, he waited for her to elaborate.

"I just... I just want to try it."

"Why?"

The young woman gestured in a kind of what-the-heck wave.

"I want to know what it's like."

"There's agencies for that kind of thing."

Yeah and I work for one, Devante thought with an inward smirk that sent a momentary flit of repulsion through him. When you thought about it, selling your body for blood was a sickening way to make a living. Despite his hunger and his throbbing desire for so much more than he received from the "paying customer" he had just left, he turned away again.

"But I can't afford them," the girl pleaded. "Come on. Don't you want it? I'll give it to you for free. I just want the experience. Please?"

Her voice was soft and young and pleading and maybe because of that, suddenly Devante felt exceptionally ancient and alone. He had only had a sip earlier, well more along the lines of a teaser taste, so he was still ravenously hungry. Blood was blood but the unfulfilled passion that had been so thoroughly drummed up was still seeking release and the act of taking blood from another gave his kind something that, at this very moment, he so desperately craved—contact and closeness with another warm body. While the individual before him wasn't the one he wanted to know in this most intimate of ways, right now, it was all he had.

Even more alluring, he still had the BBP with him so would only be able to suck the living daylights out of the young thing who had now saddled up beside him and maybe, just maybe, get a little relief from the raging emotional and literal hard-on he had been experiencing since his "date." If nothing else, the taste and feel of her blood in his mouth, his stomach and threading through his veins, would warm and comfort him for the rest of the night. In the end, the temptation proved too much for him.

"Where?"

He looked around at the throngs of people moving in and around them. There were those who may be comfortable getting it on in a variety of ways out in full view of others, but Devante was a little old-fashioned in that way. Many of his kind were showy, relishing their openly accepted existence. But call it an old habit that was damn hard to break, Devante still preferred such intimate exchanges to be out of sight from prying eyes.

The young woman pointed to a place across the street.

"There's a canopied doorway over there. I think the shop is closed for renovations so no one would interrupt us."

Devante followed her aimed arm, quickly shaking his head.

"Let's go back into the Park."

As they walked wordlessly back the way Devante had just come, he could feel his mouth watering even more in anticipation and his eyeteeth growing in length. The extended enamel tips reached his lower lip and poked hard into his flesh.

Dizzy with desire, he licked his lips as he grabbed the young woman's arm and pulled her into a shadowy area created by the lush overhanging branches of the dense grouping of trees.

"Should I take my coat off?"

"No."

It wasn't going to take that long—his single word answer coming out much harsher than he intended but by now, Devante was delirious with the need to feel her life inside him. Unlike the method of operation he adopted with his clients, Devante had no intention of taking it slow and warming the woman up. She wanted it, she was going to get it—but in a wham-bam fashion without anything akin to foreplay.

Pulling her gruffly toward him in a movement so hard and fast the young woman let out a little cry, Devante pulled back her hair with one hand and only a second later had dug his long hard teeth into the soft flesh of her throat.

The young woman shuddered for a second before growing still, her open eyes locked on the stars overhead in the heavens in an expression of transcendent bliss.

Her thoughts and feelings, along with her blood, flowed into Devante, the indescribable sensation filling him in ways that sex, food and drugs never could all those many years back when he was mortal. He drank in the warmth and essence of the woman, knowing he wouldn't have to exercise restraint and stop this time like earlier that night but rather remain in this sweet liquid paradise, feeling the blood work its magic on the anxious discontented emptiness inside him.

Involuntarily squeezing her tight, Devante drank deeper, the images of the woman's life experiences filling his mind. But soon they all gave way to the sight and sound of a single word, a name, that repeat over and over in his head as he swallowed the soothing warmth.

And yet it was not the name of the willing adventurer he held at that moment, the young propositioning woman who was clutching at his shoulders and filling his body with her blood. It was the name of the woman Devante wished with all his heart he had in his arms right now.

Tess, Tess, Tess.

When Devante finally got home it was nearly two p.m. but he didn't feel a whole helluva lot better than when he had first started his post-trick stroll. He could still feel the essence of the young woman from Central Park on his tongue and it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Preparing for his rest period, he shed his clothing down to his underwear and padded barefoot across the large space of his loft, his close-fit white boxers glowing in the darkness almost as much as his gleaming muscular body as he headed to the cleansing bay.

After brushing his teeth, he splashed some water on his face, stopping at the slight smear of red on his neck. Leaning closer to the mirror, he examined the mark that he very clearly remembered had come at the hands, or more accurately, the mouth of, not the woman in the Park, but the one he had been with before her.

Devante smiled and let out a little laugh of disbelief. Why, that little minx had given him a hickey. The nerve of her. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around?

Sighing he let his mind go back to his brief time with her, reliving the feel of her lips on his, her skin against his and the scent of her body, not just her blood, but her sweet feminine fragrance as it co-mingled with the perfumes of her assorted bath and beauty products.

She was really something for so many different reasons and he wanted her in a way and with an intensity he had never known but it just wasn't meant to be. Their timing was all off. She had her work and he had his and with neither one really knowing who the other was, it was pointless to fantasize about a future with her. There just wasn't going to be any. Best to wipe her from his mind.

Ditching his underwear, he opened the container of the flotation mind-blank and climbed into the vertical chamber. When the doors shut, enveloping him in a similar fashion to his coffin, hot water began filling the pod, washing gently and seductively over his body as the compartment slowly tilted backward until it was completely horizontal. As the soothing fluid touched his skin, Devante realized with a surprisingly strong sense of dismay, that last night was the only time he was ever going to be with that woman in that way.

All he had were memories that, if the mind-blank worked, would soon would be sucked from his mind and at the realization of that, the recollections all came back to him once more, strong, vivid and painfully real sensations and remembrances of his one night with her.

Closing his eyes, Devante waited in vain for the memory eraser to blank out his thoughts and feelings but it wasn't to be. Instead, the erotic images that flooded through his brain grew only stronger, translating hard and fast to his body. As the jets of heated liquid ejected from either side of the chamber to shoot out over his skin, the accompanying steam turning the capsule into a balmy, sultry sauna, Devante gave in to the overpowering and immediate sense of arousal that coursed through him. Without

intending to, he let one hand slid up over his submerged thigh and as the reminiscence of his lips and tongue pleasuring the woman flooded back to him, slowly he began to massage his now throbbing erection. Even as he stroked up and down the swollen length, he couldn't believe that a woman, never mind a mortal woman, had him wound up so tightly. Never once in his immortal life had he resorted to self pleasure. He'd never had to. There had always been someone around willing to lend a hand. But he so wanted this one beautiful individual, the fact that she wasn't afraid or intimidated of him making him come alive in ways and places he thought were long dead.

Maybe, he distantly wondered as his grip tightened and twisted to tweak the self-supplied sensation, it was because he hadn't done her. Perhaps if he had laid into her like he was envisioning at this very moment, there wouldn't be this intense yearning for her lips, her body, her soul—this crazy fucking desire to make her tremble with need and want and god help him, dare he even think it? Love.

Then again he hadn't done any of his "tricks" so why wasn't he obsessing over them?

At the thought of her, again came the flashes, intertwining with the mental images of what they had shared, along with a flurry of new visions of all the many things Devante still wanted to do to her. There were so many of them. The deliciously decadent daydreams only heightened his quickly approaching peak. Arching his back, his hand automatically moved faster, the pressure and friction of his skin on skin and the slippery slickness of the water as it lubricated his steady stroke urged him closer. The tantalizing thoughts of tasting her lips, her breasts, her thighs and that sweet tender section between them finally grew too strong and together conspired to send him over the edge. With a forceful moan, he grimaced as he exploded into the water, wishing again as he had hours earlier when he was drinking from her throat, that he was been buried deep inside her and feeling her clutching all around him.

Chapter Seventeen

Tuesday morning

The next morning Tess awoke feeling sluggish and disoriented. She was lying face down, nearly suffocating in a pillow on her wall bed.

God. Had they even used the bed? The events of the night before were shrouded in a mental fog with a very distant recollection that she and Devante had in fact met and something had transpired but just what, she couldn't quite piece together. Only her body held the clues to her goings-on the night before, seemingly holding the answers to her many questions when her mind either failed or refused to.

Her lips swollen and lightly bruised speaking of the ardent kisses she had exchanged with Devante and her back-to-normal shoulder-length red hair, a mass of knots and tangles, bespoke of the thrashing about she had done as well as his tendency to rub and stroke her artificial waist-long tresses. Must be a hair man.

Struggling up to a sitting position, Tess moaned at the weightiness of her limbs that felt as if a twenty-pound load were attached to each and every one. Blood loss, no matter how minute, did that.

Glancing down she saw that she still worn the bronze shift she had specially picked out for the assignment—as she was now going to officially refer to her night with Devante. Twisted around her body, the strapless article's side slit was now positioned up the centre of her body, the lengthy opening revealing her silk and lace bronze and black panties that she had picked up in a trendy lingerie store off Broadway. Featuring little triangles of strategically placed chiffon, the barely-there undergarment had a red heart right in the centre that read in tiny black letters Vampires Suck.

Groaning, Tess covered her hands with her face.

Oh great. If Devante had seen her underwear and at this point, anything was possible, now he was going to think she was a slut—and not just your everyday ordinary slut mind you, but the worst of all possible hussies—a vampire groupie. What in the world had possessed her to buy such a trashy item? Yes, she had wanted to look like an "experienced" client but did she have to go the ho route?

"Wait a minute," Tess said to the empty space, jerking up to the edge of the bed so she could plant her feet on the carpet below. Staring at the mirrored wall opposite she asked her familiar reflection, "What the hell are you doing?"

For starters, who gave a good goddamn what Devante thought of her? She was the lead detective on an investigation and he was her number one suspect. If anyone should be concerned about the type of impression they were making, Devante should be worried about what Tess thought of him.

But that would be a virtual impossibility because, as Tess scrutinized her mirror image, she had to remind herself for the umpteenth dozen time that Devante did not know who she was last night. While her temporary morph lasted sixteen hours, long enough for her assignment, by now it had worn off. As far as Devante was concerned, when he saw her the night before she was just another client—and, she winced at the possibility, one that he had supposedly been very intimate with.

With a little stab of regret, Tess was frustrated that she couldn't call upon any concrete memories but the powerful thirst that left her mouth and throat parched and sore with dryness pointed to one very obvious fact. Devante had drunk from her.

Raising a hand to her neck, she felt around but could feel no evidence of his vampire kiss. He had either covered his tracks very well which a proficient member of his community usually did, or he hadn't drunk for very long.

Getting up, Tess straightened her clothing and made her way to the kitchen. *En route* she snapped on the world viewer to catch the local news, the sight of the brighteyed perky anchor chirping away at the previous night's tragedies as cheerily as if she were reporting a lottery win.

"And in Central Park earlier this morning, the body of a young woman was found in the early hours of the morning tucked away in one of the area's bushier areas. Authorities say she had been completely drained of blood with her torso and neck horribly disfigured but a definitive statement as the cause of death will not be made until after an autopsy is performed."

In the kitchen, Tess downed three glasses of water in a row as she tried to dredge up the events of the previous night. As the liquid served to hydrate her desiccated body, bit by bit little segments of her date with Devante came back.

She remembered the sight of the BBP in his hand, she remembered mentally going over her checklist of weapons and their concealed locations throughout the living unit as Devante had tossed her onto the lounger, including one just within reach behind one of the navy pillows just to the left of her head. At that point, things were getting pretty hot and she had to be ready to back him off fast if need be.

At the memory of the playful maneuver that had her dropped rather energetically on her back, Tess couldn't help but smile. As *rendezvous* went, it had been the perfect combination of fun and excitement—not that it had ever been a real date, she crossly reminded herself.

Other vague recollections began to gradually float back to Tess returning in a random order and misty manner as if she were trying to watch the scene as a third party after one too many drinks. Even more frustrating was the fact that all the "important" memories were intercut with unnerving images of their more erotic moments together.

Opening the door and seeing his face was suddenly overlapped by the profile of his face as he bent down to kiss the palm of her hand, his dark hair falling across the bridge of his nose and into his eyes as he did so. The remembrance of Devante hanging up his

jacket was replaced by the feel of his lips on hers, her breasts and between her legs as he seductively urged her response with insistent pressure and tiny little teasing taunts of his tongue.

His jacket. What was it about his jacket that nagged at Tess. It was something important, it was something that caught her eye, it was something...

A gun.

That was it! He had been carrying a gun. But what was the big deal about that? Tess wondered. Lots of people carried weapons in the city. Refilling her water glass and drinking it down in one gulp, she felt little rivers of liquid slid down either side of her chin and dribbled down on her exposed neck. Wiping them away, she fought with the reluctant mental image. Why was the vision of his gun, sticking out of his inside jacket pocket, as spied over his shoulder being so persistent?

Closing her eyes to increase her concentration to tried to visualize the piece. It was silver, long and with a—what was that—a red mark, a crest or insignia on the grip. It was unusual looking for sure she thought through the murky recollection of the gun's appearance. At the precinct later, she would look through their catalogue of hand-held weapons and see if she could place it. Who knew? Maybe Renaldi might even be able to help her.

Renaldi! Shit! What time was it?

Hitting the vocal time indicator on the wall, a pleasant male voice robotically filled the quiet room.

"Good morning. Today is Tuesday. The time is 8:37."

Damn it. She'd better take a speeder coach. With the traffic that time of the day, she wouldn't have a hope in hell of getting there for her nine o'clock appointment with Renaldi but a speeder coach had moves and magic that individual transport units couldn't even imitate.

After punching in a coach request in the vista-viewer screen online system, Tess quickly changed into an off-duty uniform of light green and grey with hip high grey boots and threw her hair back into a ponytail. A set of short beeps alerted her to the fact that her coach was waiting outside her living unit. Jogging toward the full-length sliding doors of the unit that looked out over the city, she slid them open and entered into the back seat of the floating vehicle, using a remote to close and lock the city-side entry to her place as they sped off.

Arriving at the precinct at precisely 8:59, Tess raced into her and Renaldi's joint office only to find it empty. Calling him she only got his message machine. An hour later when he still hadn't arrived, Tess shrugged off Renaldi's no-show. After all, it's not like this was the first time he had said one thing and done another. Heading for the records room, Tess determined to try and find out the make and model of Devante's gun.

Most of the information was stored online but there were ancient writings in the storage area that could also be of use. Moving along the scores of tattered physical archival record books that had been amassed down through the years and were laid out on the various tables in the room, Tess was drawn to one very exceptionally thick volume that was marked 1700-1935. Maybe it was due to the fact that the book was twice as large as the others that surrounded it and it appeared to be in the worst shape of them all.

Though semi-protected by sheer sheets of plastic it was still painfully obvious that some documents contained within were hundreds of years old. Her father had been a sergeant in the last world war and maybe because of that, she always had a penchant for all things military.

Leafing through the pictorial history of firearms, Tess wished she had more time to read the extensive accounts and written data that spread out before her. It was a fascinating step back in time and even though she was looking for one very specific item and one she was certain not to find in the volume she had chosen, she couldn't resist allowing herself a couple of minutes to peruse the historically rich collection.

There were copious numbers of records including such momentous inventions as the British-born Puckle Gun—a tripod-mounted, single-barreled flintlock musket created in 1718 that was fitted with a multi-shot revolving cylinder able to fire nine shots per minute at a time when the standard soldier's musket could only manage three times per minute. The Colt Revolver, named after its New England inventor Samuel Colt in 1836, featured a revolving cylinder containing five or six bullets and an innovative cocking device. And the Winchester Rifle in 1839 came from the prolific gun designer John Moses Browning of Utah who went on to invent pump shotguns and automatic pistols. A doctor was actually responsible for patenting the Gatling Gun in 1861—a hand-driven, crank-operated, six-barreled machine gun capable of firing a (then) phenomenal two hundred rounds per minute, but it wasn't until 1934 that Canadian John Garand invented the M1 semi-automatic rifle.

Cracked and faded pictures peppered among the yellowed pages of text told the countless stories of creativity and innovation in the field, one of the last entries being of 1909 invention of the Silencer or Maxim Suppressor as it was known—a handgun that came rigged with an attachment to the front of the barrel of a pistol which allowed it to be fired without a loud bang.

Reluctantly closing the volume Tess turned her attention to the matter at hand. The weapon in Devante's jacket had been sleeker, lighter and smaller, in a word, contemporary. Anything pertaining to her search from the year 2000 and on would be stored in the computer database.

Taking a seat at one of the many terminals in the room, Tess began her search by entering a sequence of related words based on her recollection of the weapon's appearance. After typing in the current year, Tess entered in the descriptors *silver*, *lasergun*, *compact*, *insignia*, *crest*, *red and* waited for the system to tabulate the criteria. Unlike the internalized databases of yesteryear, the computer was wired to find any item that possessed all of the factors named, as opposed to any of them.

Speedily processing the data, the computer clicked but no links came up in relation to the information provided. It would seem that that which Tess provided wasn't computing. Or there was nothing on the data supplied.

But not all was lost. There was one person who could help her.

Forwarding the keyed-in criteria via her lightmail box, along with a brief "How's it going?" note, Tess sent the elusive weapons search off to Desi. A matter of moments later, the computer bleeped signaling Desi's response. Her reply simply read, Easy breezy. Like shooting meteors with a mile-laser.

Along with the note came a single link appearing on the screen along with a color image of what appeared to be the exact weapon she had seen in Devante's jacket. The site name and descriptor connection to her entry stunned Tess as she stared in shock at the words before her very eyes.

TGG—Official site of the world police force The Global Guard. *Includes mandate, history, zones and arsenal.*

Connecting into the page, Tess knew before the site opened that there would be no personnel lists. There never were for any kind of intelligence or police organizations for obvious reasons. Selecting the *arsenal* option, it was only a matter of seconds before she came across Devante's weapon—a short-barreled silver laser blaster able to shift its action from single bursts to automatic relay. Lightweight, slender and multi-purpose it was emblazoned with the Global Guard emblem on the grip—a red circle with an inverted silver triangle.

Not aware that she had been holding her breath, Tess exhaled and for the second time that day, put her head in her hands at this latest development, a powerful sense of relief sending a slight tremor through her limbs.

Okay, she quietly confessed to herself. All along she really didn't want to believe that Devante was who he was and capable of murder. Internally jostling the pieces about to complete the puzzle she tried to digest this latest bit of seemingly positive news.

On one hand, this unearthing did answer a few questions, especially why Devante couldn't be located in the Force's system, why he had a tendency toward being elusive and what he was doing in possession of a GG-edition weapon. It might also explain why he had requested Tess' trust in the vehicle port that night without offering any further explanation or elaboration.

However just as many uncertainties were now kicked up. If Devante was with the GG and Tess had to admit, all indications were that he was, then what the hell was he doing working as an escort for Blood Bytes? Known for their intercontinental undercover work, it would be safe to assume he had taken on the persona of Devante Matiero as a way to get close to someone or something but who and what? Was it possible that Sara Greenwood was part of whatever investigation he may or may not be working on or was she an innocent bystander? If not, then why was Devante still posing as a vampire for hire?

With a mutter of frustration, Tess shut her eyes, grimacing at the probability that, considering Devante was more than likely a worldly ace investigator, in addition to playing the role as an end to a means, he was also playing her for the same reason.

All things considered, chances were that Devante knew it had been her last night and not some client eager for his affection. How he could have pieced it all together, she didn't yet know but now in the light of day and with all the elements starting to come together, Tess would bet her life that when he showed up at her place last night, looking all fired up and fabulous, Devante knew exactly who he was there to do.

But why? What possible reason could he have for going through with the charade?

Was it possible that, despite discovering her true identity, Devante had actually wanted her, meant all those sweet nothings he had whispered and for one weak moment, he had put aside the job, the case and gave into, what was it he had said? What they both wanted.

Angrily dismissing that version, Tess reframed the situation and went with the assumption that Devante was the consummate professional who had absolutely no interest in her personally. Anything he did or said was with a very purposeful ulterior motive and contrary to what he had suggested earlier, he could *not*, under any circumstances, be trusted.

With a sharp huff, Tess shook her head as the thought of their time together the night before fuelled her fury and set her heart rate skyrocketing. It had felt so sincere, so real, so right, but it was all a farce, an act designed for his own professional intents. And to think throughout it all, he'd pretended like he didn't know who she really was.

Well, two could play that game.

Chapter Eighteen

Tuesday night

Devante rose from his daytime rest period and after dressing headed in early to Blood Bytes. It was nearly seven by the time he arrived there. The switchboard would have been open at its usual six p.m. time but most of the escorts and Tamela shouldn't arrive on the scene for another hour or so, giving him yet another chance to try and dig up something on his suspect—whoever they were. At this point, the only thing Devante could be certain of is that they were in one way or another associated with the agency itself.

How the tables had turned. Chasing a presumable key player in a murder in Italy across two continents Devante had somehow somewhere along the line become a suspect himself and he had no doubt that this was a clever ruse on the part of the individual in question to deflect the spotlight off themselves onto him. Great idea and one tactic he himself would probably employ if he were in their shoes. But from where he was sitting, as in sitting duck, it only served to seriously complicate his life and double his workload. Not only did he have to find the necessary evidence to prove the person's guilt in the still unsolved crime, but in addition to that, make time to defend himself of a felony he didn't commit.

Nodding to the receptionist as he entered and offering a quick "Just checking in on the line-up and their preferences for the weekend" Devante headed straight into Tamela's office and closed the door. Going directly to her desk, he plunked himself down in front of the computer and began going through the files. He had been scouring the office and data for the past couple of months trying to find clues to what he strongly suspected had happened but just couldn't prove. Not yet anyway. His work at the agency had got him closer to the person than he would have gotten otherwise and Devante felt he was closing in on nailing the suspect once and for all, but he still had to secure that one irrefutable bit of verification.

"Matiero. What are you doing? Trying to steal more of my clients?"

Devante looked up at Kaylen as he entered into Tamela's office, closing the door behind him before sauntering over to the desk.

"Are you that insecure Knight? You know I wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Yeah, not you, buddy," Kaylen replied, the sarcasm dripping from his voice. "Sara just decided after months with me to all of a sudden give you a go."

Excellent, Devante thought to himself, holding the other vampire's steady gaze. Let's get this out in the open and see where it goes. But first, he'd dangle the bait.

"Apparently so. Guess she was wanting something more than you could give her."

Kaylen laughed heartily and taken at face value it seemed authentic enough, that is apart from the fiery indignation blazing in his light-colored eyes.

"Ah, Matiero. You kill me."

Devante deadpanned him.

"Not yet but I wouldn't wave the invitation in front of me again."

Kaylen's apparent amusement abruptly stopped and he openly glared at Devante.

"Yeah? Well bring it on man," he said, his voice rising in volume as he flipped his hands over palms up and flickered his fingers in a sign of "come on". "Let's stop all this fucking around and get down to it."

Devante stood up.

"My feelings exactly."

The two vampires took a couple of threatening steps toward each other, both seemingly hell bent on ripping each other to shreds, or so it appeared to Tamela as she walked in on the heated confrontation.

"What the hell is going on here? And what the fuck are you two doing in my office?"

Neither one spoke but shifted their sizzling stares from one another to their boss and back again. Finally Devante offered his explanation.

"I was just looking at the background of my next Jill—you know, see if she has any hang-ups, what she's into, that sort of thing."

Tamela arched one eyebrow at Kaylen. "Well?" she demanded. "And what about you? Don't tell me you're still pulling that pouting routine again over playing second fiddle"

"Fuck off, Tamela!"

"Easy, honey. Touched a nerve did I?"

"I've told you before, don't fuck with me."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Wordlessly brushing past her, Kaylen headed for the receptionist to pick up his client list for the night but Tamela couldn't resist the chance to have the last word.

"Oh and Knight? If you're so worried about who your Jills like better, why not ask your ten o'clock? She booked Devante just last night so the comparison should be fresh in her mind."

At Tamela's words, Devante's heart dropped. Surely Tess couldn't be that stupid—putting herself in the line of fire with someone like Knight. Alone. Then again, she had done that very thing with him just the night before but that was different. Last night, while unbeknownst to her, she had not been cavorting with a killer.

Tonight she could very well be.

Chapter Nineteen

It was almost eight thirty by the time Tess got back to her living unit. After spending the remainder of the morning and the majority of the afternoon on a wild goose chase with the GG trying to confirm Devante's employment with them, which turned out to be a colossal waste of time, she had raced to Bodies Beautiful for her second morphing procedure within two days. Just under three hours later she emerged a new person yet again.

Looking completely different from her affected brunette appearance the night before, this time Tess went for more of a blonde bombshell look. With feathery ashen hair complete with striking stripes of purple woven through her windblown-look do and mesmerizing lavender eyes to match, she chose a warm golden skin tone that, when put all together, was marvelously contrasted by the shiny silver sleeveless minidress with a high angular collar and thigh-high latex silver boots she donned.

With a quick check that all her audio recorders were working but well concealed around the living unit, Tess placed another call, her fourth that day, to Renaldi. Again his machine picked up. Before she had left the precinct in the latter part of the afternoon, she had stopped in at Captain Warner's office to see if he knew of her professional partner's whereabouts but like her, the good Captain hadn't heard from Renaldi that day at all. As soon as she got rid of Knight later on, she would swallow her pride and call Renaldi's girlfriend Charmaine. It was unlikely but not entirely impossible that her partner had blown off the day and decided to spend it at home *chillaxing* as he called it. When it came to Renaldi, one rule was boss, always expect the unexpected.

The doorbell to the living unit chimed, causing Tess to flinch. Shooting a quick look at the hover clock in the kitchen she could see that Knight was not scheduled to arrive for over an hour. Was he trying to get off early or had the agency screwed up their appointment?

Laughing out loud at her unintentional private puns, Tess went to the door and opened it, her jaw dropping at the sight of Devante Matiero. God she had to think fast and come up with some sort of bogus reason as to why she looked like she did and what she doing in the same living unit as the woman a.k.a. Margaret Cutter who hired him just the night before.

"Yes?" she thought on her feet and decided on a dime to assume another personality to go along with her new look. "I'm sorry Margaret isn't here right now."

His response equally caught her off guard and at his direct remark, Tess felt her knees start to tremble and not in a good way.

"Cut the crap Tess. I have to talk to you."

Barging in, Devante walked past her into the living room and whirling around, stood waiting for her to close her mouth, close the door and follow him in.

Oh shit.

The sight of him standing there in almost the same spot he had when he had first arrived last night sent a flood of memories through Tess, which she had resolved to keep at bay. Shaking her head, hoping to shake loose the erotic images coupling with her increasing confusing and needling fear, Tess pursued him into the quiet space, perplexed.

"How'd you?—"

"Look we don't have time to beat around the bush. I know you've got a date with Knight later on and I know it was you I was with last night."

"But..."

"You played it good, you morphed and I couldn't tell it was you. By the way, you look much better the way you are normally but there was one thing you forgot."

"What's that?"

He pointed to her shoulder.

"Your scar."

Tess was shocked.

"My...what? When did you see that?"

"That night in the vehicle port. Your dress slipped down and I saw the mark on your collarbone. When I saw it again last night, I knew it was you."

"Oh my God. How could I have been so careless?"

"I also know that you know who I really am. And you're not careless. You're an excellent detective. You just have a lot on your mind."

Without a sound, Tess spread her arms apart, palms up in the worldwide sign for "How?" hoping that the answer was somewhere inside her but merely buried under a bunch of information that wasn't exactly helping her connect the dots of this case. In response to her unspoken question, Devante tapped one finger against his temple as if to say, "I can read minds, remember."

Gasping, Tess' hand went to her throat where she discovered she hadn't started up her sonic mind block. Touching the button to initialize the device she at the same time gave herself a good swift internal kick in the process. She should have turned it on before answering the door.

"Yeah, I have a lot on my mind including the likes of you trudging around in stuff that is none of your goddamned business!"

Tess was furious with herself but it came out in a full-scale assault on the only other person in the room and deservedly so. If he was one of the good guys and Tess inwardly stressed the *if* in that sentence, then why hadn't he come to her from the start, revealing his true identity and suggesting they work together? The Global Guard was

notorious for its independence so that was in all probability the reason, but on a personal level, couldn't he have trusted her?

At Tess' tirade, Devante's face darkened and his voice dropped menacingly low.

"That's where you're wrong. This is as much my business than yours. Even more."

"Oh really? And how do you figure that?"

The thunderous manner of Devante's reply made the windows rattle.

"Because it was my sister who was killed by someone at Blood Bytes and not yours!"

Tess could only stare at him in stunned bewilderment, the remnant of his heated eruption hanging heavily in the hushed space. When she finally found her voice, it was soft, the sound of his name coming out like a gentle caress.

"Devante, what are you talking about?"

Still fuming, he raked a restless hand through his dark hair and began pacing back and forth.

"It was in Italy, last year. I don't know what possessed her to do it—I never got the chance to ask her—but one night with a group of her friends Martina phoned up and hired an escort from the agency."

"Wait a minute. Blood Bytes has an agency in Italy?"

"Yes. No. Not anymore. Tamela used to have an agency there but it was called *Sangue Amore*. I'm getting to that."

"Sorry. Go on."

"It was a stagette party. You know..."

"I know what a stagette is."

"I think they had initially just wanted a stripper for the night but I don't know, things changed and Martina ended up taking the guy home. The next morning she was dead."

Devante spoke the last sentence so softly Tess had to strain to hear him. A whole slew of questions rose up in her but the anguish that exuded from Devante was so strong that she held her tongue, choosing instead to let him get as much as he could off his chest.

By this time, Devante had gone over to the lounger and sat down, his elbows resting on his knees, his legs spread to accommodate his clasped hands as they hung down between them, his gaze fixed on the floor at his feet. While she felt the desire to take a place right beside him and wrap a warm arm around the defeated line of his sagging shoulders, she knew better than to get close to a distraught vampire. Already she could hear his ragged breath through the full shape of his slack mouth, his vampire canines having extended down into view. And only moments earlier Tess had noted the darkening color of his already-dark eyes, revealing his tormented state. He was in great emotional distress which necessitated the use of extreme caution. Vampires may appear human but they were still animals in the truest sense of the word and when pushed or

in pain they resorted to their basic instinct to lash out and tear the throat out of anyone within reach.

Moving a little closer but perching on the armrest of the lounger a few feet from him and ever ready to move away quickly if necessary, Tess looked at his downtrodden profile, noticing, with an internal wrench, the shimmer of tears in his eyes.

"What happened then?" she delicately nudged.

"We started an investigation, of course, but within a matter of days, Tamela had closed the agency and fled without a trace. It's like she disappeared off the face of the earth, any related documents to the agency, the case or Martina's autopsy disappearing with her."

"It's not that hard to do – the vanishing into thin air thing."

Devante cast a sidelong glance at her.

"No, it's not. I did it."

Tess nodded in complete understanding, realizing that Devante had purposefully eliminated any trace of himself before going on his around the globe manhunt. Knowing her thoughts, he pulled out an authentic identification badge and accompanying paperwork from his jacket pocket, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was in fact an undercover agent for the Global Guard. Answering her unspoken question, he offered, "I brought that with me tonight. Somehow I knew you wouldn't just take my word for it."

Tess smiled. He thought like a detective and was acting like one, leaving little doubt that he was in fact the genuine article.

"So obviously you think Tamela did it."

His response was a shock.

"Not necessarily. I mean, she must be involved somehow but there are those in the Guard that feel she could have fled just as easily to sidestep all the bad publicity."

"At the risk of becoming a fugitive? I don't know about that. Don't you think if you were a suspect in a murder..."

"Which I currently am," he reminded her with a sneer.

"Okay, right, but stay with me on this for a moment, being a suspect in a murder, if you were innocent, wouldn't you stay and clear your name before vanishing? Put it another way. Doesn't taking off before the case is closed work to incriminate you even more?"

"Sure it does but you have to think like a vampire."

"Enlighten me."

"We may be part of this blended society of humans and mortals but there are those vampires who still don't feel confined by any human law."

"How convenient. So you can just do whatever you want without any intention of observing the regulations and restrictions laid out for the betterment of the community."

"In a nutshell? Yes."

"Kind of arrogant don't you think?"

"Kind of?" he scoffed before adding, "but not all of us have that attitude."

"I bet."

"No really. Think about it. How could I or any other vampire work in law enforcement if you yourself don't try to abide by the rules?"

"Are you suggesting there's no such thing as a dirty vampire cop?

"No, not at all. What I am saying is that in that regard, we are the same as mortals—some good, some bad and Tamela Hawthorne is definitely bad."

"Okay, great, so let's go nail the bitch."

"If she did it. And it's not that simple. We need to find a little thing called evidence."

It was all coming together for Tess now.

"So when you finally located Tamela, you posed as an escort as a way to get closer to her and the agency."

"Not only that. I was also tracking the escorts who relocated with her from Italy."

Tess rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me."

Devante nodded.

"Kaylen Knight. He was one of the two escorts who moved with Tamela from Italy and he was also the escort my sister and her friends hired the night she was murdered."

"Oh my God," Tess breathed out heavily. "Devante, I'm so sorry."

To this, he said nothing as he stood up.

"So you see now why you can't go through with this date with Knight?"

Tess nodded as she tapped her lower lip with one finger thoughtfully processing this latest bit of information.

"Hang on. You said there were two escorts who came with Tamela. Who's the other one?"

"Charmaine Renata."

Tess couldn't breathe. Renaldi's girlfriend. Absorbing it all, Tess added this additional level to the multi-tiered puzzle wondering if Renaldi knew any of this. His part of the investigation had included Blood Bytes. Was it possible he had uncovered the trail leading back to Italy, *Sangue Amore*, the murder there and the possible involvement of his own girlfriend? Tess couldn't wait for tomorrow morning where she would clue him in.

"One of the three of them has to be responsible for Martina's death as well as Sara Greenwood," Devante said.

"Certainly looks like it but why? What's the motive."

"I don't know. That's where I get stuck. I haven't been able to uncover a reason yet. But I know the how."

"So do I," Tess piped up. "It's in the BBPs. The autopsy report on Sara Greenwood pointed to the administering of a lethal drug through them." Tess halted as a thought struck her. "How'd you find out?"

Devante grimaced.

"Did you see the news this morning? The woman in the park?"

"Yeah."

"I did it."

Tess' mouth hung open.

"You killed a woman last night?"

"No I didn't. I didn't kill anybody. Not intentionally anyway. I did drink from her though."

"When?"

Devante hesitated and in that moment, Tess knew. When she spoke, she couldn't keep the hurt sound out of her voice.

"Did you do that after you were with me?"

Devante looked as guilty as a cheating husband caught in the act.

"Yeah but only because you got me so..." He circled one hand around the other in a rolling motion.

"So what?" Tess acidly asked, the sting of the news that he had done one of the most intimate things a vampire could with her, namely sink his hard fangs into her soft flesh, only to turn around and do that to another woman later that night. Her weight falling onto one hip, Tess crossed her arms in front of her and waited. She hated herself for acting the jealous woman, but hell, why pretend anymore. She *was* jealous, jealous as hell and right now, she didn't care of the object of her slighted affection knew it.

Devante stopped and looked at her honestly.

"You got me so pumped up."

"I see. So lemme get this straight. You felt all these thoughts and feelings when you were with me..."

"I did, precisely," he cut in, a sincere light blazing in his eyes that now shifted to a dark toffee hue. "And they were desires restricted to you."

Tess' heart skipped a beat at the mere possibility that what Devante was saying was actually true and noting the color change in his eyes that hinted at remorse was tempted to believe him, but emotionally overloaded, she refused to either let him off the hook or potentially be sucked in by his vampire charm.

"Oh—restricted to me? That's even better. So here you are feeling something unique by your own admission and what do you do within, what? ten, fifteen minutes of leaving here? You just go and grab yourself the first very substitute you can find."

"It wasn't like that."

"You know what? It doesn't matter. I'm really sorry I asked."

"Don't..."

"No, no, this is good. We have work to do so why don't we just get back to something that actually matters, as in, say, the case? How 'bout that, hmmm? Now where were we? Oh yeah. You had killed this woman."

Devante sighed in frustration but underneath it he felt a tinge of pleasure at the sight of an obviously desirous Tess. He had never dreamed that her feelings for him went that deep. Sure she was physically attracted to him, all mortals were, but to bring on this kind of reaction and to such an extent, could only mean that, when it came to him, Tess felt something far beyond lust.

"I told you—I didn't kill her. I drank from her and gave her a BBP. When I found out this evening when I got up that she was dead, I pieced it together and realized there must have been something in the pill."

"Are you sure she swallowed it?" Tess asked a little mockingly. "The pill doesn't work sitting in her mouth. It has to make it all the way to her stomach."

"I'm sure. I have done this once or twice before."

"Oh-ho-ho, of that I am sure."

Devante bit his lip to keep from laughing. He couldn't believe how incensed she was that he had stuck his teeth into someone else but he also couldn't believe how flattered and thrilled he was to learn her true feelings for him. When all this was over, he would make it up to her and good, but for now, as she had said just moments ago, they had work to do.

"But something doesn't compute here," Tess carried on, "you gave me a BBP last night."

"No I didn't. That's just it. I just gave you a little nip so you'd think I was drinking but the truth is, I hardly drank from you at all."

"But I got so drowsy. I fell asleep."

"I made you fall asleep. Just like I made all the clients I visited remember all these incredible things we did that never really happened."

"Come again?"

"Humans become very susceptible to subliminal thoughts when being bitten so I just planted a few images of my time with them so they would think they had gotten their money's worth."

"But why?"

"Because I'm not actually an escort but I had to make them think..."

"No I mean with me. Why didn't you drink when you had the chance? You had the BBP, you could have, if you wanted to..."

She left the sentence hanging feeling fresh hurt that he, contrary to what he said, hadn't wanted her enough to take her blood into him.

Devante looked at Tess directly, knowing full well the reason but struggling as to how best to articulate the truth.

"I did want to, more than you know but I didn't want it like that, not with you, not for the all wrong reasons."

Tess shook her head in confusion.

"Wrong?"

"I knew you were playing a role and so was I. You thought I thought you were someone else. I didn't sleep with you and I didn't drink from you because when I do, it will for the right reasons, for both of us when we both know who we are with and why."

Tess exhaled noisily, Devante's choice of the word *when* over *if* in his former statement, catching her attention.

"And thank God I made that choice to wait because if I didn't..." He left the sentence hanging for Tess to finish.

"I'd be dead today."

Devante nodded solemnly.

"So I went into the agency early in the evening to try and find something that could be linked to the something in the pills."

"It's secobarbital. The autopsy report on Sara Greenwood said as much."

Devante let out a long breath.

"Yeah, that would pretty much do it."

"And what of your trip into Blood Bytes? Did you find anything?"

"Not enough time. I was interrupted. Tamela and Knight came in. That's how I found out he had a date with you tonight, which, needless to say, you can't keep now."

Tess was shocked.

"Why not?"

"Very funny."

"I'm serious. Why shouldn't I go through with it? I think this could give us our best chance yet."

"Yeah, a good chance for you to get killed."

"Don't be so melodramatic."

"I'm telling you right now," his voice held a warning tone, "I'm not letting you do this."

"Excuse me detective?" Tess said snottily. "In case you've forgotten, you're in New York City which means that all other law enforcement agencies—and that includes the Global Guard—follow the protocol and procedures of the local force, that being the New York Force. In short? You're out of your jurisdiction, bucko, and must take your orders from the investigating detective on the case, that being *moi*."

"Ah, fffffff..." He stopped himself before giving voice to the profanity, "Don't pull that rank stuff on me."

"Oh that's right, I forgot. You vampires don't follow regulations."

"Especially when they're stupid ones," Devante muttered snidely under his breath.

"Aha! So you admit it. You don't abide by the rules."

"I never said I did, I said I *tried* to. And for the most part I succeed. But I'm only human."

Tess cocked her head to one side and stared at him as a way of expressing her doubt.

"Well I was once, a long time ago. But what I meant is that I'm not perfect. I do make mistakes."

"Yeah, like picking up some floozy in Central Park for a quick suck."

"She wasn't a floozy."

"That's another thing. If you knew who I was last night, why didn't you say something?" she posed, knowing full well why he didn't but needing to hear it from him.

"I couldn't. At that point, there was no need to expose myself. I had to play along."

"So that's all we were doing. Just playing?"

"No, but..."

"Yeah, whatever," she said, uncomfortable at the brief reference to the continual sexual charge that existed between them. "Thanks for the update Detective. Now if you'll be on your way, I have a *meeting* with Knight."

"No you don't."

"Yes I do."

"Well you might but you're not going through with it."

"Yes I am."

"No you're not."

"Yes I am and that's final."

"Listen, this guy could be a killer."

"I know," she said derisively. "That is after all the whole point of setting up the date."

"You can't just take on the likes of Kaylen Knight on your own."

"I'm not on my own. I will have a whole team of surveillance people primed to rush up here at a moment's notice. So you see, there's no reason to back out."

"I don't want him touching you!!" Devante yelled, then cringing at the admission. He hadn't intended to vocalize it but out it came, a spotlight thrown on his feelings for Tess. And in the frame of mind she was currently in, Devante knew she would pounce on the confession. And she did.

"Oh? And why is that? Could it be you are" she stole his very words to her in the vehicle port earlier that week, "conflicted in some way?"

Before he could answer, the vista-viewer rang. Heading over to the communication site, Tess saw it was Captain Warner, looking his usual stern self.

"Monterey?"

Her altered look confused him.

"Yeah it's me Captain."

She leaned forward and the system did a retinal scan, verifying her identity.

"Oh yeah. I need you in the precinct. Now."

Tess was more than a little surprised. While the captain was known across the country for his lack of cordial niceties, his manner in those very few words was excessively gruff, even for him.

"But Captain, I have that scheduled meeting with the second suspect in the Greenwood case..."

She shot an embarrassed glance in Devante's direction now knowing that he was no longer, nor had ever been, her first suspect.

"I don't give a fuck if you have a conference with the Pope. I need you in here now."

Without awaiting her response, Captain Warner hit the disconnect button and the screen went black.

In all her time with the Force, Tess had never heard the captain use the word *need* in reference to requiring someone's help, *want*, *would like*, *got to* or *expect* was more commonly-used expressions from the precinct head honcho but *need*? That was just unheard of.

Something was going down and it was something big. Because of that, everything else would come to an abrupt standstill including her banter with Devante and date with Knight, which would just have to take place another time.

"I gotta go," she said to Devante.

"Good," he replied, a strong sense of relief coursing through him.

"What about Knight?"

"Don't worry about it. When he arrives later and finds out you're not here, he'll just go onto his next trick. That's one thing about Knight. He really doesn't get hung up on details."

"Wouldn't make much of a detective," Tess said as she put on her coat.

"No he wouldn't."

Devante reached over and smoothed down one side of her collar that was sticking up.

"Call me when you get home." He gave her a little smile. "I assume you have my number."

She smiled back, her previous anger at him subsiding a little.

"I do. And I will."

They walked out the living unit together and as they went to part ways—she to the vehicle port, he to the skytram that would take him to the street—Devante called after her.

"Hey."

She turned.

"Be careful."

They shared another meaningful smile that at another time and place might have led to so much more.

"You too."

Chapter Twenty

Tess drove to the precinct, her mind in a flurry trying to digest all the information Devante had unloaded on her and how it created a new direction in the case.

The evening sky was a rich shade of royal blue alive with shifting, sliding lavender and pink streaks caused by the region's atmospheric gases. All around her darted the city's usual nighttime traffic, the flashing bursts of other vehicles' head and tail lights as they sped into the distance like the multi-colored blaze of a thousand fireflies.

It was nearly nine thirty when she arrived at the precinct but the tall amber building was still aglow with the interior lights of its thousand-plus offices. If the city of New York City never slept, neither did its police force.

Pulling up to a hovercraft bay, Tess got out and took the angular rotator lift up to the 333rd floor where the Captain's office was situated. On the way, she passed Perreault's and Mador's office, the young vampire cop was seated at his desk, sleeves rolled up, his hands in his head as he apparently poured over some absorbing document.

"Perreault," Tess called out over her shoulder as she moved past his doorway, "I'll stop in later. Got some news for you."

"Monterey, we'll talk later," came his dreary answer. From the look of him, he had also been pulling double duty on the case and contrary to belief, vampires needed their sleep just as much as their human counterparts.

Tess reached the closed door to the Captain's office. When she walked in she immediately felt the oppressive air in the tiny room.

"Hey Captain."

He looked up from his desk at her, the routine set of luggage under his eyes supporting a couple of carry-on bags as well. "What's up?"

For a moment he stared at her as if he didn't know who she was. Then Tess remembered her altered appearance. The captain had seen her in this nouveau state only a few moments earlier but he seemed confused so she decided to be on the safe side and clarify things.

"It's me Captain. Monterey."

She pulled out her badge as verification. The captain shook his hairless head.

"Monterey. Good. Sit down."

Tess pulled up one of the two chairs that sat opposite his desk and sat down, all the while trying to guess what the hell had the captain so riled that he called her off a case assignment and into his office at nine thirty at night. The vast majority of the staff

worked horrendous hours but for the most part, the captain himself, was a nine-to-fiver, his rank earning him the favored daytime shift.

Nervously Tess took a breath. What the heck was the scoop here? Quickly she mentally reviewed her conduct on the case to date. Nothing had been out of the ordinary in the way in which she had handled herself thus far with, of course, the exception of her "date" with Devante the night before. While it was standard procedure for a cop to go undercover, even using physical makeovers to conceal their true identities, Tess was the first female to be prepared to lie down on the job for the sake of the case. Not that she ever had any intention of going all the way with her ploy. She had fully planned to call a halt to the proceedings with Devante when things got too hot and heavy, citing nerves and a sudden attack of morals as the reason for her change of heart. And the captain knew that. So what could possibly be deemed inappropriate in her meeting with Devante the night before? Sure, she had gotten a little kissy-kissy, touchy-feely with him but without doubt the captain would concur that she'd had to do that. Anything less would have raised Devante's suspicion.

With a sudden rush of awareness, Tess wondered if any of her conversation with Devante earlier that night had been mistakenly overheard. For the life of her, she couldn't recall switching on the hidden recording devices in her living unit prior at the time Devante arrived and as far as she could remember, she hadn't. After all, Knight hadn't been expected for another hour when his bogus professional adversary showed up so it was unlikely she had turned them on yet, but in all the confusion and now with her increasing anxiety over the captain's obviously disconcerted state, Tess couldn't be sure. Playing the devil's advocate, she inwardly decided that even if she had switched on the recorders early, therein capturing her conversation with Devante only an hour or so before, there was nothing incriminating in her dialogue with him. Except...

Tess let out another big sigh. Except, she realized with a sinking sensation, their mutual near-admittance of attraction to one another. By any law enforcement agency's standards, that would certainly classify as a serious breech of protocol.

It was not only a massive no-no to actually become involved with a suspect, it was a similar transgression to *want* to become involved with a suspect, the latter known to potentially cloud the judgment of an investigating party. And at this point, as far as the captain was concerned, Devante Matiero was not only a suspect but the number one suspect in the case.

That must be what this is all about, Tess thought and just as quickly felt a flood of reprieve race through her for this misunderstanding could be cleared up very quickly. Once she divulged the fact that Devante was who he was, that being an undercover agent with the Global Guard and no longer a *poperp*, her suspected indiscretion would, at the very least, be downgraded to poor judgment which while worthy of a reprimand would not mean her job.

"Captain, there are some things about the case..."

"This isn't about the case."

"I know but I can explain."

"Monterey, let me get this out."

The long pause that followed served to double her suspicions and made Tess' stomach twist into tight, writhing knots, all the more so as she noted the grave appearance of his face.

"Monterey, I..."

He broke off, lowering his eyes and rubbing his sizeable weathered hand up one side of his face and down around the chin.

"Jeez, Captain, what is it?"

The captain looked up at her and for the first time since she had sat down, Tess got the inkling that she was wrong about his reason for calling her in. This impromptu meeting didn't have to do with her and Devante and as she studied his pained face, the fear in her grew. Of what she didn't know, only that she was afraid to learn what was creating such an uncharacteristic reaction in her steely superior.

"We got some bad news."

"No shit. What is it?" she asked again.

The captain slowly shook his head, again turning away from her probing gaze.

"Ah, you know, I don't know how to tell you this."

"Like whipping off a Band-Aid," she attempted a feeble smile but her skin felt tight and her lips felt leaden as she tried to stretch them into a friendly grin. "Fast and all in one go."

Captain nodded as if he found a strength and inspiration in her words. Lifting his head, he regarded her somberly, then he spoke the words that stole the very breath from her lungs.

"Renaldi is dead."

Chapter Twenty-One

Wednesday

It was nearly three a.m. when the red and black city porter coach whirred around the side of the Devante's building, only to hover for a few seconds before touching down on the street opposite the entrance. The markedly crisp winter morning was evident everywhere from the halos of fog that circled the lights high up in the street lamps that rose in tall vertical lines that disappeared into the clouds, to the bursts of steam that rose from nearby sewer grates to hang eerily in the frosty still air.

Tess fumbled with the frigid door handle activator, the near freezing temperature of the metal exit button permeating down to the bone of her gloveless hand. Nearly breaking her neck on a patch of black ice underfoot as she exited the idling vehicle, she quickly righted herself hoping any witnesses would assume that the slippery surface was the cause for her near fall. In fact, the simple truth was she was in a rare state. After several hours at the Lonesome Lagoon, doing Purple Punches, Tess was blind drunk. Not that she wanted to hallucinate anything. Rather she was trying to forget. See, the original idea was to stop in for a little bit of alcoholic anesthetic—a single drink to try and numb her raging emotions. Shaken and shattered by the news of Renaldi's death, she hadn't been able to focus or even think straight for the past few hours so what better to set her straight than a good stiff shot?

That had been the plan but unfortunately, the one drink didn't even touch the pain that practically pulsed through every nerve in her body like some sort of sonic wave of emotional torture. Her mind was going a mile a minute, merciless bits and pieces of mental images and fragments of conversations shared between the two ex-lovers relentlessly playing and replaying in her mind. Things said and not said, done and not done, good times, bad times and everything in between. But in the end, all the what ifs and one days were felled and forever silenced by one single, pitiless swipe of destiny's fateful sword. Determined to numb the steady assault on her senses, Tess quickly decided to have another one. And another. And another. Three hours and seven drinks later, she was en route to her downtown walk-up when she abruptly gave the cabbie Devante's address – a miracle in itself that she could not only remember the location of his condo, but could effectively communicate that to the driver. Very indefinitely she knew that she hadn't the slightest idea what she'd do when she got there. All she knew was that she just had to see him, be with him, even if it meant her job. Fuck it! Good jobs were a dime a dozen but a good man? Now that was something worth pursuing and holding onto.

Up through the effects of the alcohol, she distantly questioned whether or not Devante was, in fact, a good man. While he clearly was not a suspect in the murder of Sara Greenwood any longer, Tess didn't know him from Adam but she couldn't help but feel, without rhyme or reason, that there was something in him that required further investigation and that accounted for something. Combining her years of detective work and good ol' women's intuition, her assessments of people were usually dead on. If she felt there was some merit to Devante, there probably was, even if it were buried pretty damn deep.

Doing her utmost to walk in a straight line, Tess made her way in through the building's double doors and headed toward the front desk man, whose figure had mysteriously blurred and split into a series of identical triplets. Sure the booze was mostly responsible for her hazy threesome vision but the steady stream of tears that had been flowing for the past few hours didn't help either. Wiping away an errant streak, she focused on the form in the middle and opening her coat to reveal her badge, attempted to exude as professional an image as possible.

"Detective Monterey to shee Devante Maetiro."

"Matiero?" he adjusted delicately.

Tess waved her hand in an unnecessarily large gesture and pointing at the man, she squinted one eye as she weaved from side to side.

"Tha's the one!"

Breaking off, she frowned as she turned around following the echo of her own voice. Was she really speaking that loud or did the deserted, marble lobby create that booming effect on all sounds? Damned Purple Punch. As sensory-altering substances went, it was the best, so subtly blurring the line between reality and fantasy that one couldn't honestly tell the difference. The clerk, the same one as last time, nodded, a flash of recognition lighting in the warm blue eyes. Only two hours earlier she would have looked quite different but by this hour, Tess' morph job had worn off and she was back to her normal appearance.

"Certainly Detective. Is he expecting you?"

"Nope," Tess replied, shaking her head emphatically as she slashed the air with both hands in a movement that mimicked an ump's gesture for "safe". Then she leaned forward and indicating the man come closer by crooking her finger, she whispered lowly. "Don't tell him either. Wouldn't want to schpoil the fun, now would you?"

"No of course not."

Tess turned to go, zigzagging as she made for the elevator but the clerk's concerned voice stopped her and falteringly, she turned.

"Detective, are you...all right?"

"Oh yeah," Tess nodded, fluttering her hand as she headed for the solid black doors, loudly blowing her nose into a tattered piece of Kleenex she had retrieved from her coat pocket. "Just got the sniffles."

The hell she did.

Tess choked on the last word and falling against the back wall of the portal, erupted into light sobs as the skytram doors closed, mental pictures of Renaldi haunting her even when her eyes were open.

Darwin, Darwin, Darwin. Why? Why didn't you love me like I loved you? Why did you lie to me? Why did you make me think there was a chance when, from the start, there never had been?? Why did you go and die you bastard before I could tell you it's okay?

The ride up made Tess so nauseous that she had to stop and lean against the wall in the hallway for a few minutes before proceeding to Devante's door. The carpet seemed to be undulating beneath her feet and the lamps that flanked either side of the passageway appeared to grow dim then brighten, then dim again in a rhythmic and stomach-churning visual rotation.

Taking a deep breath, she smoothed back her hair and wiped away once more at the tears on her face, distantly hoping she had some mascara left on her lashes.

After what felt like a mile of walking, Tess arrived at the entrance to Devante's suite and with a hand that trembled, she rapped on the smooth black surface of the door. After what felt like a really long time, it swung open to reveal the man of the hour.

"Shurprise!" Tess said, throwing her arms open, the gesture throwing her off balance and knocking her to one side.

Reacting in a flash, Devante reached for her and grabbing her lightly by both arms steadied her wobbling form.

While he certainly had every reason to be, whether or not she had succeeded in surprising him was unclear, for as usual Devante's handsome face remained totally void of emotion. However he regarded her steadily, his dark eyes locking with hers.

"Tess, what's wrong?" his betraying concern, while not evident in his expression, clearly present in his voice.

Tess smacked at the air with one hand and pursed her lips in a show of dislike.

"I don't, I can't..." she fought to hold back another wave of tears, screwing up her face and wiping erratically at her face before stopping abruptly to point at him and grin. "H-e-y, you've never called me by my first name before. Say it again. Say Tesh," she finished leaning her head against his shoulder and patting his chest.

Devante couldn't suppress a troubled smile.

"Ooookay Tess. I think you'd better come in," he said, pulling her gently into the suite and closing the door behind her. "Why don't you tell me what happened at your meeting with Captain Warner?"

Disregarding the question, Tess pulled back far enough to let her gaze move up and down the dark figure, who dressed in a pair of faded jeans (a popular age-old fabric still in use) and a dark t-shirt, looked dangerously delicious.

"You look real schexy, hot even."

When she said *hot*, she dropped her voice to a seductive pitch and leaned forward, bringing her lips precariously close to his, the sweet scent of her breath revealing her

intoxication. Under different circumstances, Devante might have found Tess' obvious intoxication amusing but he knew her well enough, or more accurately sensed the person she was well enough to know that her present state was because of an attempt to block out something very bad.

"Come on," he said gently, placing a solid arm around her shoulders and guiding her into the kitchen. "Let's get you some lemojave."

Tess shook her head vigorously, quickly grabbing Devante's forearms for support as the impassioned motions directly challenged her equilibrium.

"Hate the schtuff! Ne'er drink it." She tried unsuccessfully to squelch a burp. "But I would take a drink."

"Ah, I think you've probably had enough."

"Nope. Not nearly enough. I still can remember..."

She almost fell then but Devante caught her and at the feel of his warm strong arms about her, Tess dissolved loudly weeping into his chest, soon completely oblivious to the feel of one hand as it gently stroked her hair or the strength and warmth of his embrace as he pulled her close against him.

"Sssh," he said softly, holding her quietly, just allowing her to cry herself out until her anguished fit receded to little muffled snuffles and sniffs into his chest.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Devante asked as he soothingly rubbed her back.

In a lengthy recounting that was punctuated with frequent floods of fresh tears, gasps and nearly indecipherable fragments, Tess mumbled the details—what she could recall from her conversation with the captain—into Devante's chest as she held onto him for dear life. In between the breaks, the sobs and the repeated segments which were reiterated due to Tess slurring them so badly the first time, Devante learned that Renaldi had been murdered around two a.m. in his condo and found in a manner similar to that of Sara Greenwood. His girlfriend Charmaine had no alibi insisting that after an early evening with Renaldi around seven that lasted about an hour where they had a couple of drinks in a bar in Manhattan, she spent the evening home alone. It would be too early to determine if the secobarbital-laced BBPs were in his system but Devante was betting the autopsy would reveal as much.

Pulling away, Tess scowled as she threw her head back and stared at the three versions of Devante that floated before her face.

"We been barking up the wrong tree with Knight, you and me. It was that bitch Charmaine. She killed him. She killed my Renaldi."

"Now don't go off on a rampage here," he said gently. "This news does cast Charmaine in a bad light but at this point we don't have any proof of her involvement."

"Proof smoof! My gut's telling me so I'll tell you exactly what happened. That vampire slut stole Renaldi from me and then when he found out she was a cold-blooded killer, she murdered him!"

Tess erupted into another lengthy wailing session before finally drawing back and trying to right herself. Sliding one arm across her face in a wobbly attempt to wipe her nose on her sleeve, Tess cleared her throat as she blinked her eyes a couple of times.

"I'm sorry. This is wrong. I'm not being very professional." She ended the statement with a loud hiccup.

"It's okay," Devante said, still holding onto her, knowing that if he released her, she'd fall into a heap on the floor. "You're allowed. He was your partner."

Tess' face melted into a pained expression.

"No, Devante. He was more than that, much more. I loved him," she moaned, "I loved him so much."

With that admission, she collapsed into another spasm of sobs, Devante holding her tight as he whispered into her hair.

"I know you did, Tess, I know. Everything's going to be okay."

"That's nice," she sniffed in between gasps. "I know it's not true but it's nice to hear."

After a time, she withdrew from his gentle hug, a slow-registering alarm lighting her face.

"Oh no, schee what I did? I got schnot on your shirt."

Devante grinned as he once again started propelling her toward the kitchen.

"Don't worry about it. Why don't we get you something to eat."

"I don't want anything," she pouted.

"How about some water? You must be thirsty."

"I'm not."

Coming to a stop and secure in the crook of his arm, Tess swung her head back and tilting it to the side, peered at him.

"How 'bout you? Are you thirsty?"

Tess mischievously lifted her hair to expose her neck and pursed her lips into a kiss. Devante looked down at her with a gentle smile.

"Not right now thanks."

"Are you sure? Maybe you want shomething else?"

Somewhere up from the pain of losing Renaldi, Tess' need for comfort rose to the forefront and all of a sudden she ached for the kind of relief that only lovemaking could provide. With a sort of sideways lunge, Tess stretched up and pressed her lips against Devante's. Despite the languid effect of the booze on her body, Tess still determined after a few ardent moments that she was only one who was participating in the kiss. But she didn't care. If she ever needed some sexual healing, it was right now and who better to give it to her?

Reaching up she put her arms around Devante's neck and increased her efforts, disappointed at the feel of his hands are her wrists, pulling her off him.

"What's wrong?" she frowned, her hands, still lightly restrained by his on her wrists, balling into fists. "I thought you wanted me."

The muscle in Devante's jaw twitched and his dark eyes glittered.

"I do."

"So wha's the problem?" She pulled out of his light grasp and wrapping her arms around his neck, kissed him again, this time harder and more adamantly.

Again he pulled her off him.

"You're drunk."

"So?"

"I think it's probably better if we wait."

"Fuck you!"

"Not tonight."

Tess started to cry again as she unevenly liberated herself from his arms and began pinballing over to the lounger in the wide open space to the left of the kitchen.

"All you men are alike. Vermin! Worse than vermin! The fungus that grows on vermin, tha's what you all are! You make we women fall for you then you turn your back on us once you know you've got us."

With this she stumbled, her torso flopping sideways onto his lounger, while the lower half of her body dangled precariously off the edge. Gently clasping her ankles, Devante eased her legs up and onto the long resting area so she was now in a straight line. Sort of.

"Tess, I'm not turning my back on you."

"Oh no!" she spat out with an overly theatrical flourish. "I just offered you my body, my body," she emphasized running her hands up and down the length of her torso like a game show model highlighting the week's biggest prize, "and you refused. Well you know what they shay? You schnnozze, you loooze." As if to make the point, she sneezed loudly, just barely managing to cover her mouth.

Devante sat down, squeezing in beside her on the couch and slowly stroked her hair. Tess made to slap away his hand but missed by a few inches and struck the back of the lounger instead.

"I very much appreciate the offer and I tell you what—I'll take you up on it another time, okay?"

Tess's eyes grew large.

"You think sho? Well let me tell you something mister. This is a one-time offer only. You don't want me."

Devante knew better than to argue with someone under the influence but he couldn't bear the thought of Tess' thinking he was rejecting her, most especially after the news she had just received.

"Don't say that. I want you and you know it and we'll be together but just not tonight."

Tess' eyes filled with tears again and she sniffed loudly as a little whimper escaped her lips.

"Why not tonight?"

"Because it's not the right time."

"Why?"

"You're still involved with someone else. You have to end one relationship before you can start another, Tess."

"So?"

"Your connection with Renaldi is not over."

"Oh it's over all right," she wailed. "It's good and over."

"Not for you it's not. And it won't be until you get the resolution you need."

"How do I do that?"

"It will come to you."

Tess reached for his hand and at the feel of the cool smooth flesh brought it up to her face and laid her cheek on it.

"But what's that got to do with you and me? Can't we just be together while I'm," she hiccupped again, "resolving."

"No sweetheart. It won't work. And I won't be that guy that you rebound with and then end up hating because you weren't ready."

"But..."

"You're not ready Tess."

Rolling over onto her side, Devante's words ringing in her ears, Tess closed her eyes, his one hand still held in hers. Distantly she could feel him pull free and the weight on the side of the lounger lessen as Devante got up. Soon after she felt a soft blanket drop down over her and be pulled up to her shoulders.

As Tess felt Devante sit back down beside her and gently rub her back, she started to cry again, this time much more softly than before, more along the lines of a muted whimper and slowly, painfully and mired in a drunken stupor, she fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning Tess opened her eyes and immediately knew she was dead.

It was pitch black, blacker than she'd ever even thought was possible, so sightless in fact that when she raised a trembling hand up to her face and even touched her nose with her palm, she was unable to see it.

It was also unnaturally quiet to the extent that she could actually hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears, banging away like one of those big big big drums in the symphony. Where were all the sounds of the city? Why wasn't she being bombarded with the noise of honking vehicles, A3s as they sped past and the robotic voices of the android traffic monitors as they issued warnings, tickets and citations?

And it was freezing—cold enough, she suspected to see one's breath, that's if one could see at all.

Staring at the encompassing darkness and resolving to remain calm, it took Tess several minutes to figure out where the hell she was and convince herself that she wasn't in fact, in one of two afterlife places.

Gradually and in a disorganized fashion, the events of the night before came back fleetingly—the meeting with the captain, the dreadful news and her late-night visit to Devante's loft. After riding out a raging bit of embarrassment, that, she concluded with a degree of relief, was where she should be now, Devante's loft—the surrounding darkness and silence due to the suite's protective and soundproof shades which would have rolled down to prevent the light of day from coming in.

When her mind returned to the reason that had brought her here, a wave of nausea abruptly overcame her. Rolling off the couch and landing on the floor on all fours, she just barely had time to grab a large circular vase from a nearby table before she threw up violently, her severely hung-over body seizing as last night's liquid toxins spewed from her mouth and into the ornate ivory flower holder. It didn't help that she had been sleeping on her stomach and that the laser contained in her concealed torso strap had been pressing in on her gut.

Breathless and dizzy, she steadied the container with its now vile contents on the floor before shifting and sitting with her back against the lounger. Often purging one's over indulgences made one feel better but if it were at all possible, Tess actually felt worse. She tried to make a mental note that before she left, she would have to clean out the vase but for now, all her energies went to willing herself to die. And when it appeared that wouldn't work, she took her plea to a higher power.

Please God. Take me now. I don't want to be here anymore. There's nothing and no one here for me. Please take me home.

If Tess had one ounce of fluid left in her body, tears would have formed in her eyes but the reality was, she was so severely dehydrated she could neither tear nor spit even if her very life depended on it.

So there she was—heartbroken, grief-stricken and virtually unable to swallow or move. The release she sought would come if she could just wait it out. At this rate it might take a few days, but it would be a slow and painful few days and somehow she doubted Devante would just step around her while she sat there, waiting to expire.

Devante.

At the thought of him, Tess felt wave upon wave of sensory-laden recollections wash over her from their one-time intimate encounter, the enticing smell of his skin, his hair and the sleek feel of it slipping through her fingers, the pressure of his warm and moist lips on hers, on her neck, her shoulder, the swell of her breasts.

Distantly she wondered where he was. Then remembering that the sun was, more than likely up, knew he would be embedded in his in-wall crypt hidden somewhere in the suite. Similar to the standard hide-a-bed contraptions of the day, vampires' resting pads were built to accommodate a body moreover be controlled and locked from the inside, virtually eliminating the possibility of someone coming in during the dangerous day and opening the sliding bed-of-sorts, therein exposing the immortal to the lethal rays of the sun.

There were semi-legal injections, such as SunSaver XT which, though unreliable and unpredictable, were available for occasional use to permit exposure to the sun for short periods of time for the vampire of today's world. But extended use of the inoculations would result in the individual becoming immune to the product and where and when it would run out could never be forecast. So in essence, one day a vampire could walk out and be fine after the shot, the next, they could sizzle and fry like a piece of bacon. When push came to shove, it just wasn't worth the risk.

Speaking of shots, she thought to herself groggily, Tess knew she would not be able to function at all if she didn't get a Ranovan shot to eliminate the effects of her bender the night before. And function she'd have to. Devante wouldn't let her shrivel up and die, as much as she wanted to and besides, she thought with a renewed sense of purpose, she had not one, but two cases now to solve. And they both pointed in precisely the same direction.

Crawling in the dark over to the vista-viewer she recalled seeing in the kitchen the night, Tess dialled the emergency pharmaceutical hotline, the viewer screen casting enough light in the immediate area to see. After outlining her "emergency" and upping the urgency a notch by divulging the fact that she was with the Force, she ordered an onsite delivery of the miracle hangover terminator drug. With instructions that the courier come to the front door and not the barricaded light-tight window door of Devante's loft.

As much as it sickened her, Tess used that brief spell before her drug arrived to feel her way back into the living room, pick up the vase she had been unwell in, clean it in the kitchen's garburator and replace it on the glass-topped table from whence it had come—granted all done at a snail's pace and most painstakingly. Like most incidents of over-imbibing, every cell in Tess' body was screaming in protest at the least bit of movement, the very hair on her head practically vibrating in pain and fury at her self-abusive decision. But while her body felt like it had quite actually been beaten up, Tess was not going to join in and beat herself up too. Maybe it wasn't exactly the smartest choice she had ever made but it was the best she could do at the time.

Thankfully it was only a matter of ten minutes before she heard a light rap at the suite's main entrance. After many excruciating attempts, Tess got to her feet and making her way across what felt like the mile-long stretch to the front hallway, opened the door, retrieving her personal scanner card from her pocket as she did.

A cute young girl probably no more than fourteen with earphones and popping an enormous wad of red and brown chewing gum that had the sickening scent of cherry and chocolate stood looking at Tess eagerly.

"Delivery for Detective Monterey?"

Tess answered, the sound of her own voice blaring in her head like a canon blast.

"Right."

Grabbing the package, she gave the girl her scanner card which would process the order and allow funds to be removed from her account to pay for the purchase and the delivery fee. After swiping it through the scanner box attached to her right hip, the girl handed the card back to Tess.

"Good party?" she said with an enthusiastic nod.

"Awesome," Tess replied, shutting the door on the girl's far-too-cheery face.

Stumbling over to the table in the kitchen, with trembling hands Tess tore open the package, a plastic-encased syringe, a small vial containing the narcotic and an insert with instructions falling out. Fighting with the protective seal of the needle, she finally freed it and jamming it into the rubber-based bottom of the Ranovan bottle, withdrew all of the murky medicinal contents. She herself had never used the drug but had seen many a person do it. And considering her current state of need, she wasn't of the mind to waste any time reading the how-tos when she was pretty certain she could manage even with skipping that step.

Lifting her leg up and bracing one foot on a chair, Tess twisted her left thigh around to expose the inside part of her limb. She still wore the mini-dress from the night before so the area she was after—her upper thigh—was easily accessed.

With a quick breath and a calculated stab of the needle's point into her flesh, Tess pumped the medicine into herself, the effects of the injection acting immediately upon her abused body. The proverbial miracle drug put her right as rain in a flash.

Tossing the medicinal accourrements in the garbage, Tess then moved over to the compact computer that was tucked diagonally into one corner.

Initializing the system, she called up its online local residential route finder program and waited for the search function to appear. When it did, she typed in the name, her stomach starting to ache and her heart pounding even more viciously than as a result of her alcoholic foray last night.

Yes, she had been thrown a tremendous curve ball, arguably the biggest of her life and one that had, even as recently as this very morning, threatened to undo her. And it still might.

But first she was going to make a little unannounced stop.

Staring hard at the letters on the screen, she bit her lip and prayed she would have the self-control necessary to do her job. Then again, she mused, fingering her abdominally-situated hidden weapon, she might just give into the moment and make it all right.

A loud bleep signaled the located address. Noting the street and avenue, Tess clicked the off switch on the computer and left the suite, locking the door behind her but not before ensuring she had engaged her mind block and cleared her head of her intentions.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Charmaine Renata was in the midst of a fitful sleep when the first sounds started—a recurring solid banging that wove their way into her tormented dream-like state.

It was actually a miracle that she was sleeping at all, but somewhere in the early hours of the morning exhaustion and grief had conspired to finally let her drift off into an unsettled state of repose. Even so, her subconscious mind worked to keep her from resting fully as more than a few nightmares that featured her beloved Darwin played one after the other on the big screen of her mind's eye.

Again the banging came, insistent, angry and with no indication of stopping—the harsh heavy sound needling her up through the bleary blanket of slumber.

Opening her eyes she stared unblinkingly, trying to focus and assimilate the nature of the endless thumping. Rubbing her eyes, all swollen and red from crying, she listened to the noise again for a minute and then all of a sudden it clicked.

Someone was hammering at her door.

Hitting the ejection button on the lid of her coffin, she felt the compartment shift, heard the wall doors open and the entire casket slide out before hydraulically rising to a standing position. Another button inside unlocked the enclosure. Pushing the top open, Charmaine stepped out into the open space of her living unit and headed for the door.

Touching the exterior outlooker camera situated inside the living unit near the entrance, Charmaine peered closely at the individual on the other side as visible on a tiny little wall-mounted screen. In an atypical gesture, Charmaine covered her face with her hands. She wasn't all that surprised but for the first time in a long while, Charmaine didn't know what to do. She knew this meeting would occur eventually but never dreamed it would be for the reason that undoubtedly had brought it about.

Opening the door, Charmaine found she could neither smile nor speak but merely stare at the individual before her.

"Charmaine Renata?"

"Yes"

"I'm Detective Tess Monterey with the New York Force. I need to speak with you regarding the death of Darwin Renaldi."

* * * * *

Kaylen Knight was steaming, almost as much as the cup of herbal tea that sat before him. The accommodating little diner in Greenwich that catered to the undead's special dietary needs had an entire section of their menu comprised of plasma and whole blood items and normally Kaylen would make a selection from the lengthy and tasty list, but on this bright and sunny day, he wanted something light in both texture and flavor.

Seated in a corner booth at the back of the popular spot, he avoided eye contact with everyone who bothered to cast a glance his way and generally speaking, sat and stewed as all around him were the bustlings and bullshittings of the mortals and immortals alike who regularly frequented the joint.

Peevishly he scratched at the skin on one forearm. He was itchy as hell, a reaction to the shot of Sunsaver XT he had taken that morning. He rarely used the shit—doing so was a crapshoot and one that could kill even the undead—but knowing there was no way on earth he was going to sleep, Kaylen decided to brave the rays of day for a most infrequent sun-filled jaunt and walk amongst the living as the old saying goes. Rest would always be there but for right now, what he really needed was to think.

Never one of the philosophizing kind, Kaylen was surprised by his desire to roll the situation around in his head but he was starting to feel his world close in on him. Because of this, he couldn't help but speculate on how his life would have been different if he had made different choices. Moving his fingers roughly through his tousled mane to rub the surface of his scalp, he pondered the mistake he had made and how, since then, he'd allowed things to get out of hand. All along he'd known that sooner or later the gig would be up but he'd always assumed it would be later.

And what about that chick last night standing him up? *Him*! Kaylen Knight. The one and only. No woman, breather or blood taker, even refused him. What was he to make of her no-show? Was this more indication of the beginning of the end? Was his reign coming to a close?

But with a heavy sigh, Kaylen knew that was the least of his worries. There was something infinitely more important at risk here and it had nothing to do with his status as the city's hottest lay.

Taking a sip of tea, he retraced his steps and tried to determine how he should best proceed.

The woman in Italy had been one thing and he had thought everything was sorted out when he left but now the bodies were adding up here too. First there was his favorite regular, then the girl in the Park. Not that he cared the least little bit for any mortal soul—they were after all obviously inferior beings—but that didn't mean he had ever intended them to die. He just wasn't able to stop it. Every time he turned around it was happening again and there was nothing he could do about it.

Helplessness was an emotion Kaylen was not familiar with and it infuriated him to be held hostage by his feelings. Damn it, he was his own person and one who was in full control of himself and that was exactly how he would proceed. He'd made the choices he'd made and done what he'd done. Time to face the music.

Whereas this resolve meant he would start taking responsibility for his actions and suffer the consequences accordingly, what Kaylen Knight was *not* going to do, from here on, was lie. Not anymore.

Determining that was Step One, but there would be a second part to his newly embraced morality.

Kaylen tossed a couple of coins on the tabletop and headed for the door of the diner. The clock overhead read three thirty. In just over a couple of hours, he would make his way downtown and do the one thing, he never imagined he would ever do.

Confess.

Even more amazingly, he was going to spill his guts to the one person he never thought he would talk to again.

* * * * *

Tess watched Charmaine's face closely for any surprise or suspicious emotion that might reveal itself in regards to the news that Renaldi was dead but ever the stoic immortal, Charmaine only regarded her coolly, only a fleeting flutter of hurt flashing in her steady green gaze.

"Come in."

Tess followed Charmaine into the vampire's living unit, doing her best to keep her internal shaking that had spread to the limbs of her body down to a minimum. Equally enraged and eager to bust the murderous whore, Tess had to proceed with caution and collect what evidence she could in the appropriate fashion. Anything less could result in the findings being deemed inadmissible by the courts and if there was one thing that fuelled Tess at this point, it was the probability of seeing Renaldi's girlfriend rot in prison for the rest of her life.

Charmaine turned around and motioned to one of the set of suspended chairs that were attached sideways to the walls in the circular space.

"Please sit down."

"I prefer to stand."

"Fine."

Charmaine herself took a seat and regarded Tess without emotion, curling her feet up under her on one side. Normally an absolute vision, the female vampire looked drawn, exhausted and overall terrible. Then again, this was the undead equivalent of the middle of the night for the immortal. She was more than likely just tired.

Tess opened her mouth to give her usual spiel but hesitated. The bile rose in the back of her throat as the words she was about to say formed in her mind. The thing opposite her wasn't worthy of kindness, compassion or respect and yet, for the sake of appearances, Tess had to make a showing of all three.

"Ms Renata, I'm very sorry to have to tell you this but..._"

"I know Darwin's dead."

Tess' heart thudded. She'd have to put a lid on her feelings that ranged from hatred and anger to an odd sort of enthusiasm that the woman already knew of Darwin's

demise only hours after the fact. Biting her tongue, Tess vowed she wouldn't give the game away by showing any emotion or leaking any thoughts.

"I see. And who advised you of that fact?"

"Captain Warner. He called me last night."

To this, Tess only nodded, her mind going a mile a minute. In the aftermath of receiving the news from Warner last night, Tess had neglected to share what had been recently uncovered about Charmaine and her involvement with Blood Bytes, instead heading directly for the bar. Without such info, naturally, Renaldi's girlfriend would have been among the first to be notified. All the more so if said girlfriend was a key suspect in the murder, which all things considered, it appeared she was.

"I didn't do it," Charmaine said out the blue, causing Tess to start and for a quick moment, she worried if she had not set up her mind block effectively but the vampire's next sentence dispelled her fears. "I don't know if that's what you're thinking, but if I were you, I would be."

Tess shrugged.

"You were the last one with him."

"No I wasn't."

Tess' professional demeanor crumbled. Here she was face to face with the woman who not only stole her boyfriend, but then turned around and killed him and now she was going to try and lie her way out of the whole thing? Not on Tess' watch.

"Cut the bullshit. You expect me to believe anything that comes out of your mouth after everything that's happened?"

Charmaine shook her head slowly, her eyes filling with tears.

"Why wouldn't you? I wasn't the one who lied to you."

"Oh that's right. Forgive me. You just seduced my lover."

"I didn't do that either."

Tess flushed with anger.

"Oh so it was Renaldi's idea?"

"Yeah, it was, but you don't understand."

"Oh I understand all right. You're a whore without morals who gets her kicks breaking up relationships just so you can have something new."

Charmaine looked down at her hands as they twisted in her lap. When she spoke it was a soft whisper but Tess still heard it loud and clear.

"It wasn't new."

The incomprehension on Tess' face melted into shock, her icy tone slicing the air like a machete.

"What?"

Charmaine's expression danced between misery and pity and Tess couldn't stand either one.

"I asked Darwin so many times to tell you. I told him it wasn't fair, it wasn't right that you didn't know."

Tess hated the sound of Renaldi's name on her lips, couldn't bear the possibility of the other woman saying it. He had been her man, *hers* and this woman had no right to touch him, love him, anymore. But all that was beside the point. What the hell was this lying tramp babbling on about?

"Didn't know what?"

"I wanted him to explain everything, all that had happened so that maybe, just maybe, it might make things easier for you."

Tess stared at Charmaine with a combination of loathing and mistrust.

"I have no fucking idea what you're talking about."

"I know," Charmaine said sadly, "and I had thought Darwin would tell you, he promised he would but now we both know that's not going to happen so I guess it's up to me."

Tess smiled and threw her hands heavenwards in a sort of whatever gesture.

"About ten years ago, before I moved to Italy and started work at *Sangue Amore*—the Italian equivalent of Blood Bytes, I had lived in the Bronx."

"Is this going to take long? I am investigating a murder here."

"Believe me. This is very pertinent to Renaldi's death."

Tess sat down on one of the protruding wall chairs and crossed her legs.

"In that case then, by all means, carry on."

"During that time, I was working as a street pro, trying to bring in what money I could for my family. It was then that I met a young cop who had just started with the Force and was assigned to the beat. He was sweet and kind and everything I had ever wanted in a man. We fell in love and married and I thought our lives would be linked together forever. Happy ending right? As I soon found out, there just aren't any happy endings.

"I gave up my job, played housewife and all was fine for a time but things do change, people change and all of a sudden we were going through a really bad time. He was overworked, never home and I felt unloved, unwanted and unwilling to live that way anymore. He'd even taken up with someone else. He had a girlfriend, a woman on the Force, he had been seeing for a while. In retrospect, a little communication and a lot more understanding would have weathered the temporary storm but we went a different route. Within a year and a half of our wedding day, we divorced. I was destroyed.

"A relative in Italy paid my way over, offering to give me a little time away to get my head straight and try to make some kind of new life. But I wasn't there long before I signed up with *Sangue Amore* — an escort agency in Italy. I figured what the hell. I knew how to do the work and the money was great."

Tess sighed deeply and crossed her arms over her chest to matched her crossed legs.

"Are we getting anywhere near the end of this?"

"Almost," Charmaine said softly before continuing. "When the agency shut down in Italy and moved, opening up a similar organization in New York, I went with them. I felt secure in my work, was well liked by my boss and trusted I had my life back together enough to return to my home.

"I wasn't back a month when I ran into my ex-husband. It had been years but all the good feelings between us were still there and without planning to, we started back up again."

Tess was stunned silent, her heart pounding so hard and fast that she could practically hear it and knew, without a shadow of a doubt that Charmaine could. But she said nothing knowing the outcome of the vampire's love story.

"That cop, my ex-husband with whom I rekindled our relationship a year ago, was Darwin."

Tess closed her eyes. She didn't want to hear anymore. More than anything she wanted to believe that Charmaine was lying through her teeth but her sixth sense told her that the vampire who sat opposite her, with the solemn eyes and trembling voice, was telling her the truth about herself and her on-again, off-again love affair with Renaldi. Inwardly Tess prayed it was over, but Charmaine had more to say.

"I've never known why he continued seeing you even after he took back up with me. I always knew he was—he didn't know I knew—but I did and yet I allowed it.

"Why did you?" Tess asked.

Charmaine started to weep softly, finally offering flatly, "Because I loved him. I guess somewhere deep down I hoped that one day, he would finally want only me. But I think what had happened in the time I was away was he had really grown to love you and in the end, just couldn't choose between us."

At the sound of the vampire's sobs, Tess unwillingly felt her heart go out to the female. She too was hurting, she too had been used by Renaldi and she too was grief-stricken over his death. Charmaine's voice when she next spoke was shaking and low.

"I'm so sorry for all the pain this has caused you. I'm sorry for all the lies and doubts but it's high time you knew the truth, I was never the other woman, you were."

Tess's tear-filled eyes, formerly sympathetic, grew hard.

"So you killed him because of me? But why? It was over. You'd won. You got him."

Charmaine got up and Tess fingered her weapon. Ever since learning that the killer was more than likely one of the undead, she had specially loaded her laser with ultraviolet light blasts to add a little punching power when firing at a vampire. But Charmaine walked past her and after taking a tissue from a box on the counter, held the container out to Tess. Quickly snatching a tissue herself, Tess watched Charmaine closely as she moved back to take her place in the far chair.

"I loved Darwin with all my heart. I must have to permit him having a mistress. I told you I didn't kill him but," she paused to blow her nose, leaving Tess to bristle at being referred to as a mistress as she waited for the vampire to finish her thought, "I know who did."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Wednesday night

The sun had long since dipped down under the horizon and the sultry shades of dusk played across the barricaded windows of Devante's loft.

At the chime of seven, the shades rolled up and within minutes, Devante emerged from the back room where his rest area was, looking refreshed but worried.

Walking into the living room, he could see that Tess had already left and he was knew the first place she would go. If her suspicions were right, she could be in serious danger and without him there to protect her, she wouldn't have a hope in hell against a vampire, most especially, one that is backed into a corner.

Racing for the vista-viewer, he utilized the viewer's phone number directory and dialed Tess on her transport contactor. It was busy. His heart sunk. God please let her be on the line and not, he squeezed his eyes shut at the mere thought, incapacitated. Hanging up, he sought and found Charmaine Renata's number. Calling there, he only got the message machine.

Don't let it be. Don't let her be ripped flesh from bone by Charmaine.

Frantically he set to redial Tess' number again when a sharp knock snapped his head around toward the door. Looking through the exterior outlooker camera situated inside the loft near the entrance, Devante stared in disbelief at the individual on the other side of the door.

Now this was unexpected.

Pulling on the heavy dark frame, he opened the door and waited expectantly, the sound of the vista-viewer ringing in the other room threatening to draw his attention.

"Hey," Kaylen Knight said, looking unusually serious as he eyed his number one competitor the persistent chime of the vista-viewer piercing the silence that followed. "Aren't you going get that?"

"Ah, yeah," Devante said distractedly. "I guess I better."

"Well hurry up 'cause then I have to talk to you."

* * * * *

Tess burst into Blood Bytes, the frosted doors hitting the outside walls with such a bang that the glass on one of them shattered, her red hair flying about her face as she breathlessly headed for Tamela Hawthorne's office. The receptionist who had been gabbing and laughing at the speaker on the other end of the phone, gawked and stood up sharply, her eyes like saucers as she waved frantically at Tess' passing form.

"Excuse me! Excuse me! What are you doing? Have you an appointment? Wait a minute! You can't just go in there."

Ignoring her, Tess threw open the door to Tamela's room and barged in. Frenetically she began rifling through the desk, pulling drawers out with such force that they, along with their contents, landed on the floor, papers, writing instruments, photos and file folders flying every which way with the force of the impact. From there she moved to one of two file cabinets and after smashing the exterior locks began heaving out the papers and files within, sometimes stopping to leaf through the first few pages here and there, other times letting the hardcopy document fall to her feet where by now, a thick layer of paper was collecting and growing ever larger.

Horrified at Tess' obviously incensed condition, the receptionist had disconnected from her ardent conversation with her boyfriend and followed her in. But when she saw the manner in which Tess was systematically searching through the place, she stopped cold in her tracks.

"What are you... Ms. Hawthorne wouldn't approve of this."

At the name of Blood Bytes continent-hopping entrepreneur, Tess whirled around and glared.

"Where is she?"

"She's, she's not here."

"I can see that, Einstein. Where is she?"

The young woman was plainly growing more and more upset by the minute.

"I-I-I don't know."

Tess lost it. Again. Another surge of adrenaline coursed through her as had happened repeatedly in the past twenty-four hours. At the time each happened, she would have bet her life that she couldn't get any more upset than she was when she had first learned about Renaldi's death, or hotfooted it over to Charmaine Renata's place, convinced her ex-lover's immortal girlfriend was directly responsible for it. But she was wrong. Dead wrong. For when his vampire lover handed Tess the crumbled message she had retrieved from his garbage that bore the words in Renaldi's familiar script *Tuesday, ten p.m. Tamela Hawthorne,* Tess saw red like she never had before.

And if that wasn't enough proof, en route to Blood Bytes Tess had received a call from Freemont Gale. The DNA match on the other hair strand from the Sara Greenwood crime scene was in. It belonged to Tamela Hawthorne.

Hot on the trail of a sure thing killer, Tess wasn't about to let some lamebrain with sadly misplaced loyalties stand in her way. She drew her laser and pointed it.

"Last chance," she spat out from between clenched teeth. "Now where is your boss?"

The young woman started to cry and tremble.

"I swear I don't know. She just called a while back and said she wouldn't be in tonight."

Now they were getting somewhere.

"Where did she call from?"

"I-I don't know."

"Retrace the origin of the call."

As Tess followed the receptionist back out to the front where she initialized a former call trace, Tess recalled how, at the sight of the crumbled message in her hand at Charmaine's, in a flash, it had all clicked.

Renaldi must have found something out about Tamela Hawthorne when he was doing his background check on Blood Bytes, something that must have led back to her time in Italy and *Sangue Amore*. To secure the evidence he required—that substantiation Tess was now certain would be the secobarbital that the agency owner had cut into the BBPs her escorts were in turn, feeding their clients—he set up some sort of clandestine meeting with the maniacal madam. But before he could find it, she killed him. Now it was up to Tess to find Tamela's stash of secobarbital that would irrefutably link her to the pills and the deaths of Sara Greenwood, the girl in the park and unless she was very wrong, Renaldi's death and that of Devante's sister.

"Here it is," the young woman said.

"Give it to me."

Jotting down the sequence of numbers on a notepad, she turn off the slip at handed it to Tess with trembling fingers.

Punching the numbers into her mobile residential locator, an address spread across the minute computer's visor along with the description *Hawthorne residence*. Sliding the skinny bit of technology back into the pocket situated on the front of her thigh, Tess moved over to close and lock the door—cracked glass and all before waving her laser gun at the woman.

"Let's go."

She shook her head fearfully.

"What? Why? Where are we going?"

"In here. Move it."

Bringing up the rear, Tess directed the trembling figure into Tamela's office once more, motioning with the barrel of her weapon loosely around the empty space.

"Start looking."

"What are we looking for?"

"Anything that doesn't belong."

* * * * *

"Can't you drive any faster?" Devante said to Kaylen as they sped along through the central part of the city. Of all the times to have the electrostarter belt on his transport misfire and die. What he didn't need right now was a civilian sidekick but Kaylen not only had wheels but also inhuman strength and in order to confront Tamela he would both would be useful.

Actually Kaylen was doing pretty well, dodging past A3s and other assorted flying paraphernalia at such a high speed. Their vehicle was only able to go two hundred and seventy mph which might be a good thing as the non-sanctioned vampire was not accustomed to driving.

"I told you we should have just flown. Would get there faster." When Devante didn't answer, Knight added a little snidely. "We do have the ability to do that."

Devante shook his head steadfastly.

"Not in this district. Downtown's a no-fly zone."

Kaylen shot him a look that crossed bemusement with disbelief.

"Jesus Christ, you really are a cop."

Devante returned the expression.

"And you never put that together yourself?"

Kaylen shrugged before flooring it and running a red light. Letting out a long breath, he answered.

"Your mind block was impenetrable. Besides, you look different from what you did back in Italy." He nodded in appreciation as he viewed Devante out of the corner of his eye. "Pretty good job too. Where'd you get your morph done?"

"I didn't. I had changed my appearance in Italy to investigate Martina's murder. What you're looking at now is the real me. Turn here."

They raced around a corner too fast and the vehicle fishtailed, making no less than three complete circles before Kaylen gained control and righted their direction.

For a few moments they drove along in silence.

"Why didn't you come to me before with all this?" Devante asked quietly.

"I told you. I didn't know who you were. And I wasn't ready to fess up to that girl's death back in Italy. Not until now. I saw the signs, saw it all starting to happen all over again here."

"But it was an accident, you said. That trick in Italy."

"It was. I was new to the biz and the whole idea of having blood volunteered. She was my first client and right in the throes of it all, I got carried away and forgot to give her the BBP until it was too late."

"And Tamela was holding this over your head."

"I believe the term is blackmail. But what could I do? Somehow I doubt that any court of law was going to believe my side of the story."

"You're wrong Knight. These things do happen. Our kind does lose control every once and a while. It's in our disposition."

"I don't think that argument is going to get me off."

"Maybe not entirely but with a good lawyer and a bit of plea-bargaining you would have received a very light sentence. Don't forget, you're an invaluable witness. You know that Tamela killed four people and can testify against her."

"Four?"

Devante looked at him.

"If all you say is correct then I'm pretty sure she also murdered Detective Renaldi. He must have uncovered something about her past."

"Who's Renaldi?"

"Tess' partner on the Greenwood case."

"Tess?"

"Detective Monterey."

"You two on a first-name basis now?"

Devante took no notice of the comment.

"So we now know the who and how but without you, we don't have the why."

"It's so crazy, no one would believe it."

"Hey, I believe it. People in love do crazy things."

"I don't know if I would classify Tamela's obsession with me as love but after I became her favorite at *Sangue Amore*, she certainly became very jealous of any female client I had."

"Including Martina."

Kaylen looked at him seriously.

"Yeah." Then uncomfortably he added, "I'm sorry about that."

"Wasn't your fault. Like you said, Tamela was obsessed with you and didn't want anyone else to sample the goods."

"She said as much, after the fact of course. She had something on me and I on her so we closed up shop and relocated to New York. She promised it would never happen again. And it didn't. That is, not until you showed up."

"And she became obsessed with *me* and jealous of *my clients.*"

"Exactly."

"When did you all put it together?"

"I was suspicious after the Greenwood murder but when I heard about that girl in the park, slashed and drained of blood, it all fit."

"And that's when you decided to come and talk to me?"

"I took a chance. I figured if Tamela had confessed to me about her jealousy in Italy, maybe she might have done the same with you here. Kinda stupid when you think of it. A madam not wanting anyone to touch one of her studs. Isn't that what you would call counterproductive?"

"Like you said, it's crazy. And so is Tamela Hawthorne."

"Do you think this Detective Monterey is already at her place?"

"I hope not. I'm just glad Charmaine called me and told me what had happened."

"What did she say?"

"She told me about Renaldi's note regarding his rendezvous with Tamela and that after learning about it, Tess flew out of her living unit like a bat out of hell. I just hope we make it there before she does."

"Charmaine didn't go with her?"

"At that time, she couldn't. Daylight hours."

"It's night now."

"Yeah and Tamela will be waking up."

His concerned tone drew Kaylen's attention and wanting some confirmation of that which he suspected, he tested the waters.

"Yeah, that lady cop is pretty hot all right. Maybe when all this is said and done, I'll give her a little something to remember me by."

"Fucking forget it Knight. Over my dead body! You touch a hair on her head and I will obliterate you."

Kaylen laughed and Devante let out a heavy sigh knowing he had been caught.

"Obliterate? Now that's no way to talk to someone who has agreed to help you take down the Queen Bitch of Blood Bytes. And you're going to need the two of us to keep her from slicing and dicing the Detective there. She's one powerful mother."

Devante remained silent, his eyes darkening as his teeth pushed through his gums to lengthen and harden in preparation for either a feast or a fight.

"You know it's none of my business but am I picking up a vibe of something more than a carnal craving from you for this Tess?"

When Devante didn't answer, Knight took that as a yes.

"Does she feel the same?"

Devante shot him a tired look and tried to present his apparently obvious feelings in a different light.

"She just lost her partner and is very vulnerable right now. I'm just, worried about her."

"Vulnerable? Excellent!" Kaylen said slapping his thigh. "That gives you the perfect in to offer her a little... comfort."

"No."

"What are you nuts? You play your cards right and you can have this chick eating out of your hand, not to mention other places. There's no aphrodisiac like grief."

"Knight, you're something else."

"You got that right but that's beside the point. Given the circumstances of the situation, I'm telling you man, if you want this woman, you've got her. Take it from one "legitimate" pro to another."

"You might be right, but I guess we'll never know."

"What do you mean? Oh I got you. You're not the kiss and tell type."

"There won't be anything to tell. I'm not going to push or confuse her. She's been through enough."

"You disappoint me, you know that?"

"Oh no. How will I sleep?"

"Make all the jokes you like," Knight said running a red light. "I'm just saying that if I were you and she felt anything for me, I'd be banging this babe every chance I got."

"Well you're not me. If and when she wants me, she'll have to make the first move."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tess must've received a half a dozen traffic violations on the way over to Tamela's Long Island dwelling. Her knuckles aching from gripping the control wheel so hard, she trembled in unbridled anger as her cruiser ripped through the air lanes between the tall skyscrapers, dodging other transport units and veering around corners.

Hitting the cruiser's distress signal, a flash of neon orange light and a blaring highpitched sound filled the air around the unit, alerting all those within the immediate vicinity that an emergency was in progress and they had better get the hell out of the way or get hit. Within blocks of her destination, she discontinued the visual and audio signal.

Radioing her location and intent to Captain Warner, along with the news of the substantiation she had collected, Tess agreed to wait outside Tamela's residence upon her arrival for backup and the emergency response team that would come with it. But as she pulled up to the independent living quarters, she cut the engine and getting out, stole around the side of the basement living unit.

Standing flush against the back wall of the structure, she caught her breath and formulated a plan. It was dark, but just newly, meaning that Tamela was up or just getting up for the night. Tess would have to move fast. With a superior sense of smell intact, the vampires would be able to smell her approach.

Trying a handful of the lower windows that would normally permit easy access, Tess saw that the shutters had been rolled up indicating the lady of the house was indeed up and about or that she had a timer for them.

Moving around to the rear entrance, Tess halted in her tracks upon seeing the back door lying wide open. With laser gun drawn and set to ultraviolet rays to seriously maim one of the undead, Tess pointed the weapon straight out in front of her and cautiously walked toward the entrance way. Peering around the corner, she leapt in, her back pressed against one wall and she rotated, weapon first about the circumference of the room. It was a living space filled with the usual items—an assortment of seating items, a world watcher, a computer, drink and miscellaneous purpose holders and a vista-viewer near the door. But peoplewise, there was no sign of Tamela or anyone else for that matter. The only sound came from a music maker in another room somewhere beyond, a low sultry voice in a sweeping sad melody flowing from its speakers and carried across the way.

Silently pushing the door closed behind her, Tess proceeded into the next adjoining room, a kitchen area and then another, a bathroom. Tess entered and scoured each compartment vigilantly, only to abandon it and move onto the next connecting area.

When Tess had searched the entire main floor twice, she retraced her steps and stood in the living area where she had first entered. With her weapon still in hand but her arms having relaxed down to her sides and facing the very door she had come in through—the same one that had been open upon her back yard approach—Tess was left to assume that Tamela had exited the dwelling and fled. But why would she run? And to where?

As she stood pondering the fugitive's next move, her back to the core of the home, Tess could neither see nor hear the hidden wall crypt open behind her, the long contained slab emerging from its secret location, once reaching its full length rising vertically to lift its precious cargo to a standing position. Soundlessly the circular domed cover slid back to reveal Tamela Hawthorne, eyes blazing, fangs bared and vibrating with hatred.

In a flash she had reached Tess, grabbing her red hair with one hand and brutishly yanking her backward, the sheer force of the impact sending Tess' laser gun flying out of her hands. Screaming Tess fought, her hands and fingernails scratching at the single hand that dragged her by the hair, her legs kicking wildly as she tried to get right side up but momentum was on the side of her captor.

Bumped and bruised along her backward journey and feeling very much like a rag doll being carried by a youngster, Tess was relieved when the movement stopped but the reality of the halt was far more horrifying than the voyage had been.

Now in a back room that looked to be Tamela's in-house version of her office dungeon, Tamela forced Tess into a standing restraint facing forward, only to rip the clothes off her—the mini-dress she had adopted for her date with Knight easily torn from her body. Strolling over to her chamber of horrors instrument panel, Tamela leisurely selected a decidedly gruesome-looking whip with a number of sharp metal spikes attached to the end of its leather strap.

"You're not going to get away with this," Tess said, working to keep her teeth from chattering. She was still angry, but also keenly afraid and now more than a little cold.

"No?" Tamela looked at her in surprise. "And why wouldn't I?

"Because I have Renaldi's note with the day and time of your meeting with him. I have the DNA proof that you were in Sara Greenwood's living room and now I have your hoard of secobarbital."

After turning Tamela's office upside down, Tess had, in a despondent move, slid down to the floor behind the desk she had just ransacked, her eyes filling with tears. And that's when she saw the veiled button located underneath the keyboard panel. Pushing it down, Tamela's unknown closet area was exposed and within minutes of entering the clandestine space, Tess had located all the evidence she needed. It was all there, the secobarbital, the BBP casings and a chemist's measuring scale to ensure that she used a lethal amount of the drug when cutting the dangerous compound in the blood back pills.

"Yes but you seem to be overlooking one small fact."

"What's that?"

"I have you. The DNA file can easily be lost and once you are removed from the equation, all you have goes with you. So you see my dear, it's in my best interests if you disappear. But first, time for a little payback."

With that, Tamela lunged forward and brought the lash sharply down across Tess' torso, the metal barbs easily slicing the flesh of her midsection, blood springing to the surface.

Tess shrieked straining against her leather bounds but she could not budge.

"Payback for what?"

Tamela looked astonished.

"For touching Devante of course."

"But I didn't touch him."

Another lash came down, this one harder, leaving streaks of red across her chest and stomach in its wake. Tears sprung to Tess' eyes as she screamed.

"At this point you may as well tell the truth," Tamela said walking around to the other side to get a better vantage point. "Who would be willing to pay twice Devante's normal rate and then turn around the next night and book Kaylen? Who and why? It didn't take me long to figure out the answers to both those questions. So you see, you are lying when you said you didn't touch him. I know you did. Touch him and more."

Again she brought the lash down, this time twice in a row. Tess felt her knees buckle at the intense pain, a dizziness threatening to overtake her as the red liquid now flowed freely from her bloodied trunk.

"Oh and don't worry about the blood loss," Tamela grinned wickedly. "I have one of my special BBPs to give you once I'm done."

A half dozen more strikes blessedly rendered Tess unconscious but Tamela was not done. Raising her hand high over her head, Tamela prepared to deliver another blow to Tess' confined and slack form but in a blur, Devante and Knight burst in to tackle her to the ground, the immortal pair each latching on to one of the many arteries in her body and sucking powerfully to weaken the vigorous vampire. With Devante on her throat and Knight piercing the area just over her heart, a screech from the doorway announced the arrival of Charmaine who flew over to sink her fangs into Tamela's inner thigh. Draining her to near the point of death, Devante pulled away first. Seeing Tamela's near comatose state he called off his two allies. Handing Tess' laser gun which he had grabbed upon entering to Charmaine he instructed her to "shoot her between the eyes if she moves."

Racing over to Tess, Devante freed her from her bonds, her bloodied body falling limp into his arms.

"No, no, no," he muttered, cradling her as he brushed the hair that fell in her unresponsive face. "Tess, come on, wake up. Wake up."

Biting his tongue, Devante licked at the wounds on her breasts and stomach but the damage was too extensive. The gouges were too large and he couldn't heal them fast enough to stop the exodus of her life force from her body.

Knight had risen from his place by the unconscious figure of Tamela and walked over to where Devante attended Tess, watching solemnly over the vampire detective's shoulder as he fought to save the woman he had so very clearly fallen in love with.

"Help me," Devante said to him, his voice cracking with emotion. It wasn't until he realized he might lose Tess that his true feelings for the woman really hit home.

"I don't think..."

"Help me!!!" he boomed.

Silently, Knight knelt down beside him and similarly began bathing Tess' torso with the healing blood from his own tongue, each one working a different section. Together they worked to close the gaping gashes but even though their combined efforts managed to finally seal all the lesions, Tess' condition remained critical.

"She's lost too much blood."

"Can't you give her a BBP? Charmaine asked.

"I don't have one on me," Knight said.

"I do," Devante said, "but it's from the agency and is probably one of the contaminated ones."

Hoisting Tess up higher into the crook of his arms, Devante grabbed the whip Charmaine had dropped and using one of the steel claws, torn open his shirt and pierced the skin on his chest, dragging the metal piece down in a long line beside his left nipple, a spurt of blood jerking out to soak the fabric of his shirt. Positioning her mouth over his oozing cut, he urged her softly.

"Come on Tess. Drink now. Drink."

With no response, her head fell against him, closed eyes remaining so and her mouth open but not drinking in the vital fluid that she needed.

Devante tried again, but again, Tess merely flopped in his arms, unable to comply with his urgent request.

"Please Tess, drink. Please. Come on baby. Come on. Take a little."

Devante dapped a finger in the blood on his chest and smeared the crimsoned digit in between her lips, rubbing the rich elixir on her gums and tongue.

His eyes moving from Tess' face to Devante's, Knight watched the vampire cop for a long moment before reaching over and placing a light hand on his shoulder.

"She's gone man. She's gone."

"No, no her heart's still beating. It's still beating," Devante said, the air of desperation in his voice heartbreaking.

"It does that sometimes, but trust me, she's gone. Let her go."

Charmaine's soft sobs could be heard in the otherwise silent room for a moments as Devante's tears trickled down and fell on Tess' face. Clutching her to him, he buried his face in her hair and rocked back and forth, softly kissing her hair and murmuring terms of endearment into her ear. Lost in grief, he didn't hear the wail of the emergency response team as they pulled up to the unit.

Chapter Twenty-Six

One week later

It should have been raining, Tess decided as she walked past the rows of graves, the heels of her shoes digging into the soft grass that was all the more pliant thanks to last night's brief shower. In the movies, graveside visits were always in the rain and it seemed fitting for such a gloomy activity, but today the sun was absolutely blinding.

The alternate white and gray marble slabs and markers looking almost pretty in the bright sunlight, their smooth surfaces contrasted by the various array of flowers, photos and candles left at the individual sites. Not much had changed through the centuries in the ways in which people memorialized their loved ones. Only nowadays, thanks to the pronounced lack of land in the city, cemeteries existed in specially designated farms in outlying areas.

Following the Captain's directions, Tess made her way amongst the linear pattern of the memorial park, finally reaching her goal. Stopping she stared blankly at the tombstone of Detective Darwin Renaldi. Apart from his name it simply read:

Living on in our memories.

She hadn't gone to the funeral. She knew her absence had raised many an eyebrow but she just couldn't handle it. To hell with what anybody thought. She was here now and that's all that mattered.

Kneeling down Tess placed the single red rose on the mound of fresh dirt of the newly-dug grave, her fingers feeling the coolness of the earth. The tactile sensation inexplicably served to crumble her stoic reserve and sitting down on the nearby patch of grass, her knees pressed into the edges of the dirt mound, she dissolved into tears, her hand remaining motionless and flat atop the pile. In her distress, it felt as if she could feel his life force reaching up to her from beneath as flashes of his face appeared in her mind's eye.

"You stupid weenie," she blubbered, irately wiping a tear from her cheek with the back of her free hand. "I loved you, you know."

Tess realized for the first time that she had not entirely released the pain of his death nor, for that matter, the pain of their breakup. Now was the time to do both.

For a long while she sat like that, one hand on the cool dirt, the other wiping the endless stream of tears from her face. Slowly she reviewed every moment she could recall with Darwin, determined that this would be the last time she visited each memory.

She remembered the first but fleeting time they had met, the introduction doing little to interest, never mind titillate, her. Bits and pieces of conversations during that

first year flooded over her from chats in the lemojave room to in-depth dissections of everything from morality to religion to politics in the sanctity of their shared office. The turning point in her evaluation of him from friend to leading man came one late fall afternoon when he appeared at the records room, carrying a cup of honey-lime tea. Few in the precinct drank the decaffeinated special blend and he had not only prepared her a cup, but made the long trip down to her compartment at the far end of the zone.

Everything changed after that.

Soon they were spending every waking moment in his bed or hers, talking of life, love and the future. Despite all that though, in retrospect, she could see all the warning signs in his behavior—the vagueness, the evasiveness and the blatant lack of commitment. Even then, it was clear Renaldi wasn't in love with her, not fully, but she just couldn't accept it.

But that was now all in the past. Furthermore, it was way past time to let him go and finally, she was prepared to. Leaning close, Tess directed her words into the soft soil.

"I forgive you Darwin for everything you've done," she said, calling him by his first name for the first time since they had split, "I really do, but I can't let the love I've felt for you keep me from loving someone else anymore. I'm glad I met you and I'm glad for the time we had but now I have to move on. You have a new life now and I have to create one for myself too. Goodbye Darwin. Rest well."

The sun shifted in the afternoon sky and soon long shadows were falling across the deserted grounds. Feeling relieved and strangely lightened by her speech and the closure she had reached, Tess said farewell to her reminiscence and slowly rose to her feet brushing the dirt from her shins.

Turning, she gradually made her way back to her transport unit, smiling softly to herself as she realized she felt something else and how. It had been far too long and now, free to open herself up again, Tess couldn't wait one moment longer.

Hitting the dashtop accelerator, she raced off, her heart pounding as she concluded she had one more stop to make.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When Devante opened the door, he was apparently just fresh from the shower for his hair was a beguiling dripping mess that left errant wet strands to hang in his eyes. Little droplets of moisture trickled down his muscular bare chest to disappear into the unbuttoned waistband of his low-rise jeans, his exposed feet looking scrubbed clean and strangely sexy beneath the tattered hem of the faded denim. Tousled and terrifically disheveled, some guys could really pull off the "bum" look and miraculously turn it into something incredibly sexy.

"Are you okay?" Devante asked.

Tess took her time in dragging her gaze up his body to his face where a single drop of water fell from his slick wet hair slid down the bridge of his nose to drop and hover seductively on the fleshy swell of his upper lip. Unconsciously, Tess ran her tongue over her own lips, the thought of licking the drop from his mouth bombarding her imagination and rattling her senses.

The movement caused Devante to look down at her mouth and when he returned his sight to Tess' eyes, he recognized the unmistakable look of desire glowing within. A distinct look of surprise registered on his face then and he opened his mouth, but Tess cut him off before he had a chance to speak. Stepping fast into the living unit and laying a hand on either side of his shoulders, she pivoted him around to push him against the wall as she kicked the door shut with her foot.

"Yeah I am. I'm good."

Truer words were never spoken.

Not only had Tess completely healed from her ordeal with Tamela, but after a lengthy recovery period, she had finally healed from losing Renaldi. Both times.

Wrapping her arms around Devante's neck, Tess tilted her head to the right to kiss him full on the mouth. Beneath her lips, she could feel his parting and moving as he kissed her back, the feel of his hands registering as he caressed her hips and back before pulling her into a tighter embrace, her breasts crushing against his solid chest.

Pulling back she asked him breathlessly, "How about you?"

"Oh yeah," he smiled. "I'm good."

"Prove it."

A flaming arrow of desire shot through her as she twisted her head around to the other side to kiss him again, this time even deeper, their tongues now circling around in a heated play ripe with need and want. Kissing down the smooth curve of his jaw and the line of his throat, she ran her hands down the hard, heaving surface of his chest and

abdomen, following the trail of her hands with her mouth, kissing and licking every hard, rippling inch of his torso.

A cursory glance up the length of his body revealed the exquisite pleasure her touch was producing for he now leaned flush against the wall, his head tilted back and to one side, eyes closed and positively panting—his vampire teeth now fully extended and jutting out over the curve of his lower lip.

Never before had she wanted someone so badly. Not even her ex-partner and lover. For the first time ever, the thought of him created no pain whatsoever inside Tess, leaving her to focus on the feeling that was blazing, full-blown and uncontrollable—that of passion for the vampire at whose feet she knelt. Somewhere up through the dim recesses of her mind she realized that this was a runaway train and there was no way it could be stopped.

A soft moan escaped from behind her lips as she pressed them to the rigid bulge in the front of Devante's pants, her hands soon joining in the amorous assault on his massive erection. Only vaguely was she aware of his hands in her hair, stroking the flaming red strands and firmly pressing her lips against his pounding hard-on. She knew what he wanted and by God, she was going to give it to him.

Unzipping his jeans, she spread apart the fabric to plant a progression of moist, firm kisses on him, the smooth material of his shorts straining under the mounting pressure of his burgeoning shaft. Tess really wanted to tease him through the thin cotton garment and take her time driving him absolutely mad before she locked her lips around his engorged rod but she wasn't sure if her own need would let her wait. Kneeling on the floor in front of him, she was so close to the edge that she had to fight for control, her free hand grasping his backside tightly.

However restraint wasn't on the cards for either of them. With a hoarse groan, Devante reached down and pulled out the object of her desire with one hand, gently guiding her mouth toward his inflamed length. At the sight of him, any inhibitions Tess felt melted away and she began licking and sucking on the fingers of his hand that wrapped around his pulsating piece. When at last she had peeled away each of his digits and moved her undivided attention to his throbbing manhood, the cry that met her ears was one of intense pleasure and surrender. Moving rhythmically up and down the length of him, she detected the slight rocking movement of his hips that urged him even deeper into her mouth, the combination serving to, as impossible as it seemed, turn his already granite-like pole into steel. She was perfectly prepared to crouch at his feet and suck him till kingdom come—or he did—but Devante had other plans.

Never having been turned on so much, so fast, he pushed Tess slightly away before jerking her up to her feet. Swinging her around and pinning her hard against the wall with his body, winded and wild-looking, he gave her one last chance.

"Are you sure you're up to this?"

She stroked him lightly, a playful smile crossing her face.

"Well you sure are."

He gave her a quick grin before growing serious again.

"I mean it Tess. Are you sure you're ready?"

Tess pulled him close, the hunger in her eyes forecasting the words she was about to say.

"Baby, I've never been more ready. And the fact that you were prepared to wait for me makes me want you even more."

That was all Devante needed to hear. Devante kissed her hard in response, their teeth touched as their tongues once again danced around within the hot, moist caverns of their joined mouths. His hands drifted up and down her torso, front and back, caressing and squeezing her skin, stroking and cupping her breasts as he squashed the length of her body against him, the bulk of his exposed hard-on rubbing against her pelvis, causing her to writhe with need. As if in answer, Devante began nuzzling her neck and dropped one hand to between her legs, expertly massaging the clothed nook in such a way that Tess suddenly exclaimed, grasping tightly to his shoulders as an abrupt and not-yet-expected climax tore through her. Gasping for air, she opened her eyes only to meet Devante's fiery, perceptive gaze. Smiling, he reached down and with a quick move, picked her up and swung her around into his arms. Heading into the bedroom, he spoke low and softly to her—both his velvet voice and fire-laden forecast causing her to twist in anticipatory ecstasy.

"If you think that was hot, just wait until I get you naked."

In the darkness of the room, they undressed each other, heatedly interspersing sensual caresses and slow wet kisses with each removed article of clothing. Climbing onto the spacious surface of his wall bed, the long flat surface having been ejected earlier and now lay ready and waiting for whatever horizontal pleasure its owner desired, Tess turned around and stretched open her arms and legs to Devante who stood watching her.

In a blur he was atop her, his cool flesh pressing along her, one thick thigh separating hers, his knee rubbing seductively against her pounding wetness. With a tender touch and a skilful stroke, the fingers of his right hand moved down to first tease her externally then push her to another pinnacle as he fondled her inside.

Breathlessly recovering, Tess shifted quickly and pushing Devante onto his back, straddled him, her hands lightly teasing his nipples.

"So I have a question."

Devante chuckled.

"You want to talk now?"

"I do, I do, yes."

He screwed up in face in an adorable look of frustration.

"Okay. What?"

"Remember you said you planted all those thoughts in the minds of your clients."

"Yeah."

"And you had said that if they wanted it, you tied them up."

"I didn't actually do it."

"No but you suggested that you had, right?"

"Right."

"Hmmm. Well you know what Freud would say?"

"What?"

"That the suggestions we make to others is what we really want for ourselves."

Devante chuckled.

"Is that so?"

"I don't know, is it?"

Dropping a hand back behind her to rub the stiff part of him that was poking her in the back, she leaned forward and murmured lightly. "Got anything strong enough to hold you down?"

Devante's eyes blazed as his breath quickened.

"Workout shackles."

Used for suspending bodies overhead to work certain body parts such as the abdomen, the shoulders and arms and even the glutes, the strong chains comprised of a procession of sturdy metal links came with a large circular hoop at one end for attaching to stabilizing hooks.

Tess kissed him deeply before sliding to one side to let him move.

"Get them."

The clinking sound of metal against metal soon met her ears and within a few seconds, Devante was back beside her, with fetters in hand.

"Did you want to try?" he asked.

"Thanks, no, not this time. I've had enough with the restraint thing for now," she said, referring to her recent interaction with Tamela. "But I'd be more than happy to indulge you."

Securing each of his limbs to the manual circular handle located under the hovering wall bed, Tess next set out to blow Devante's mind.

Situated up at the top of the bed and with one leg placed on either side of his head, her body close enough for him to see but not to touch, she let one hand fall lazily between her legs where she stroked the slick feminine folds, her fingers moving up and down and around and inside herself in an up-close-and-personal demonstration of self-pleasure. The private show elicited the precise reaction she thought it would for almost immediately the chains that restrained Devante clanked against the sides of the bed as he tried to reach out and touch her. As she further aroused herself, Devante's excitement matched hers, his body undulating from the visual stimulation. Men, mortals and immortals alike, were such visual animals that providing them with something to look at never failed to rock their world.

Once or twice, Tess dipped her hips down low enough for him to strain upward and lick the honey soaked area she was touching, his hot breath and flicking motion of his tongue enticing Tess to the point that, unable to resist the lure of his lips, she finally conceded and relaxing down, let Devante do what he was so very desperate to do—suck her sweetness until she shuddered in another explosion of physical bliss.

Inching her way down, Tess laughed lightly, embarrassed at Devante's glistening mouth and reaching for the corner of the sheet underneath them, wiped his face.

"I'm sorry."

"Come here," he said with a whisper, their lips meeting as she maneuvered her lower half and slowly mounted him. Pulling away, Tess moved her hips up and down, grinding her glossy velvet onto his steel in lazy strokes that would increase in speed and pressure only to reduce again—a pattern that was clearly getting the better of Devante. Groaning in passion, he bit his lip so hard a thin trickle of blood began running down his chin, the chains wildly clanging.

Then a loud crack ripped out as he freed first one then the other hand. Sitting straight up and clasping her close to his torso, Devante reached down and pulled at the chains of first one then the other foot, the clatter of the loose metal on the floor reverberating in the quiet of the room.

Stunned, Tess who had been looking over her shoulder watching him effortlessly yank the fetters from their holds, turned back around to regard her blazing-eyed lover. She knew vampires had superhuman strength but watching him pull the restraints as easily as if they were string was kind of frightening. And more than a little electrifying.

"Uh-oh," she grinned in nervous anticipation. "I'm in trouble now aren't I?"

Quickly slipping out of the metal cuffs around his wrists and ankles, Devante leapt over Tess in so fast a movement she could only feel his passage. Embracing her from the back, he stroked her with both hands—one positioned north, the other south, as he nuzzled her neck, the prick of his teeth in her throat coinciding with the gentle probe of his fingers within her.

Melting against him, Tess let her head fall back against his shoulder, one of her arms rising up and over behind her to caress his hair. The sensual sensation of his teeth in her and his mouth pulling the blood from her veins promised to take her to a new height but sensing her nearness to the moment, Devante pulled back, withdrawing both his teeth and fingers.

"Hang on," he whispered. "Not yet."

Lifting her easily to turn and face him, he dropped her down onto the mattress, entering her in one forceful thrust, his teeth piercing her flesh as they fell. Hard and steady he drove against her wet warmth, his mouth, as much as his manhood, urging her to burst and when she did, he did too, the pumping of her heart at the moment of orgasm causing her blood to spurt into his mouth, just as he spurted hard and fast into her body. It was the ultimate circle of love and pleasure and in this most intimate of moments, neither one wanted for anything, or anyone, else.

After their passion cooled and Devante had given Tess a BBP—a *safe* one—they lay, warm and entwined in the aftermath of their lovemaking, the future in all its mystery spread out before them.

"So what do we do now?" Tess asked, loving the feel of his cool hard body against hers and his arms, strong and protective around her.

Twisting around so that she could see his face, Devante only smiled, drawing back a damp strand of hair from her forehead with a single finger before leaning forward to place a soft moist kiss on her lips.

"Whatever we want."

Epilogue

In the wake of the Blood Bytes scandal, life changed radically for all those involved in the months and years that followed.

Chase Telmor never recovered from the murder of his fiancée Sara Greenwood and became an alcoholic. His father Senator Jonathan Telmor had him committed to a treatment centre/sanitarium in Upstate New York where he visits his son every Sunday.

After devoting a few years of his youth to the New York Force, Freemont Gale decided to act his age and taking a lengthy leave of absence, joined a punk rock band and toured Ireland where he hooked up with a spunky Mick by the name of Moira.

Stephen Carson did please his wife by talking more, even going on to join an the international chatters group PSA—Professional Speakers Association—and giving lectures in and around the New York area, his proud spouse always in attendance at each and every function.

Shelley Warner retired as New York coroner only to open up a tattoo parlor in the Bronx several months later.

Desiree Ranchart kept working as a weapons specialist but switched organizations, utilizing her highly specialized skills in the area of espionage and ammunition classification for none other than the Global Guard.

When certain tapes mysteriously emerged revealing his indisputable involvement, Benjamin Matheson was tried and convicted of conspiracy to commit murder. He was sentenced to twenty-five years in a medium security prison on Coney Island where he has taken up macramé as a means of whiling away the time.

As the funds supposedly paid to Charmaine Renata for the murder of Sara Greenwood could never be located, her case was thrown out of court and she was released. Months later she would return to Florence and after purchasing a profitable vineyard, set up the Renaldi Estates Winery. She has never remarried.

Tamela Hawthorne was tried and convicted of the murders of Martina Matiero, Sara Greenwood, Diana Lobay—the girl in the park—and Darwin Renaldi. She is currently serving an *ad infinitum* sentence at Rochester Vampire Prison—a high-security prison specially designed to keep the criminal immortal in—with no possibility of parole.

Kaylen Knight took over running Blood Bytes and, after changing the name to The Kaylen Knight Agency, retired from personally escorting clients—that is except for the rare "luckiest person on the planet" whom he would entertain out of a craving for his former lifestyle every once in a while. He still enjoyed toying with the rotating

receptionists that manned the agency's front desk, up until he met his match in the form of a tough cookie from the Bronx with whom he fell head over heels in love.

Devante Matiero continued to work for the Global Guard but after centuries of drifting, put down roots in New York City where he shares a sprawling suite with his mortal wife and fellow law enforcement agent Tess Monterey.

Tess Monterey rose up through the ranks of the New York Force to eventually become Captain. Comfortable in the easy nine-to-five shift of the position, she is free to heap tons of love and romance and earth-shatteringly good sex on her husband Devante every night and every weekend, proving that, contrary to what someone once told her, there are such things as happy endings.

About the Author

Susan Phelan began writing poetry and short stories as a child, always intrigued by both the fantastic and the romantic. Several years ago she began work as an entertainment and travel freelance writer. Today, she is the editor of international tourist magazine WHERE.

In addition to writing, Susan has studied and taught classical piano and various forms of dance including tap, jazz and flamenco. She lives in Edmonton, AB, Canada, with her collie, Sadie.

Susan welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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