

Bridge
Over
Troubled
Water

Vivien
Dean

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

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"Why?"

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"Do what?"

"You know what."

"It's the truth. Well, except for the fact that you look exhausted. But other than that—"

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Born To Be Wild
Ruby Red Rebels

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BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

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ISBN 978-1-60272-308-5
Cover Art © 2008 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER 1

“Go home, Lindstrom.”

Detective Brady Lindstrom stared at the taped-off room, an immovable wall all the techs were forced to skirt around. Though the bodies were long gone, he still saw it as he'd come upon the scene—Ikea-inspired furniture splintered, blood smeared across the beige walls like some kind of hazing graffiti, frat boys battered and broken where whoever had attacked had decided to drop their corpses. Every single one of them had had his throat ripped out. All but one was missing his heart.

Through the windows, the headlights from the news trucks nearly eclipsed the shine from all the cameras. It made the

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curtains glow as if it was already dawn, but the sun wouldn't show its face until nearly seven. Brady had been on the job for over thirty hours.

"You heard me, Lindstrom." His partner, Monty Webster, scowled at him from his stand at the doorway. He was as big a man as Brady, though too many hours doing the desk was settling his bulk around his midsection. "It's going to be hours before this is all processed."

Brady shook his head. "Something might come up."

"So I'll take care of it when it does."

"You need me."

"And you need to get some sleep."

With a roll of his eyes, he finally tore his attention away from the crime scene. Not that that made much of a difference. Give him a pen and a piece of paper, and he'd be able to recreate it, all the way down to the bloody beer bottles piled up in the far corner. He'd overheard one of the techs suggesting the killers had used them with the neck snapped off to gouge out the victims' hearts.

"Gee, I didn't know you cared."

"I don't. You fuck up because you're not thinking straight, and it's going to be my ass on the line, too."

Webster was only half-kidding, but Brady knew he had at least a small point. If he was tired, he ran the risk of missing an angle or a detail that could prove crucial to the case. And he wouldn't go to sleep right away when he got home anyway, so he'd have a few hours to work out, then surf around online to see what might be lurking in the ether.

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“Fine.” Casting one last glance at the room behind him, Brady pulled his gloves out of his pockets and slipped them on. San Francisco was brisk in January, but gloves were as much of a concession he was willing to make. “You’ll call if something comes up?”

Webster sighed. “You know I will. You think I want a repeat of what happened at the festival last year?”

Brady gave his partner a brusque nod and exited the frat house. Webster would call. When he hadn’t the previous summer for a stakeout that had gone south, Brady had gotten him unofficially reprimanded when he’d complained to their boss about being left out of the loop unnecessarily. Webster had been ultra-careful ever since not to keep him in the dark about anything.

He kept his head down, his hands stuffed in his pockets, as he half-jogged past all the reporters. The slaughter was going to be all over the morning news. Coffee and chaos, the breakfast of the big city. The fact that most of the kids who’d been murdered were sons of wealthy families meant there’d be sound bites all over the place, angry parents demanding justice, litigators debating whether or not SFPD would be able to find the culprits responsible. Brady had a lot of long nights ahead of him, not that that was any different than normal. He worked graveyard for a reason. Sleep had deserted him long ago.

One tenacious blonde broke away from the pack and chased him to his car, but Brady’s legs were longer, his resolve greater. He smirked when she came up short, tempted

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to flip her off as he shifted into reverse. Only the reminder that he was still on the job, that it would end up all over the morning news and make the force look bad, kept him from doing it.

The streets of San Francisco were deserted, the hour too early for commuters to clog its narrow arteries. Beyond the circus of the crime scene, people were shuttered inside their homes, unaware of the dangers that lurked outside their walls. Or maybe they actually knew, and chose to lock themselves away because of it. Either way, nobody stole Brady's attention as he maneuvered toward the highway. He slipped onto 80 and headed south, with only the cacophony of imagined screams for company.

His apartment in San Bruno was tucked off the main roads, a tiny complex whose best attribute was its privacy. Brady didn't need a view, or fancy workout rooms, or community centers. As long as it was safe and clean, he could do the rest. He moved every other year, always a new town in the Bay Area, always with excellent references. If he didn't hate the hassle of getting mail redirected and setting up utilities so much, he would make the change annually. They joked at the station that he had to move so often to escape the hordes of women he left behind. It was a misconception Brady had no problem fostering.

He didn't date. And even if he did, it wouldn't be with women.

The scent of eucalyptus hung lightly in the air as he locked the car and walked the short distance to his front door.

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Shadows danced across the pavement, a slight breeze blowing leaves in front of the security lights. Brady didn't even blink. That bothered him. By all rights, he should be tenser than he was, jumping at any sound. He wasn't. He reached his apartment with his keys dangling half useless in his hand, and only glanced over his shoulder once before letting himself inside.

In spite of Webster's orders, he knew he wouldn't sleep right away. Too many ghosts clamored for his attention, and the only way to slam the door on them was to push himself to the brink of exhaustion. If he didn't, they'd populate his dreams with their bloody claws and hungry mouths, and he'd be worse off by the time he returned to work.

Brady stripped as he walked through the apartment, leaving a trail of clothes behind him that would be forgotten until he needed them again. Nobody would follow these breadcrumbs. If someone did, he'd just get rid of them like he got rid of everybody else.

A treadmill occupied the corner of his bedroom, the one piece of large equipment he owned. He bought a new one every time he moved; they were fucking heavy and easy to push on Craig's List. It was the best way for him to keep in shape, though. He ran ten miles a day on it, sometimes more, never less. Three days a week, he hit a gym around the corner of the station to do weight training for muscle tone. He would never go soft like Webster. That was a vow he'd made long before he'd joined the force.

Changing quickly into shorts and a T-shirt, Brady picked

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up the remote control to unpause the movie he'd been watching the day before. Vin Diesel's gravelly voice filled the room as he hit the settings on the treadmill, and within a minute, his feet pounded against the belt.

Run. Run. Run. Don't think.

“Richard B. Riddick. Escaped convict. Murderer.”

Murderer. Or more than one. Tore their hearts out. Monsters in the street. Shouldn't have invited them in.

“Battlefield doctors decide who lives and dies. It's called triage.”

“They kept calling it murder when I did it.”

Maybe it's not the same. Maybe it's just some sick fuck with a blood fetish.

But not even Vin Diesel blowing the shit out of aliens was enough to convince Brady that was anywhere near the truth. Webster would lie to himself about what had really happened, and he'd convince everybody who'd listen that his lies were real—mostly because he wouldn't know any better—but Brady would be the one to know. Brady would be the one who'd have to keep his mouth shut when they locked up the wrong bad guys and the real murderers walked free.

Because evil came in many shapes and sizes, and you couldn't always catch it to put it behind bars.

Screams came from the television speakers.

He really should have picked a different movie to watch.

Sweat dripped down the back of his neck and into his eyes. His hair was soaked. So were his clothes. A smart man would stop before he fell over, but if Brady was smart, his life would

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have turned out a lot differently. He ran because it was all he could do, the only way he knew to guarantee being so tired that he might actually sleep for a few hours. It didn't matter that he never really went anywhere. Better to keep moving in place than be dead, after all.

He didn't stop until the credits finished rolling, and even then, he ran until the screen was black. Slowing to a walk and then to a halt, he stepped off the treadmill and grabbed the towel, wiping away the worst of the sweat from his face.

The clock said six-forty. Shit. It wasn't even dawn yet.

Dropping the towel in the hamper, Brady headed out to the kitchen to get a fresh bottle of water from the fridge. The sun wouldn't rise for another half hour, at least. He had time to kill before hopping in the shower, but the idea of getting back on the treadmill made his back ache. Lack of sleep was beginning to wear on his routine. He needed to sleep the entire day to get back in form.

He hated that Webster could be right about that.

He was tossing the empty bottle into the recycling bin when the knock came at his door. Brady's eyes shot to the clock on the microwave, then to the window.

Still dark outside.

Another knock. This one fainter. Brady stood stock-still and listened.

Something scraped on his front step.

Every nerve was on alert as Brady got his gun. Nobody would come calling on him right now. Anybody from work would have phoned. Someone from the complex would have

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waited until working hours. He didn't have friends. That left someone unfriendly. Or an idiot who thought it was a good idea to annoy a sleep deprived cop who just wanted to be alone.

Brady crept toward the front door. His steps were silent. Or nearly so. The floorboards outside the kitchen entrance always creaked. His gun was solid against his palm. Welcome. As much a part of him as the slow, steady thud of his heart.

A third knock echoed just as he leaned in to look out the peephole. Someone else might have flinched.

Orange light filled the fishbowl on the other side of the door, a weird circle of illumination from the security lamps he'd re-angled to shine on his front step the night he'd moved in. Nobody filled it. At least, nobody standing.

"Brady..."

The hair stood up on his arms. He must be more tired than he thought. Now he was hearing things.

He stepped back, staring at the closed door. There was only one way to confirm he just needed to hit the sack, but the energy it took to reach forward and turn the doorknob escaped him.

A soft rustling from outside tightened his hold on the gun. The weapon would be useless if he wasn't hallucinating, though it might make him feel a hell of a lot better.

"Brady..." The repeat of his name was a little bit louder, the knock that came with it more of a tapping than a full rap. "I know you're there. I can hear you breathing."

He clenched his jaw. His imagination wasn't nearly so

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idiotic that it would deliberately piss him off by pointing out such a detail. But the truth it left behind colored a bad situation worse.

“Go away,” he said, his voice low, his body iron-hard.

“Can’t. I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Find a grave to call back into.”

“Sometimes I really wish I could.” Wet coughing choked further words. Brady knew that sound. Lungs filled with blood always sounded the same.

“I don’t want you here,” Brady tried. He wasn’t sure why he wasn’t backing away from the door. Nothing good was going to come from this.

“I know. I know.” A sigh. “If I thought I had any other choice, believe me, Brady, I would’ve taken it.” A shadow flickered at the corner of the window next to the door. “Can you at least open up so we don’t have to have this conversation where your neighbors can hear it? I know how much you value your privacy.”

Oh, he knew, all right. He knew far more than made Brady comfortable.

But Brady reached forward anyway, and he turned the knob with his free hand, and he swung the door open to reveal his guest leaning one shoulder against the wall.

Just as Cole Singer had known he would.

His black hair was longer than Brady remembered, straight and skimming his shoulders like a silken curtain that wanted to hide the etched sculpture of his face. Eyes like coal regarded him through thick lashes, but those looked different,

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too, older, more jaded. World weary, Brady would have thought if this was one of his suspects. An effect of the ten year time span since they'd last seen each other. The rich coppery tone of Cole's skin was paler, though, like somebody had added too much cream, but there was an explanation for that, as well.

But Brady didn't stare because of the physical differences. Blood saturated the front of Cole's shirt. His jeans hung from his slim hips, but somebody had torn the hell out of them, revealing deep gouges through the ripped denim. Somebody had torn the hell out of *Cole*, for that matter, and Brady took a half-step forward before he checked the instinct.

Brady wasn't the only one doing an inspection. He shivered as Cole's gaze swept over him, lingering on parts of his body that shouldn't have woken up under the scrutiny. *Fuck you*, he wanted to say. *You don't get to do that, not anymore*. He didn't. He wanted to slam the door on his face, too, but he didn't do that, either.

A sudden cough startled both of them, and Brady watched in sick fascination as blood spittled on Cole's wide mouth. "Someone did a number on you."

The wracking subsided. Cole wiped the back of his hand across his lips, scarlet smearing the fine tendons. Brady froze at the first glimpse of a white fang.

"That's why I'm here. I need a place to stay while I heal up."

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“Why?”

Brady blinked. “Because I haven’t seen you in ten years. And you’re a mess. And, oh yeah, let’s not forget that you’re a fucking *vampire*. Do I really look that stupid to you?”

“No.” Cole’s voice was soft, his appraising gaze even more so. “You look great.”

He froze. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“You know what.”

“It’s the truth. Well, except for the fact that you look exhausted. But other than that—”

“Go away, Cole.” Control finally started to seep back, and Brady tightened his hand on the door to slam it shut. “Don’t come back.”

“Wait. Please.”

And like a good puppy, Brady stopped. And hated that he reacted so automatically to a man who’d been dead to him for a decade.

“One night,” Cole said. “That’s all I ask for. The guys that did this...they’re not that far behind me. They catch up, and they’ll finish the job.”

“You ever think that maybe the fact people are hunting you down is a good sign you’re a monster that should’ve been destroyed years ago?”

Cole shook his head. “They’re not people. They’re other

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vamps.”

Brady’s eyes immediately went over Cole’s shoulder, but the shadows looked exactly the same.

“The sun’s going to be up soon,” Cole continued. “There’s no place else I can get to in time.”

“That’s not my fault.”

“You don’t really want to watch me die twice, do you?”

Bile rose in the back of Brady’s throat. It was a low blow, and there was no way Cole didn’t realize that.

“I invite you in, and you’re just going to tear my throat out,” Brady said. “So no thanks. I’m not in the mood to be your all-night buffet.”

“I won’t.” Hair slipped over Cole’s cheek. “I promise.”

“You’re a vampire. Your word means shit.”

“It never used to.”

“That was before.”

Cole blinked. Once. Twice. Three times. Nothing else moved, not the rise of his chest, not a flutter of his shirt.

“I’m sorry. I thought...” He shook his head. “Never mind. Forget I said anything. Forget I was even here.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

He thumbed the hammer on the gun, ready though he knew it would be pointless in the long run. Cole pushed off from where he leaned against the wall, but as he turned, his shirt collar fell open and revealed a vicious, circular gouge in the left-center of his chest.

Like someone had tried cutting out his heart.

“Wait.”

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Brady's hand shot out, past the sanctuary of the threshold, and grabbed Cole's shoulder. Blood seeped through his fingers, and he had to set down the gun in order to hold Cole still and undo two more buttons in order to expose the injury.

Cole let him.

Brady stared at the bleeding wound, the ragged edges where the pale skin had been sliced open. He flashed back on the scene, wondering if he'd been blind and Cole had actually been one of the bodies they'd found. Cole didn't have a pulse. He could have fooled the cops who checked. In spite of the possibility, though, Brady knew he hadn't been there. It wasn't just that he could draw the scene from memory.

He'd lived with Cole's specter haunting his dreams for a decade. He would never miss it if it was right in front of him.

Brady looked up to see Cole regarding him. "One night. And you're going to tell me everything. How you got this, who did it to you, where I can find them."

Something akin to hope fluttered in Cole's dark eyes. "Thanks—"

"Don't thank me." He let him go, abruptly stepping back into the apartment. "Just don't kill me."

Cole nodded, but after several seconds, he still hadn't moved. "You have to invite me in," he said, almost apologetically.

His skin turned to ice, so cold it burned. The words he uttered were the last he ever thought he'd say.

"Come on in, Cole."

CHAPTER 2

Brady had never really thought of his apartment as small before. He didn't spend a whole lot of time there, and when he did, it was usually confined to the bedroom for sleeping and working out, and the occasional quick meal in the kitchen. That was all he needed. That, and the safety of having a threshold safe from monsters.

But with Cole standing in his living room, the walls shrank. At six-one, Brady was a tall man, but Cole topped him by an inch, and his rangy build had always exaggerated the effect of his height. It felt like Cole's head skimmed the ceiling, that everywhere Brady turned, Cole was there. Almost as if he'd never left in the first place.

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“First things first.” Brady grasped Cole’s arm, helping to shoulder some of his weight. “You’re showering. I’m not losing my security deposit because you bled all over my carpet.”

Cole didn’t protest as he led him toward to the bathroom. “Someone would have to find the carpet first,” he joked lightly. “I see you still leave your clothes wherever you take them off.”

Brady clenched his jaw. No one else in this world knew his housekeeping habits better than Cole.

As soon as they’d left the beige carpeting behind for the white, much easier to clean, tile, Brady released his arm and went to the tub. The toilet seat clattered as Cole dropped it, but he didn’t look back to see whether or not Cole was actually sitting down. He didn’t care. This wasn’t about feeling sorry for Cole, or missing him, or anything personal like that. This was about information he might have that would help Brady close his newest case. That was all.

With the water steaming so hot he could barely put his fingers under it, Brady almost believed it.

“If you want to take a shower first, I don’t mind waiting,” Cole said. “The bleeding is slowing down, and you’re going to want to go to bed soon, right?”

Brady snorted. “You think I’m going to be able to sleep with a vampire in my place?”

“I already promised you I wouldn’t hurt you.”

“And I’ve already made it clear, I don’t trust you.” He straightened and pulled the curtain on the tub. “I’ll find some

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clean clothes for you. Leave your old ones.”

When he turned to leave, Cole was still sitting on the toilet. Under the harsh lighting, his skin took on an even sicklier pallor, and shadows mottled the hollows below his dark eyes. His gaze slid sideways to the tub and stayed there.

“Would it be too much to ask to take a bath instead?” The hand holding his shirt together trembled. “I’m not sure I’ve got enough strength in me to stand for a whole shower.”

It was on the tip of Brady’s tongue to argue that he’d be sitting in his own blood and filth if he did that, but he curbed the dispute. What did he care? If that’s what Cole wanted, that’s what Cole would get.

He flipped the switch back on the shower, pulling the stopper on the plug at the same time. “Soap and shampoo are on the shelf,” he said when he was done. “Help yourself.”

Brady didn’t wait for any more delays. He strode out into the hall without looking back.

Finding clothes that would fit Cole proved harder than he thought. Brady was bulkier than Cole; most of his pants or jeans were out of the question. His running shorts all had elastic waistbands, which threw those out. Finally, he found a pair of old sweats with a drawstring. They were the only thing he could guarantee would stay up on Cole’s lean hips. Because no way in hell was he risking them falling down to expose more than Brady needed to see.

The entire time he searched, he did everything he could to block out the memories that refused to be ignored. He didn’t need reminders of what Cole’s laughter had sounded like, or

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how his skin would glow in the summertime. All it took was a little bit of sun for Cole's Native American ancestry to take over. Brady used to make him tan for hours, just so that he'd have the pleasure of licking the heated flesh when the sun finally set. Girls might have always hit on the pair of them in hopes of more, but from the day they had met in their freshmen year at Stanford, Brady and Cole had only had eyes for each other.

Those same eyes burned now. He rubbed at them, hoping to alleviate the discomfort.

Brady grabbed a trash bag before going back to the bathroom. The door was open, the curtain pulled, but he kept his eyes averted as he dropped the clean clothes on the counter next to the sink and scooped up the wrecked ones Cole had folded neatly on the toilet. Any evidence he gathered from it would be inadmissible, but there was always the possibility that it could help focus their investigation.

The water lapped against the tub behind him. He kept expecting Cole to call out, or talk to him, or make more platitudes about how he wasn't going to hurt Brady, but he remained silent. For some reason, that didn't make it any easier to walk out to stow the trash bag in a safe place until he left for work that night. He wanted to be reminded that Cole was a vampire now, a monster who killed for pleasure.

Brady killed more time by locking up, picking up his discarded clothes, doing miscellaneous housekeeping while he waited for Cole to emerge. Staying busy was his forte, but now, it made him itchy, like a coat that didn't exactly sit right

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on his broad shoulders. Even the sweat drying on his skin felt wrong. Every other minute, he glanced in the direction of the bathroom, expecting noise, expecting a door opening, expecting *something* other than the quiet that seemed to permeate his apartment now.

Sunlight peeked around the edges of his blinds by the time he got what he was waiting for. A floorboard creaked, and Brady deliberately concentrated on squaring the edges of a pile of year-old sports mags next to the couch. *I'm not afraid of you*, he wanted Cole to understand. An exercise in nonchalance. Except if he touched him, Brady was pretty sure he'd explode.

"Do you have a first aid kit?"

He replied without look back. "Under the sink in the bathroom."

"Oh. Thanks."

The board in the hall groaned again. Brady waited several seconds before glancing up, half convinced Cole's presence had etched an outline on the wall. The light from the bathroom filtered across the carpet, the sound of paper tearing a distant rustle. Only when he realized what exactly Cole was covering did Brady rise to his feet. Those injuries were most of the reason he'd let him in, in the first place. He wasn't going to lose whatever story they might have to tell by healing before he got a chance to inspect them.

Cole stood in front of the sink, unfolding a gauze pad so that it would stretch across the largest slice on his chest. Brady stiffened when he realized the reflection in the mirror was

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empty, but he kept his eyes averted to keep the worst of the anxiety at bay.

“Don’t cover those up yet,” he said, more than a hint of irritation in his voice.

Cole’s long, graceful hands immediately stopped. “I’m still bleeding. I didn’t want to get blood on your shirt.”

Brady snorted. “Don’t pretend you give a damn about my wardrobe. Now let me see.”

Obediently, Cole turned toward him, his arms falling to his sides. With the worst of the blood washed away, there was no mistaking the marks on his chest. Circular, right over the heart, with jagged edges where broken glass had torn the skin. It was exactly like the ones they’d found on the frat boys. Which put Cole on the scene.

Brady clenched his jaw. He’d known that was a possibility. Having the evidence at his fingertips made him a little sick to his stomach.

Blood oozed out of the lower curve, collecting in a fat bead before starting a languid path down Cole’s ripped abs. He caught the flash of Cole’s tongue over his lower lip, but otherwise, he remained still, waiting for Brady to do something.

“What were you doing there?” He asked the question, then realized there was a small part of him that was glad Cole sported the same wounds. “I’m going to want names, descriptions, anything you think is relevant.”

“Why? You know you’re never going to find them.”

“No, I don’t know that.” It was a lie. A big one. Pressing

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the gauze to Cole's skin, he wiped away the blood and tossed the pad into the bin. "How many of them were your kills?"

"None."

That made his head snap up, but there wasn't a hint of duplicity in Cole's dark eyes. Was that some kind of vampire trick? He'd always thought he'd be able to tell the difference in Cole. He'd seen him only the one time after Cole's death, and he'd definitely been different then. Hungry, fangs bared, glaring at Brady as he held him at bay with the biggest cross he could find.

This wasn't the same. Except for the tip of a silvery fang visible in his mouth and the pale cast of his skin, this could have been the same Cole who had used Brady as a human canvas for his sophomore art project. The same Cole who held him in the middle of the night and whispered how they would always be together with only the dark as their witness. The same Cole who stood next to him at his father's funeral, who kept the reporters at bay when they refused to respect the family's wishes by barging into the wake.

Consciously, he looked into the mirror. Though there were still vestiges of condensation at the corners of the glass, most of it was clear. Brady saw himself, haggard and hard, and he saw the rack behind Cole, the wet towel folded neatly over the bar. When he turned back to Cole, his head was straight again.

"There were a lot of dead bodies there." He reached for another bandage, ripping open the packet. "You really expect me to believe that you're not responsible for any of them?"

Cole took the gauze and held it in place over the lower half

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of the injury. “Why would I be carved up like this if I was?”

“That’s what I need to figure out.”

“It’s not a mystery. I tried to stop them, they tried to stop me stopping them. I got out before they could finish the job.”

Brady tore off a piece of tape and affixed it along the edge of the bandage. “Why try to stop them? Don’t you bloodsuckers have some sort of code about turning on your own or something?”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Because it’s an exclusive club, so all us vamps have to stick together, is that it? Please. You can’t be that naïve, Brady.”

“I’m just following the blood trail.”

“And it doesn’t lead to me. Why would I come to you if I had something to hide?”

The tape split from how hard he ripped it off the roll. “You tell me. Why the hell would you come to me at all? How do you even know how to find me?”

The last question was the one that truly made Brady’s blood run cold. He moved around so often for that specific reason, even if he never really admitted it out loud to anybody. His number was unlisted, he had strict orders at work that nothing personal would ever be given out, and he refused to give statements to the press, even when the higher-ups started breathing down his neck. But Cole had still managed to find him. As far as he knew, Cole had kept track of him ever since that night Brady had refused him entrance into the apartment they shared.

“As much as you think you know about vampires, you

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don't know shit," Cole said evenly.

He took the tape out of Brady's hands, and though he didn't fight him, Brady felt the strength in his long fingers. Those hands had killed more men than he'd put behind bars in the past decade. They'd enticed. Coaxed. Brady didn't care how much or how little Cole thought he knew. There was one fact that was indisputable, and in the end, it was the only one that mattered. Cole murdered people.

End of story.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he retreated to the doorway, leaning against the jamb as Cole finished his bandaging. "I still want those names. You might think I'm impotent in the face of your big and bad vampire gang, but I've got resources you can only dream about. People are going to demand justice for what you did. It's my job to make sure they get it."

"I didn't—" Cole cut himself off with a shake of his head. "Forget it. Give me a pad and I'll write it all down. Not that it's going to do you any good, but hey, if that's what helps you sleep at night, who am I to tell you're fucked beyond all reason?" He glanced up at him through his lashes, and what could only be called a gleam appeared in his dark eyes. "Oh, wait. You don't sleep at night. I forgot for a second there."

Any warming that might have happened disappeared with Cole's reminder that he knew a hell of a lot more about Brady than he'd ever imagined. Inviting him in had been a mistake. As soon as he could get rid of Cole, Brady was going to find a place to crash while he figured out how to get out of his

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current lease. Maybe it was time to get out of the Bay Area altogether. It wasn't like he had anything but his own messed up sense of responsibility that tied him there.

"Once you've written everything down, I'm tying you to a chair for the day," he said.

"What? You're not going to stake me?"

Cole's mocking tone drove Brady out of the room. "We're not both killers here."

Some of the cold humor fled from Cole's face. "Sure, Brady. You just keep telling yourself that."

CHAPTER 3

Silence was a lion, caged for most of its life now given freedom to walk at its master's side. It knew its place. It protected when it had to. It recognized the hand that fed it. But it was also a wild beast, ready to strike back at any moment, turning on the master who thought he'd had it beat.

Brady had never loathed quiet as much as he did once Cole fell asleep.

Staring up at the ceiling of his bedroom, he tried to will his brain to shut off long enough so that he could get a few hours rest before returning to work that night. But every time he closed his eyes, he saw Cole stretched out on the couch in the living room. He saw the handcuffs around those slim wrists,

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the clothesline cutting across his stomach and ankles that bound him in place. He saw dark lashes appear even darker against pale cheeks, but what he didn't see was the rise and fall of his chest. Because Cole didn't need to breathe. Monsters like him never did.

Not for the first time, Brady rose from bed and slipped out of the room. He inched silently down the hall, pausing at the end to see exactly what he came out to see—Cole still asleep on the couch. He hadn't moved. The fact that Brady had heard absolutely nothing meant exactly that, not any nightmare where Cole managed to get out of his bindings without making a single sound and sneaking down to drink him dry.

He wiped a weary hand over his eyes. He was too exhausted to even think straight. He couldn't relax enough with Cole in the apartment because he kept expecting the worst, which meant he was going to be irritable and next to useless when he got on shift that night. Webster was never going to let him hear the end of it.

"It would just be easier if you crashed in here. It'd save you trips coming in to check to see if I've wiggled my way free yet."

Brady dropped his hand to see Cole watching him, his dark eyes as heavy-lidded as Brady's felt. "So I'm closer for you to get to? I don't think so."

"We're both tired. And I can't sleep listening to you. You'll be doing both of us a favor."

"I'd be doing both of us a favor if I threw you out right now."

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“If you really wanted to do that, you never would have let me in. Stop being an idiot, and go get your pillow.”

The hardest part about looking at Cole was not seeing the vampire he'd become. Too many parts of him reminded Brady of the years they'd spent together, pieces of a life he'd thought lost forever. He hastened to remind himself it *was* lost; no look-alike lying on his couch could change that.

When Brady didn't move, Cole sighed. “If you're not going to sleep, do you want to talk? It's been a long time.”

Brady folded his arms over his chest. It hid the slight tremor in his hands. “About what? Who's seen the most dead bodies over the past ten years?”

“I know you have questions. You think you know the answers, but you don't. So ask. I'm not going to lie to you.”

“Oh, that's a good one. The vampire promises to tell the truth.” Brady shook his head. “Why do you continue treating me like I'm stupid? You, of all people, should know better.”

“You're right. I do know better.”

They both fell silent. Again. Brady knew he should retreat to his bedroom, spend the sleepless hours safe behind a closed door with his gun at his side, but his feet refused to move. Moving meant not seeing Cole. The fact that he'd seen him in his nightmares, every time he changed his address, every time he'd been assigned to a new murder, didn't seem to matter.

“I hate how tired you look,” Cole said softly. “If you won't sleep, and you don't want to interrogate me, maybe you should go get a room at a hotel so you can get some sleep. There was some money in my jeans. Take it.”

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Brady shook his head. “I don’t want your blood money. You probably stole it anyway.”

“So don’t take it then. The point is, get out of here. Obviously, it’s too disruptive being around me.” He closed his eyes and turned his head away. His hair fell away from his jaw, exposing the graceful line of his neck. Brady couldn’t help but glance at it and look for scars. “I’ll be gone at sunset. You won’t ever see me again.”

It was the perfect solution. Brady could get some sleep, and he wouldn’t have to face those eyes, that pale, perfect body, the knowledge that Cole had been a part of the massacre. He didn’t even care about leaving Cole in the apartment alone; it wasn’t like he had anything worth stealing anyway.

“What answers do you think I have so wrong?” The question came out on its own. It surprised both of them as it hung in the air between them, but Brady refused to back away from Cole’s redirected gaze. “Clearly, there’s something you want to say. So say it.”

The cuffs rattled as Cole moved his hands, folding them over his stomach. “You’re operating under the illusion that I’m some serial killer, out for his jollies. I’m not.”

Brady snorted. “You have to kill to survive. Try again.”

“No, I need blood to survive. I don’t have to kill to get it.”

“Right. Tell that to the house full of frat boys who got drained dry tonight.”

“That was different. That wasn’t me.”

“But you don’t deny that vampires are responsible.”

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Cole shook his head. “But I wasn’t. I went there to stop them. That should count for something, don’t you think?”

He said it straight, with the same sincerity Brady remembered. Cole had always been the good boy, the one the professors believed, the one who charmed mothers citywide into wanting as a son-in-law. Most of it was genuine. He had an artist’s soul.

Brady gritted his teeth. He’d *had* an artist’s soul. Brady had to force himself to remember that it was gone now.

“Why else would I be this cut up?” Cole continued. “Why would I come to the one person in this world who wants most to see me dead?”

The retort, “You’re already dead,” died on his lips. Instead, he stepped into the room, coming around the recliner to sink into its cushions.

“You are not going to try and tell me that you haven’t killed people,” Brady accused.

“No,” Cole said, his voice still soft. “Because that would be a lie. What isn’t a lie is that I haven’t killed a human who didn’t ask me to for almost seven years.” His mouth twisted into a grimace, one that transformed his handsome features and exposed his fangs more fully. “You’d be surprised how many people crave death.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

The confession riveted Cole’s attention to him, intense and unblinking. “You were right not to invite me in ten years ago. I would have killed you. I would have hated myself afterward for hurting you like that, but I couldn’t control the hunger

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back then like I can now.”

“You would have hated yourself?” Brady stared at him in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? If you had any feelings at all about it, about me, you wouldn’t have come back to our place at all.”

“I couldn’t keep my mouth off you when I had a pulse. You really think I could do it when I could smell every inch of you? When I could taste your fear? Jesus, Brady, did you ever consider for a second what it was like for me?”

He hadn’t. He’d been wrapped up enough with what it was like for him, losing the man he thought he’d spend the rest of his life with, watching that man kill another human so viciously that he’d had nightmares about it for months.

Cole read it in his face, like he had always done. Closing his eyes, he shook his head as he seemed to sink into the couch. “You don’t want to hear any of this. I’ll stop. I know it’s a waste of time.”

Anger bubbled up inside him. It was the dismissal he’d been waiting for, but the fact that Cole thought he could still call the shots spurred Brady closer.

Crouching next to the couch, Brady yanked on the ropes, cinching them tighter in order to get Cole’s attention. “You know what was a waste of time?” he hissed. “Spending a week looking for you. Pissing off every cop in a fifty-mile radius with calls. Bugging them for information. Trying to get them to do their job when you were already dead, just looking for a way to get back at me.”

“Back *to* you,” Cole snapped. Fire danced in his eyes, the

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most passion Brady had seen in them since he'd opened the door. "You think I *wanted* to die? That I wanted this? Jesus, Brady, why the hell would I? I got jumped leaving the gallery. One minute, I feel somebody grabbing me. The next, I'm waking up in the basement of a deserted warehouse, hungrier than I've ever been in my life. The first thing I did—the *first*—was go home. To you. So why does that make me the bad guy here?"

"The fact that you're a vampire makes you the bad guy, remember?"

The muscles twitched in Cole's cheek. "How many times do I have to tell you that I didn't ask for this? Yes, that's what I am now. I've learned to live with it. But the last thing I ever wanted was to be separated from you. If I could go back and undo this, you can bet your sweet ass I would."

He sat back on his heels. Touching the bindings had scalded his fingers, and he flashed on how he had wrapped Cole's injuries in the bathroom. How the skin had stretched over the tight muscles, how it had twitched with each glance of his hands. He used to sleep with Cole in his arms, spooned behind him as his fingers spread across Cole's stomach. He had woken him up more than once with a handjob, stroking his lover to a quiet orgasm that meant they always had the cleanest sheets in the apartment complex.

"And if I could go back and undo it, you can bet I would, too," Brady said softly. "I've been looking over my shoulder for ten years." He snorted. "And then I fucking invited you in. I'm certifiable."

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“No,” Cole countered. “You’re just a good man. And I took advantage of that for sanctuary.” He looked down at his bound wrists, drawing Brady’s gaze to them as well. “I won’t stay. I won’t put you at risk, too.”

Brady swallowed the automatic protest. It was for the best. “Your hands look the same.” With a sigh, he rose and retreated back to the chair, putting the necessary distance between them again in order to clear his thoughts. “I can’t get over how much you still look the same.”

“One of the few advantages to this undead business,” he replied with a wry twist of his mouth.

“There are advantages?”

“I should be half-healed by the time the sun sets, too. I actually like that one.”

“What about feeding?” His throat was dry, but he had to ask. “You lost a lot of blood.”

Cole had started to relax again in the absence of Brady’s attack, but now the tension returned. “I ate yesterday. Before the...before everything went wrong at the frat house. I’ll be fine until tonight.”

“Because you can control the hunger.”

“Do you really think I’m killing people twenty-four hours a day?”

“No.” He couldn’t resist. “Only those hours that are dark.”

Cole’s dark gaze jumped to his, searching so intently that it stole Brady’s breath. After several seconds, his mouth twitched, then spread into a smile, a chuckle rumbling through his chest. The sound was an echo from the past, so warm and

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inviting that Brady started laughing in kind until he remembered not only who was who, but who was what now. It didn't stop Cole, though. He continued to chuckle long after Brady settled back again.

"You know one of the things I hate now?" Cole gestured between the two of them. "Not having this. Normal conversation. Laughing. Joking around about something that isn't life and death. Something you do have right is that a lot of vampires are obsessed with their own power, drunk on their own lusts." He sighed and shook his head. "It gets old. Fast."

Brady rolled his eyes. "You're never going to convince me you've been alone all this time."

"No, not all of it." His gaze grew thoughtful. "Why can't you see me alone?"

"Are you kidding? People were always drawn to you. Hide your fangs, and I don't see why that should change. Even I fell for letting you back in."

"You just wanted what I knew."

He could answer Cole any number of ways. The truth. *I want them to pay for what they did to those boys.* The confession. *I needed to know for sure that you were real, even if I'm half convinced you're going to rip my throat out while I sleep.* The sentiment. *I dream about you every night, both like this and like we were.*

He held his tongue. Anything he said would damn him.

Cole finally shifted, staring up at the ceiling. "There's a club in town. Caters to vampires. Caters to anybody with a fetish, really, but it's turned into a blood bar lately. You go in,

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you find somebody you like, you get a corner all to yourself, and for a few hours, it's not so bad. You get to feed, and they get...whatever satisfaction they get from being bitten. But you rarely see the same person twice. And it's never for long. At dawn, you leave by yourself, and it just starts up again the next night." He snorted, a soft whisper of a sound made more intimate than it had any right to be. "Sometimes, you get so desperate for company that isn't interested in your fangs you do some really stupid shit."

Curiosity rather than common sense drove him to ask, "Like what?"

Cole paused. "You don't want to know."

"Maybe not, but what else are we going to talk about? And it's not like either one of us is sleeping." Though his body was starting to feel heavy, with a languor that was more long-lost relative than cozy next door neighbor these days. "Why haven't I ever heard of this bar?"

"Because you're not a bite bitch. Because nobody actually dies there, because the owners don't want the publicity. They stay in business by staying under the radar. Even yours."

"You wouldn't tell me where they were anyway, would you?"

His sooty gaze leveled in Brady's direction again. "All consenting adults there," he said in lieu of a direct response. "Even if you don't understand that particular kink."

No, he didn't understand. He didn't understand how he could be sitting here, having this conversation, with an ex-lover he should have staked on sight. He didn't understand

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how he could look at Cole and feel the stirrings of desire not forgotten, remember all the good times as well as the bad. And he especially didn't understand why he felt like he could fall asleep sitting opposite the very vampire who had been plaguing all of his thoughts in the safety of his bedroom.

"This stupid shit you do. It's got to do with me, doesn't it?"

A flicker of something he would have called shame on a human passed behind Cole's eyes. "Yes," he admitted. "And other things."

"I don't want to know about the other things."

"I know."

"And I don't really want to know how you found me again. Or how you know my schedule. Or all the other shit that's freaked me out since I invited you in."

"I know."

Brady stretched his neck, the new burn along the muscles more soothing than painful. His lashes fell, rose, then fell again as he fought against his exhaustion.

"You don't have to go just because the sun goes down." The words surprised him, probably more than they surprised Cole, but hell, if he lasted this long around Cole when he was exhausted, he'd be more than fine when he was fully awake. He couldn't look at him, though. He didn't want to witness any satisfaction Cole might betray in getting to him. "I'm taking you down to the scene. You're going to tell me everything that's happened."

Silence made his ears ring. He was almost ready to speak

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up again, just to fill the void, when Cole said quietly,
“Whatever you say, Brady.”

Brady almost smiled.

That was the last thing he heard before slipping into sleep.

CHAPTER 4

Though the sun had set nearly fifteen minutes earlier, Cole didn't make a sound as he watched Brady sleep in the chair. He could have left. He could have slipped out of his bonds at any point, a detail he was sure Brady would have figured out when he made the mistake of suggesting being gone while Brady went to a hotel. But maybe Brady wasn't thinking as clearly as Cole knew he could, because he never made the connection. After Brady's breathing evened out into a warm flutter Cole felt all the way to his bones, he had drifted off into his own slumber, waking when the call of the night beckoned to his demon.

Though he'd watched Brady from afar for years, seeing

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him so close etched each one of the lines deeper into his forehead, heightened the shadows below his eyes. He didn't sleep. He worked too hard. He pushed his body—his gorgeous, perfectly sculptured body—to its limits. He did it all as a direct response to Cole's vamping, and that, more than any of the rest of it, made it even worse.

This brittle soldier in front of him wasn't the man he'd loved. The man he'd loved would have been the first to stand in line to tend to Cole's wounds. He would have offered his bed and insisted on taking the floor. He would have laughed and dispelled the monsters that could even terrorize Cole, and then he would have gone out to hunt them down himself.

This man took Brady's strength and turned it into a fortress. Cole wasn't sure what had happened to the man he'd left behind. By all appearances, Cole had killed him, just as assuredly as if he'd drained him dry.

On the surface, there were still similarities. He still liked to wear his blond hair short, and his wide brow made his hazel eyes look even more deepset than they were. He couldn't change his nose, either, its aquiline slope evidence of his physical nature and the fight he'd gotten into in high school when his football team found out he was gay. He had chiseled out his muscles in careful labor, each one testament to his diligence, but his broad shoulders still gave the appearance of being able to bear several times his weight, both literally and figuratively.

Cole missed his old love. When he was exhausted, or when the loneliness turned into a bitter drug burning through his

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veins, he dreamt of more halcyon days, when surrendering to Brady's hands had been the meaning of bliss. But he had to be honest. This new Brady intrigued him. Enough that he would withstand whatever torture Brady tossed his way in order to learn even more.

In the chair, Brady stirred. His head had fallen to the side as he slept, and now, he lifted it, the frown that had been omnipresent while he'd been awake returning even before he opened his eyes. Cole tried not to smile at the lines that marred the side of Brady's face, but he knew the instant their eyes met that he'd failed.

Brady's scowl deepened. "What the fuck's so funny?" He groaned as he sat up, his back audibly cracking. "I can't believe I fell asleep."

"I can. You were exhausted."

Only when Brady squinted did Cole realize how dim the living room really was. The blinds were pulled, the sun already gone. The only light came from what managed to sneak out of the bedroom and down the hall. It was more than enough for Cole to see, but Brady was human. His eyesight wasn't nearly as acute.

"What time is it?" he asked, rising to his feet.

"About five-thirty."

"How do you know that? Wait. Don't tell me. A vampire thing."

Within his confines, Cole shrugged. "I know when the sun sets. So sue me."

Though he was sure he wasn't supposed to see it, Brady

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shot him a glare. “I’m going to get dressed, and then I want to take a look at your chest. We’ll change the bandages and head out to the crime scene then.”

“You don’t need to change them. It’s healing, I can tell.”

At his sides, Brady balled his hands into fists. “Right. Another vampire thing. So just wait. I’ll be right back.”

Cole laid there in quiet contemplation while he listened to the sounds of Brady’s life filter from the bedroom. Two steps forward, one step back. Brady might not be kicking him out like they’d agreed upon before he fell asleep, but the softer acceptance he’d started to exhibit at the same time was gone again, replaced by the initial hostility that had greeted Cole at the front door. He couldn’t blame Brady. Not really. That didn’t mean he had to like it.

Brady came out dressed in jeans and a black button-down shirt that looked like he’d pulled it out of the back of his closet. It was tucked in, though, and stretched across his broad shoulders in order to iron out some of the creases. Too bad the same couldn’t be done for the lines between his eyes.

“I’m still taking a look at your chest,” he said as he untied the ropes around Cole’s ankles.

He moved swiftly enough to make the touches fleeting, barely noticeable at all. That was almost as disappointing as Brady not even being able to meet Cole’s eyes. When he was done, he straightened and stood out of the way, every line in his body tense and ready for a fight should Cole offer one.

Cole didn’t. Stretching as he stood, he kept his movements long and fluid, though his attempts to calm the too-swift thuds

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of Brady's pulse failed miserably.

"Shirt off," Brady barked.

Grabbing the hem, Cole pulled it over his head while Brady turned on a light. When they faced each other again, the single lamp cast a sallow glare over his bare skin. If he hadn't looked dead before, he sure as hell did now.

The tape pulled where Brady peeled it away, taking a stray dark hair or two with it. Every one of Brady's breaths fluttered against Cole's chest, tickling across his nipple like a memory of a caress. On the surface, Brady was doing a bang-up job not looking discomfited by the contact between them. Cole was more interested in what was going on below the surface. That was the response that would keep him alive long enough to heal properly and get out of town in one piece.

"See?" he said when Brady exposed the worst cut over his heart. The ends were sealed together, though it wouldn't take much to split them apart again, for a few hours at least. "Nothing to worry about."

Brady grunted. Systematically, he checked over each of the other wounds, never saying a word, never lifting his eyes away from his work. Cole wasn't entirely sure why he did it, but the last thing he wanted was for Brady to stop. The warm scent rising from Brady's skin erased years of interactions with other men, men who had begged for Cole to fuck and bite them, men who had gotten on their knees to suck him off in payment for feeling his fangs, men who had turned violent at the last minute only to force Cole to do the same.

Brady had no interest in his fangs. Brady had the least

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amount of interest as any man Cole had ever met. But that didn't mean there wasn't a reaction to Cole's physical nearness. Cole felt it as slight tremors in his fingertips when he pressed the tape back into his skin. He smelled it in the stirrings of anger and desire seeping from his pores. He saw it in his cock's half-aroused state, every time Brady looked at Cole or got close to him.

Cole didn't do anything about it. To do so would destroy what little trust he'd gained. Right now, that was more important than the taste of memories.

"Your shoes are still okay," Brady was saying as he moved away. The light came on in the kitchen, and the sound of the refrigerator opening and closing filtered out. "Get 'em on and we'll head out."

"How are you going to explain my presence?" he asked as he pulled his shirt back on.

"Nobody else should be around." Brady came back to the kitchen doorway with an orange in his hands. His fingers worked to peel it as his gaze fixed on Cole. "How did you get here last night? Do you have a car?"

"Yeah, but it's not here. I left it at a BART station and hopped a train to get here." He found his shoes lined up neatly at the door. Brady must have done that while he had been in the bath. "I didn't want anybody following me to realize I was heading for you."

"Are you going to tell me who's following you then?" He tossed the peeling onto the counter behind him. "I'm guessing it's whoever slaughtered those frat boys last night."

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“Yeah,” Cole conceded. The last thing he wanted was to drag Brady into the mess and put him in even more danger than he already was, but he’d made a deal. Just because he wanted to back out of it now that he was starting to heal a little bit didn’t mean he actually would. “But I’m telling you, they’re vampires. You can’t lock them up.”

Brady licked a stray droplet of orange juice from his thumb. The sight of his lips curling around the rough skin hardened Cole’s cock, enough so that he turned away in order to hide it from the other man.

“Justice doesn’t always mean prison,” he said obliquely before turning on his heel and going back into the kitchen.

Cole didn’t follow. He heard the sounds of Brady eating all too well, the fresh citrus tang in the air making his eyes water a little bit. Though it hurt to sit down, he perched on the arm of the couch in order to slip his shoes back on.

He grimaced when he felt the bloody insole.

“I don’t suppose you have any shoes I can borrow?” he called out. They’d be a little too wide, but if Brady had a pair that laced up, Cole would live with them cramping his toes.

Brady reappeared back in the doorway. His mouth glistened from the orange. “What’s wrong with yours?”

“My feet were bleeding, too. They haven’t dried out completely yet.”

Though he glanced down to Cole’s feet, Brady set his jaw and shook his head. “Live with it. If vampires were really that squeamish about blood, you wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.”

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When he retreated again, Cole stared at the empty space he'd just filled. He didn't go to Brady. He didn't argue. What would he say? Nothing Brady would actually hear.

There was nothing left to do but put on the other shoe and wait for the time to leave.

* * *

Brady insisted they take his car. "In case they know yours," he said. In spite of the logic, Cole knew it was another control issue. He held his tongue, even though the car reeked of everything Brady.

His sweat. His exhaustion. His fear. His determination.

And in the close quarters of the front seat, something new got added to the cocktail.

Arousal.

Once they got on the road, Brady didn't speak to him, didn't touch him, didn't even look at him. He put all his concentration on the road. Or so it seemed. Cole stole one glance to be sure, but the scent of desire bleeding from Brady's pores was more than enough evidence. He was hard as a rock. The thick line was obvious against his thigh, but not once did he adjust himself, not even discreetly. If he thought ignoring it would make it go away, though, he was mistaken.

Ignoring it didn't make Cole forget it was there, either.

The lights of San Francisco's skyline glittered outside his window. He had left the city after getting vamped, but he'd only been gone for a few months before returning. Why should he have to leave, he'd argued. He loved the city. All his

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best memories had been made in San Francisco. It didn't take long for him to figure out how to survive, and it took even less time to realize he could still keep tabs on Brady. Not too close, but close enough to know he was still alive, that he wasn't wallowing in all the losses that had come at him in such a short period of time.

He'd been wrong about a lot of that, of course. He didn't know how badly until last night.

When Brady parked the car at the curb outside the frat house, Cole was the first to leap out. Throwing back his head, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, inhaling the smells of the city in an attempt to banish Brady's. What he got was exhaust and gasoline, the breeze from the bay, other sundry scents that helped clear his head.

It wasn't until he opened his eyes that he saw Brady watching him with disgust.

"Enjoying the smell of your kill last night?" he snarled.

Cole stood frozen as he marched off toward the darkened house. He hadn't even noticed the lingering blood in the air.

Yellow police tape cordoned off the front of the house. Brady bypassed it by ducking beneath, but he paused before going inside. When he looked back over his shoulder, Cole knew what he was waiting for. It didn't make him feel any better.

"I want you to walk me through everything that happened last night," Brady said when Cole came up the stairs of the porch. "What time did you get here?"

"Just after midnight." He came to a stop next to Brady, but

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his gaze was pulled by the broken locks on the door. He frowned. “Did you guys have to bust open to get in last night?”

Brady followed his line of sight. “No, it was like that when we arrived. Why?”

Cole crouched down to peer at the mechanism more closely. The plate was a dull copper, the wood splintered where someone had forced the door open. Chemicals had been sprayed over the metal, probably to gather whatever physical evidence remained, and there was a little bit of putty left from where someone had made an impression.

“Vampires need an invitation to enter.” He looked up and knew his confusion shone in his eyes. “So who showed up after I left to force the doors open?”

Brady’s head snapped to stare at the locks. Cole could practically hear his brain working. “You said vampires did that to those boys,” he ground out.

“They did. I saw them myself.”

“But you fled the scene. They attacked you.”

“Because I tried to stop them.” Cole straightened, pulling to his full height. “I only ran when I knew wasn’t going to win.”

“So why would anybody break in afterward? If you’re not lying, those boys would’ve been dead already.”

“I’m not lying. And I don’t know.” His anger rising, he jabbed Brady in the chest. “You’re the cop here. You figure it out.”

Brady caught his wrist before he could pull his hand

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completely away. His strong fingers wrapped all the way around; Cole's finer bone structure had always been one of the things Brady had professed to love about him. "Don't touch me," he growled.

Cole's eyes narrowed. "Stop being such an asshole then."

"I'm doing my job here."

"No, you're using me as a scapegoat because you're pissed off about the frat boys." With a twist of his arm that made the healing cuts across his chest pull and sting, Cole broke free and grabbed Brady's wrist instead. He was too fast for Brady to stop, and when Cole felt him tense, he shoved him into the wall before Brady could do the same to him.

"I haven't lied to you once," Cole growled. "And I'm getting a little sick and tired of you accusing me of it."

"All I have is your word for it," Brady spat. His eyes sparkled, even in the darkness, and though he tried to push Cole away, his strength was no match for Cole's demon. Even though his broader and more heavily muscled body strained against him, nothing Brady did worked to get him free.

What it did was make both of them all too aware of how they fit together. It reminded Cole of nights when they'd be walking home from class and Brady would suddenly shove him between buildings to kiss and grope him until they both came. Brady's body was even more delicious than it had been then. Did he take his frustrations out on his lovers? Did he wield his strength like a weapon or hide behind it to deny his baser longings?

Cole ground their hips together. When Brady hissed, he

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smiled.

“Oh, come on.” His voice was low and seductive, and even though his wounds ached, he kept his grip firm. “Who do you think you’re trying to fool here? Nobody knows your cock like I do.”

“Did. Not anymore.”

“I know you were hard the whole ride here. That’s about as current as events can get.”

“You’re surprised? You look like him.”

“I *am* him.”

“And I’ll repeat.” Brady went completely still. “Not anymore.”

Cole looked into those hazel eyes and saw emotions that would have turned him on if they’d been in anybody else’s. But this was Brady, and as tempting as it was to push him, to take what he wanted, Cole couldn’t do it.

Abruptly, he let Brady go and stepped back to the edge of the porch. “Use your brain,” he said, changing the subject back to its original topic. “The vampires who did this got invited in. They wouldn’t have jimmed the lock. So who did?” He paused, thinking. “Who called it in? How did the cops get here so fast?”

“Neighbors complained about the noise. A patrol drove by, saw it was quiet, almost dismissed the complaint when he saw the front door open.” Brady slid sidewise to the doorway, watching him warily until the last moment. It was his turn to crouch and look over the broken lock for several seconds. “Maybe the vamps did this to make it look like a break-in,” he

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suggested.

Cole snorted. “Because they were so worried about not getting caught? They would never have left the bodies like that if they gave a damn.”

Brady’s silence offered the only concession Cole thought he was going to get that he might have a point. He eased farther away, giving Brady space to look at the broken lock, and leaned against the porch railing to stare out over the neighborhood. Curtains twitched in nearby homes. People were watching. Someone two houses down was fucking someone else, but there was enough edgy quiet to say they were in the minority.

It was as if the entire block waited to see if there would be a repeat performance.

Not tonight, people. The bloodsuckers have left the building.

Leaves rustled from the narrow strip separating the frat house from its neighbor.

Or maybe not.

When he glanced back, Brady had pulled his phone out and was arguing extensively with whoever was on the other end. He didn’t notice when Cole slipped over the railing, landing silently on the grass and creeping forward.

They shouldn’t be here. There was no reason for them to come back. All the frat boys were dead, and the police were going to be crawling over the house for days to come.

A twig cracked.

Cole froze.

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But he knew that scent. He'd lived with that scent. He wasn't wrong.

Brady's shout split the night.

CHAPTER 5

With a death grip on his phone, Brady listened to Webster try to explain why it wasn't worth their time yet to track down the 9-1-1 call about the noise. Of course he wouldn't see the logic in it. As far as he was concerned, the killers had been the ones to break the locks. He wouldn't see that the frat boys had already been long dead by that point. Whoever broke in after the murders had to be the one to call it in. A B&E where the burglar walked in on a little more than he bargained for? Brady liked that theory. He liked that theory a lot. It meant he had somebody he could arrest, even if it wasn't for the right crime.

Webster wasn't listening to a word he said, though. Brady

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rubbed his hand over his eyes, wondering what the hell he could do with Cole while he went into the station himself to follow up on the 9-1-1.

A twig snapped.

He looked up. Cole wasn't on the porch anymore.

"Damn it," he muttered. When Webster went on the defensive again, he snapped, "Not you. I'll call you back."

He had just closed his phone when the shadow fell across the porch at his side. Cast from someone behind him.

Brady whirled and shouted when a short, compact body barreled into him. The force sucked the air from his lungs for a moment, but he reacted in time to avoid crashing through the porch railing. They landed with a sharp thud to the slatted floor instead, and he scrabbled for a hold against his assailant's smooth clothing.

He encountered soft flesh. A breast. A very full breast.

The moment of surprise that it was a woman who had taken him down was all she needed to grab his wrist and twist it over his head. He got a brief glimpse of a white smile, heard her light chuckle. So she thought this was funny? He'd show her funny.

Except he couldn't break her hold. He brought his knee up to slam it into her midsection, but she slithered to the side at the last minute so he jabbed at air.

A growl somewhere behind him made the hair stand up on the back of his neck. The woman's head snapped up, and her smile widened.

Brady felt like someone had dropped a piano on his chest.

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She had fangs.

Panic made him fight harder. He had barely clutched her shirt when a black shape launched over him, tackling the female vampire around the shoulders to throw both of them to the other side of the porch. They landed with snarls that should have woken up the entire neighborhood, but Brady knew at a quick glance that nobody was coming out of their houses yet. He scrambled to his feet, pulling out his gun at the same time.

Cole was pounding at the girl.

He straddled her voluptuous body. His arms blurred from how swiftly he was raining blows down upon her torso and face, but through them all, the girl's maniacal laughter continued to dance over all three of them.

"You're such a coward," she spat. "You think any of this will really make a difference?"

Brady had no idea what she was talking about. He didn't care. He had his gun pointed at her head, ready to shout out for them to break it up, when a second shadow unfolded from the side of the house.

It grabbed Cole's shoulders and threw him off, straightening to a full, menacing height that put him on a par with Brady. Cole twisted in midair to land on his feet, directly between Brady's line of fire and the female vampire.

"You shouldn't have come back," Cole said.

"Who says we left?" the girl returned. She leapt to her feet with a grace that belied her size. "You're the idiot who thought poking your nose around where it's not wanted was

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such a great idea.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Brady demanded. He stepped to the side in order to clear his trajectory, but neither of the two newcomers seemed fazed by his weapon.

Cole didn’t bother looking back. He quivered in the moonlight, like a dog straining at a leash that had held him back for too long. “Get out of here.”

He could’ve been speaking to either the vampires or Brady. The female was the one to respond.

“You don’t give orders. You’re outnumbered. Weak. Just like you’ve always been.” Her too-full lips curled into a sneer so that her fangs glistened, wet and deadly. “Someone should have staked you a long time ago.”

“Considering how many opportunities you had to do that very thing, maybe the person you should be annoyed with is yourself.” Cole neatly stepped in front of Brady again. He was pretty sure Cole did it on purpose. “But I’ll fight you to the fang to keep you from hurting anybody else.”

“Oooo, pretty boy found a spine somewhere,” the girl cooed. “Did you steal one from the frat boys last night before you ran away? There were certainly enough body parts lying around for you to pick and choose from.”

The casual way she referred to the slaughter made Brady’s stomach churn. Gritting his teeth, he took a step forward, making sure to line her up in his sights. “I guess that means you were responsible,” he said, his voice remarkably even. “That makes me interested in you.”

Her gaze flickered over him in disdain. “Too bad I can’t

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say the same for you, though at least you're better looking than Cole's other boyfriends."

"I'm not his boyfriend."

The male vampire stooped and whispered something in the girl's ear, too low to be heard. A cunning gleam replaced the boredom in her eyes.

"A cop, huh?" She laughed. "And you honestly think you can do anything to stop me?"

"No," Cole interrupted. "I can."

He moved with preternatural speed. Brady blinked, and then Cole was tangled with both vampires, all arms and legs and fingers and fangs while each of them tried to gain the upper hand. It reminded him of watching a pack of stray dogs taking on a loner in the streets—raw and unformed. A fight to the death where only instincts prevailed.

The darkness made it impossible to see details. Brady skirted around the scuffle, wondering who was who, trying desperately to get his sight on one that deserved to be hurt. He knew he should just fire. What did it matter who he hit? All of them were vampires, all dangerous, all worthy of extinction. Murderers, each and every one of them, and he'd be doing the world a favor if he just emptied his clip in all three skulls right then.

Except he couldn't. One of those three was Cole. And yes, Cole was a vampire, and yes, he wanted to see the back of Cole more than he'd wanted anything in a very long time, but Cole had also just saved his skin. He'd thrown himself into the fray and now fought for his life. Brady wouldn't pay him back

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by taking him down.

He winced when he saw the male vampire grab Cole's shirtfront and dig his clawed fingers into his shirt. When he pulled his hand away, it shone with wetness. The fresh scent of blood began to drift on the cold night breeze.

Cole stumbled back. His shirt was torn. The ragged edges of the bandages peeked through, exposing the re-opened injuries from the night before. His handsome face twisted in pain, in spite of his bared fangs, but he launched himself forward again anyway.

The girl blocked his attack by lashing out with her heel. It slammed into the middle of his chest with a sickening thud. Brady barely ducked out of the way before Cole went flying past him, onto the front lawn.

He didn't wait. He took the opportunity he'd been given and shot at the pair on the porch.

Shouts came from the neighboring houses, and someone flipped the lights on. The illumination momentarily blinded Brady. Blinking, he retreated down the stairs, stumbling down the bottom two. By the time his vision cleared, he stared at an empty house.

He took two steps forward when Cole groaned off to his left.

"They'll kill you," Cole rasped. Brady turned in time to see him struggling to push himself off the ground. His hand slipped where it gripped the grass, and he would have fallen sideways if Brady hadn't jumped forward to catch him.

Blood immediately soaked through his shirt.

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“I need to get you home again,” he said through clenched teeth. Scooping his arm behind Cole’s back, he lifted him to his feet. “So much for all the healing you did.”

“No.” Cole tried to pull away, and he might have succeeded if he wasn’t so badly hurt. Blood spittled across the sidewalk when he coughed, and he dragged his hand over his mouth to wipe the rest of it away. “If they didn’t target you before, they sure as hell will now. It’s not safe.”

“They can’t get into my place without an invitation.” He kept his tone as unyielding as his grip. “We’re going home.”

He waited until he’d managed to get Cole into the front seat before pulling out his phone. Webster answered on the second ring.

“Get a crew out to the frat house,” he barked. “I just got jumped.”

Webster swore under his breath. “What happened?”

Brady rounded the front of his car, ignoring the flicker of curtains next door. “I hung up with you because I heard something and got grabbed from behind. A guy and a girl.”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.” He met Cole’s eyes for a brief moment before slamming his door shut. “Someone heard the fight and tried to intervene. When they went after him, I shot at them.”

More cursing, but Brady knew it was unavoidable. Cole’s blood was on the porch. He’d be considered suspect if Brady didn’t mention him now.

“I’m going to get this kid looked at and take him home,” he continued. “I’ll call you when I can.”

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“If he’s hurt, get him to the hospital.”

He blocked out the image of the open wounds on Cole’s chest. “It’s not that bad, and the kid doesn’t have insurance,” he lied. “I’ll take his statement and get his info in case we need to talk to him again later.”

“How do you know he’s not one of them?”

That was the million dollar question.

“Because he probably just saved my life,” Brady admitted. He felt Cole’s gaze on him, heavy and smothering, and jerked the key in the ignition. “I gotta go. I’ll call you later.”

They remained quiet as Brady shot down the road. He kept alert, checking all his mirrors repeatedly, watching for any sign that they were being followed. Only when he was completely sure they weren’t did he angle toward the highway.

He glanced across to the other seat. Cole was out cold. No wonder it had been so quiet.

Brady had a whole shopping list of questions he wanted to ask, questions about who the vampires were, how Cole knew them. They would have to wait. Rather than torture himself with the unknown, he focused on the road and getting home as quickly and safely as possible. None of it would make a difference if they didn’t make it.

He parked illegally in the handicapped spot nearest his house. Cole hadn’t moved or made a sound for the entire journey, and blood had soaked through into Brady’s car seat. Brady took his coat off and threw it over Cole’s shoulders, hefting him out with an arm around his waist. He kicked the

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door shut and took the shortest path possible to his front door.

Inside, he was at a momentary loss as to what to do with him. Cole was a mess; he needed to be cleaned up. Bathroom then, he decided grimly. Blood trailed slightly over the carpet, but that was something else Brady ignored. He couldn't do anything about it anyway.

Leaving Cole slumped in the tub, he hurried back and moved his car, his gaze jumping from shadow to shadow the entire time. His exhalation when he finally locked his apartment door behind him was as much relief as it was weariness. Nobody had followed him. They would be safe. He'd get Cole taken care of, then call in to Webster and see what steps were being taken, what Brady could do next.

He came to a dead halt in the bathroom doorway. An unconscious Cole couldn't bathe himself. He couldn't even undress himself. But Brady couldn't do anything about bandaging him up while he was such a mess.

Swallowing the sudden lump in his throat, he stripped out of his shoes and shirt before kneeling at the side of the tub. The bloodstained gauze he'd taped over the injuries was a wreck, unusable. So was the shirt he'd given to Cole. Keeping his gaze from the worst of the injuries, he scooped an arm behind Cole's back in order to pull the shirt over his head.

He froze. Scars mottled Cole's shoulder blades. Skinny, thick, long, short. Most were white with age, but there were a couple still pink from newness. There were even a few puncture marks. Fangs. Unmistakably.

He wished Cole was awake. He wanted to know what the

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hell had happened to him. If this had something to do with the pair at the frat house.

Somehow, he got the rest of Cole's clothes off, and still, Cole wasn't moving. Brady sat back on his heels and debated his options. A bath was out of the question. Cole might not drown, but...he couldn't do it. A shower? There was still the question of how he'd get clean. Brady could do it, but he'd get wet.

For the first time since putting him in the tub, he looked at Cole's face.

The smooth skin. Bruises blued one side of his jaw.

The dark lashes. Cole could have been sleeping.

That mouth. Blood had dried at the corner where his lower lip split. Brady reached forward and rubbed it gently away.

He's a vampire.

He's hurt.

He deserved it.

He saved my life.

Brady scrubbed at his face, wishing at least one of the little voices in his head would shut the other one up. The scent of Cole's blood clinging to his fingers settled his decision.

He undressed in record time. Angling the showerhead so that it hit farther down Cole's body, he started the water, deliberately opting for as hot a temperature as he could stand. It was harder to slide into the tub with Cole already in it; it wasn't exactly built for two. But Cole had always been narrower than him, and by spreading his legs farther apart, Brady slipped Cole carefully in between them, leaning him

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back against his chest.

He immediately closed his eyes and shuddered. Memories like sharp glass rained down on him, too many to avoid getting cut. Falling asleep on the couch with Cole stretched out on top of him, watching TV. Clinging to Cole after his father's funeral, when everyone had already left, when the only thing that made sense was having Cole in his embrace.

His arms stole around Cole's body, holding him even closer. Resting his head against Cole's, Brady ran his hands up and down over the lean body he'd once known so well, tenderly, gently, washing away the blood that marred its pale perfection. His fingertips barely touched the rough edges of the cuts; he didn't want the moment ruined by more of the reality he loathed so much.

It wouldn't hurt to pretend. Not for a few minutes. Pretend Cole had never died. Pretend that they were together, that everything was fine, that there was nothing to mourn except the loss of their youth.

The water stung where it pelted against his skin, but Brady welcomed it. It made him feel alive. The heat soaked into Cole's flesh, too, which just made it easier to pretend. Except then he remembered that he *was* pretending, that none of this was real, that Cole rested ravaged in his arms and would never be that innocent, carefree young man no matter how much Brady wanted him back, and the loss hit him all over again.

The sob caught in his throat. He felt like he was choking. Maybe if he just held him a little bit tighter.

CHAPTER 6

“You’re not serious.”

“Deadly.”

Cole watched Brady strip out of shirt, dropping it onto their bed before going for his belt buckle. His skin rippled with the newly etched muscles he’d been working on. Cole didn’t want to think about painting. He wanted to drop to his knees and worship every inch of Brady’s body.

“Well?” Brady was trying to look mean and annoyed, but a smile kept pulling at his lips. “You wanted to ace this project, right? Stop standing around and looking like I just suggested you paint the Golden Gate.”

“I don’t know why you think this is such a good idea. If we

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do this, you have to go on display. With all the other projects. For hours.” He paused when Brady pushed his jeans down his well-toned legs. His brain always short-circuited a little at the sight of Brady’s thick cock, even when it wasn’t aroused.

“I know what’s involved,” Brady said evenly. “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t aware of what it’s going to mean. But you were saying the other day how you wanted to try something a little more risqué. To push some buttons. This seems like the perfect solution.”

“But...you hate people staring at you.”

His crooked grin hooked Cole as he strolled toward him. “But I love you more.” Brady pressed his naked body against Cole’s clothed one, his hand sliding around to cup Cole’s ass. “And maybe the idea of you having your brushes on me while we practice gets me a little hot.”

Cole wrapped his arms around Brady’s shoulders to pull him into a long, grateful kiss. Skin warmed beneath his hands, but with each degree it went up, Cole’s felt like it went down until he shivered within Brady’s embrace.

“What’s wrong?” Brady murmured. His mouth slid down to Cole’s neck so that he could suck lightly at the tender hollow of his throat. “Why are you so cold?”

“I don’t know.” He nestled closer. “Just hold me.”

“Always...”

* * *

Cole woke up from his dreams feeling safer than he had in a very long time. Dreaming about being human, his life with

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Brady, wasn't uncommon, but rarely did it leave him with any sense of security. It was usually tinged in sadness or regret. That which was lost. This was different. The scent of Brady surrounded him, soaking into his bare skin. When he shifted under the blankets, it dawned on him why that was.

They were Brady's blankets. This was Brady's bed.

Slowly, Cole pushed them back. Though he had to blink against the gloom, his senses told him it wasn't night yet. It felt like midday. And he had been sleeping in Brady's bedroom.

He had no idea how he had gotten there. The last thing he remembered was passing out in the car after leaving the frat house. The attack had left him more injured than he'd let Brady think, and he'd lost a lot of blood. He was still low in that regard. His muscles were watery, and his stomach kept grumbling.

But when he looked down at his chest, he saw fresh bandages. He smelled like soap, too. Brady had washed him off and then given up his bed rather than put Cole back on the couch.

His head turned automatically to the side. Though he knew he wouldn't find Brady there, disappointment still managed to surprise him when he saw it empty.

So it wasn't time to get up, and Brady wasn't in the room to have woken him. Something else had done it. Hunger, perhaps. He was going to have to eat soon, or risk putting Brady in danger if his control slipped.

He heard it then. The whisper of the refrigerator being

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opened and closed in the kitchen.

That was what had pulled him from the wonderful dreams.

A little annoyed that one of his favorite memories of Brady had been interrupted, Cole pushed the blankets off the rest of the way and sat up. Pain lanced through his chest. He grimaced. He'd taken the beating too soon after the first one. These fresh cuts wouldn't heal quite as quickly.

While he rubbed at the edges of the bandages, he scanned the room. It was typically untidy; Brady could never pick up after himself. But there were few personal items other than the treadmill in the corner. He lived like he needed to move at a moment's notice.

Because he thinks he needs to. That's my fault.

Cole shook his head. The punishing refrain was nothing new.

The door opened behind him, and he turned to see Brady standing with his hand on the knob.

"I didn't expect to find you awake," he said. He looked terrible. Even worse than he had the night Cole had shown up on his front step. Dark shadows ringed his eyes, and there was a new bruise at his temple. He'd been hurt before Cole had had a chance to stop it. "But it's probably a good thing you are."

"Oh? Why?"

Brady hesitated, then came inside. "I just got back from the station. Webster wants to bring you in for questioning."

That explained why he looked so tired. "You've been up all night?"

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“I still have a job to do.”

“You got hurt.”

Brady snorted and kicked off his shoes. “It’s not like it was the first time.” His gaze flickered over Cole’s naked body. It lingered for a moment too long on his groin before he turned away from the bed. “I went and bought you a few things. Try not to ruin these, too.”

Cole’s mouth watered as Brady took off his shirt and bared his back. “How do you want me to deal with Webster?” He had to stop looking at Brady like he was something to eat, both sexually and literally. What he really wanted to do was bring up the topic of food, but frankly, he thought that would be pushing his luck.

Brady shook his head. “I don’t know. I got him to focus on the intruders last night, but that’s only going to distract him for a little while. You’re an eyewitness. He’s practically drooling, he wants you so bad.”

“Is he going to give you a hard time if you don’t take me in?”

“What does it matter?”

That meant yes.

“So I’ll go in. Problem solved.”

His simple declaration had Brady stopping in mid-reach for his fly. He gaped at Cole, his mistrust shining in his hazel eyes.

“Did you forget you’re dead? Dead man don’t make the most reliable witnesses.”

“How do you think vampires manage in the real world?”

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Cole countered. “Especially in a digital age? Do you have any idea how easy it is to create a fake identity for ourselves?”

“There wasn’t any ID in your clothes the other night.”

He should have known Brady would go through them. “I don’t carry it all the time. Only when I think I might need it. I can go out tonight and get it while you get some rest.”

As soon as the word “out” passed his lips, Brady was shaking his head. “No, no, you’re not going anywhere without me. It’s not safe, and you’re in no condition for another fight like last night.”

It was hard to believe this was the same man who didn’t want to invite him in just a couple days earlier. Brady was still hard and wary, but vowing to protect Cole was an entire world away from wanting him dead. Again.

“I need to go out anyway,” Cole said. Time to face the cold reality and have Brady’s distaste come roaring back. “I need to feed.”

Hazel eyes immediately shuttered against him, but at least he didn’t turn away. “You don’t need to go out and do that. There’s blood for you in the fridge.”

Cole stared at him. This was more than a polite courtesy, a desire to have an informant close at hand. Brady had bought him clothes. Found blood. Given him his bed.

“Why?”

“Because you need to eat.”

It wasn’t what he’d been questioning, but it gave him an answer all the same.

“You can eat it like that, right?” Brady’s hesitancy was

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almost endearing. “It’s bagged, but it’s human. I figure you can heat it up.”

“I can. Thanks.”

They watched each other in silence. The longer it stretched, the more uncomfortable it became. All Cole wanted was to touch Brady, to thank him the way he always had before everything had gone to hell—or he had, at least. Fear held him back. He had made some ground with Brady. As self-centered as he could be, now was the perfect time to restrain his desires. He needed to prove that he could be trusted

Cole broke the spell first. Grabbing the blanket, he wrapped it around his waist as he stood up. “I’ll go eat something now then. It’ll help me heal faster.”

Brady nodded and stepped out of his way as he rounded the bed. For a minute, it looked like he was going to say something, but though Cole slowed his steps, he walked out of the room without Brady saying a word.

He found the clothes on the couch where he’d slept the first day. Several pairs of jeans, more than a couple T-shirts...there was even a pair of shoes. Brady’s refusal to loan a pair of his the night before echoed inside Cole’s head, and his hand shook as he fingered the laces.

Hope was a bitch of a mistress.

Cole pulled on jeans that fit perfectly and tore the tags off one of the tees. He left it on the couch for the moment as he went to the kitchen to forage for food. His upper body ached too much to cover it up, and besides, he had a strong suspicion

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he was going to need more sleep.

He heated the blood and drank it in the kitchen, making sure to clean out all the dishes and clean up the mess so there was no evidence of what he'd actually eaten. Courtesy, he told himself. The fact that he didn't want to fuck up the delicate balance that had fallen between him and Brady was something he deliberately chose not to acknowledge.

When he emerged, he hesitated. He should rest on the couch. Brady clearly needed his own sleep, and it was his bed, after all. He hadn't invited Cole back.

But he wasn't asleep. Not yet, anyway. His breathing hadn't settled down yet, and his pulse would jump every so often. Thinking about the case? He didn't want to think that it was because Brady was thinking about him, even if it was obvious Brady wanted him physically.

He couldn't resist. They needed to talk about the interrogation, he rationalized as he went down the hall. And he needed to thank Brady for the clothes.

The lights were off when he pushed the door open, but he saw perfectly how Brady stretched out on the bed. He lay on his side, his back to the door. His arm was curled under his head, and his hand rested on the rumpled spot where Cole had slept. He didn't move. From his rear vantage, Cole couldn't even tell if his eyes were open. But he was awake.

"Thanks for the clothes," Cole said softly, unwilling to disturb Brady more than he already was.

Brady didn't roll over, didn't even look over his shoulder. "Do they fit okay?"

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“Yeah. Just great.”

“What about the shoes?”

Though he hadn't tried them on, he said, “Perfect.” He'd bind his feet like a geisha if he had to make them fit. “About tonight—”

“I don't want you talking to Webster.”

“But he's going to ride you if I don't.”

“That's my problem. Not yours.”

“If you're worried I'll screw it up, don't be. I've been living like this for a long time. I know what I have to do to work around the system.”

Brady finally shifted, though he did more of a twist thing with his upper body rather than turn around. His gaze ate Cole up, and for a moment, Cole thought he was going to reach out and grab him.

“I'm not letting you anywhere near Webster until I know exactly what we're dealing with here. I give him a witness, and he's going to want to nail the ones who did this even more.”

“He can't.”

“Exactly. But Webster's as much of a bulldog as I am. He won't let it go until he's got someone to blame.” He paused. “It would be better if that person wasn't you.”

Something about Brady's tone drew Cole closer. Or maybe everything about Brady did it. “What about the broken locks? Did that give you anything you can use?”

“They don't know yet. I sent a couple more techs down to go over it again, but the evidence won't be processed fully

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until tonight at the earliest. I spent a good chunk of time trying to figure out where the 9-1-1 came from.”

“And?”

“Untraceable cell. It had a bounceback that made it impossible for us to pinpoint. Which leaves me with two vampires I know nothing about. Except they both know you.”

Cole had known it would come to this. From the moment he had chosen to come to Brady for help in the first place, he had known it would. “We can talk about it tonight, if you want. Before we go see Webster.”

Brady’s eyes hardened. “Every time you say shit like that, you just convince me even more you’re going to blow me off.”

“No. I promise.”

He waited for the familiar protestation. *You’re a vampire. Your word means nothing.*

It didn’t come.

Brady rolled back to face away from him, though this time, his hand didn’t return to the mussed spot Cole had left behind. “You could save us both a lot of time if you just wrote it all out. There’s a notepad next to the phone in the kitchen. Put the rest of the day to some use.”

He was torn between doing what he knew he should and what he knew he needed. “I was going to get some more sleep, actually. I only woke up because I heard you moving around.”

“Did you eat yet?”

“Yeah. Thanks for that, too, by the way.”

Brady sighed. “Stop thanking me. After what you did last

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night...”

The thought went unsaid. Cole wished Brady would finish it. He'd only done what he had to, but Brady probably didn't want to hear that. He'd want to know reasons, then, and that would make both of them uncomfortable. Cole hadn't protected Brady out of any sense of moral obligation. He'd reacted on a visceral level, one that remembered promises made in the dead of night. Nobody would hurt Brady if he had any say in the matter; he'd die before he let that happen.

“You can sleep in here.”

Brady might as well have begged Cole to bite him; it would have shocked Cole less. He stared at the tension in the man's shoulders, but no amount of willing him to turn around so Cole could see his face, maybe understand what was going through his head, seemed to work. He had no choice but to stand there, because if he went around the bed to see for himself, he knew it would only make it worse.

“You couldn't relax when I was in the next room,” he said instead. “You don't want me getting in the way of you relaxing now.”

“I'm tired enough that not even you can stop me from sleeping. And you need to heal up. So either get into bed, or get out.”

As far as invitations went, it wasn't the most elegant he'd ever received. But in that moment, coming from that man, it was music to Cole's ears.

Carefully, he circled the end of the bed. Brady's eyes were open and tracked him as soon as he came into his line of sight,

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but otherwise, Brady didn't move, did nothing to make it easier for Cole to climb in. He regarded Cole when he pulled back the blanket, didn't blink when he stretched out next to him. But for a moment, just as Cole turned his head to look at Brady, he caught a flicker of lashes, a downward cast as Brady looked somewhere he might not ought to. Cole's mouth? His injuries? His denim-clad legs?

"Answer me one thing," Brady said quietly. "How do you know them?"

He didn't have to specify; Cole understood perfectly what he was asking.

"Dara found me not long after I came back to San Francisco," he explained. "She and Pete kind of took me in." He rolled his eyes. "I think they thought having a gay vamp in the club would make it easier to score in the city."

Brady still watched him. The muscles in his jaw had eased, his mouth as relaxed as it got while he was awake. Cole itched to reach out and touch him, to steal the heat he could smell coming from Brady's skin, but he knew he didn't dare.

"When did you leave?"

Cole hesitated before he realized what Brady was asking. "Not long after trying to get to you. I thought it would be easier."

"Except you came back. So obviously it wasn't."

"No. It was just different."

"She called you a coward." His mouth twisted on the word, like it left a bad aftertaste. "Why?"

"This is a lot more than one thing," Cole tried to joke.

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“It’s all the same thing. I think you know that.”

He did. God help him, but he really did.

“She called me that because that’s what she thinks I am. In her eyes...I’m not a very good vampire.”

It was the perfect opening for Brady to launch into his favorite torrent, about how Cole couldn’t change what he is, that he was a monster, that the only good vampire was a dead one. But just like earlier, Brady held his tongue, merely nodding like it was what he expected to hear.

“I still don’t like the idea of you talking to Webster.” Brady’s eyes drifted shut. His breathing was already starting to slow. “But we can argue about that later.”

Cole didn’t think he could fall asleep now. This was the closest he’d been to Brady since arriving, and he didn’t want to waste a single second. Every rise and fall of his chest echoed into Cole’s flesh. Every throb of his pulse made him hard in return. If he had any nerve at all, he’d reach out and touch Brady now. Even hurt, he was strong enough to overpower Brady, take what he wanted.

Except he’d learned that particular lesson long, long ago.

“What time do you want me to wake you up?” he asked instead.

Brady snorted. “You and your damn sunset clock.”

“Hey, it works. So what time?”

His breathing deepened. Seconds passed. A minute. The heat of his body soaked through the blankets. Cole had been warm before, but this was going to be nirvana.

“Six-thirty’s good.” In slow motion, Brady licked his lips,

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swallowed, burrowed deeper into his pillow. “Thanks.”

Within a minute, he was asleep.

Cole didn't succumb to the same need for nearly an hour. He was too content, lying there looking at him to dare close his eyes.

CHAPTER 7

The interview with Webster left Brady wanting to crawl up the walls.

“I don’t like him.”

They stood in the hallway outside the tiniest interrogation room in the building. Sweat stained the pits of Webster’s shirt, and his face was set in a permanent scowl. It had been like that from the instant Brady had walked in with Cole in tow.

“You don’t have to like him. You just have to believe him.”

“Do you?”

“What? Believe him? Yeah, I do. I was there, remember? It was my fucking life he saved.”

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With a frustrated snarl, Webster laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles. The loud pops did nothing to shake Brady's composure. No way was he going to let his partner see how rattled he was.

"It's too convenient," Webster said. "Him showing up at the same time as the other two? Why doesn't this bother you, Lindstrom?"

"Because they were beating the shit out of the kid," Brady snapped. "Because he jumped in when he didn't have to, and because I think that actually means something."

Curious glances from the guys nearby made him realize how loud he was being, not to mention how close to Webster he was. Taking a deep breath, he backed off a step.

"We've got his prints, we've got his DNA, and he's got no priors. There is zero reason for us to hold him." Brady jabbed a finger at the closed door. "You saw his face. Why the hell would he put himself through that if he had an ulterior motive? And why would he bother letting me bring him in for questioning?"

Logic was finally starting to browbeat Webster into submission. He glanced guiltily at the door, then back to Brady, darting over the bruise at his temple. "We need to keep close tabs on him," he warned. "Just in case."

Brady glared at him. "Since when don't I do my job?"

"And you're off for the next two days. I already talked to the captain. Between all your double shifts and now this, you need to get your shit together before you come back to work."

The argument poised on the tip of his tongue. He didn't

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need a break. He needed to catch these killers. But he held it back. These killers were going to elude punishment, at least from the police. And Webster was right about one thing.

He needed to get his head clear about all of this before he was going to be any use to anyone.

“Fine,” he bit out. “But—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m calling you if anything major develops.” Rolling his eyes, Webster waved him off as he turned back to the door. “I hope you come back with that stick removed from your ass. If sleep doesn’t do it, find a hot girl to take it out for you.”

Brady left without indulging the urge to slam a fist into his face. Getting reinforcement from the captain gave Webster balls to venture opinions he normally kept more tightly in check. Brady needed to come back from this mini-break more on the ball than normal, so he could knock Webster back into place.

He waited inside his car, watching the front door for Cole to emerge. They had agreed before going in they weren’t going to foster opinions that they were any more than passing acquaintances. While that had been Brady’s idea, it had been tougher than he expected to remain neutral as Webster interrogated Cole. He’d stood in the corner of the stifling room and watched, but all he remembered was how well he’d slept.

With Cole in his bed.

Nothing had happened; Cole had woken him up just as he’d promised, already dressed. But the memory of the added weight in his bed burned on his brain. His sheets smelled like

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Cole again. If he wanted to, he could reach out and touch him. From the looks Cole kept shooting him, he thought he could probably kiss him and get away with it with nothing more than a hard-on.

The more time he spent with Cole around, the harder it got to remember he was a vampire.

Light slashing across the night stopped him from dwelling too long on thoughts that were just going to get him into trouble. The outline of Cole's long, lean body silhouetted against the exit before the door shut behind him. Then he was another shadow in the night, creeping over the parking lot.

"That Webster is a real asshole," Cole commented as he slid into the front seat. "I can't believe you have to work with him."

Brady pulled the idling car out of the lot. "I'm not exactly a prize to work with, either."

"Would *you* have accused me of using this to get into your pants?"

He hit the brake too hard. They jerked to a halt at the curb.

"He did what? When?"

"When he came back in without you. He said he was letting me go, but that I shouldn't forget that he had my number. That he wasn't going to let some fag college kid fuck with his partner."

Brady stared at him, stunned. "Why the hell would he say that? Nothing like that came up during the questioning."

Cole looked out his window. His hair fell against his jaw, obscuring even his profile from sight. "Maybe because I suck

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at pretending I don't have feelings for you. I haven't spent the last ten years hating you, Brady. I can't just turn something like that off. And Webster's a prick, but he's not stupid."

"Webster doesn't even know I'm gay. Everyone around the station thinks I'm some sort of player because—"

He stopped. He didn't want to go there. Not now, not with Cole.

"I know you don't date." Cole's voice was barely above a whisper, almost lost as he spoke to the window. "I know that's my fault."

Protesting otherwise was a waste of time. They both knew he'd be lying.

Slowly, Brady eased back into traffic. "He didn't need to threaten you," he said, changing the subject again. "That crossed a line."

"He's just doing his job. At least he cares enough to watch your back."

"Is that what we're calling it?"

"I don't think he's wrong."

Brady glanced over. Cole still stared out the window. "So you *were* trying to get into my pants by saving me?"

He meant it as a joke, but Cole didn't relax. He rubbed at his swollen knuckles, his pale skin glowing in the streetlight.

"You think I'm proud of how isolated you are? You think I get off knowing what you've turned your life into? I don't. I'm not. As much as I want to, I don't know this man you've become."

His soft voice held no recriminations, no anger. They

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could have been in a confessional, but Brady was no priest. In that moment, he refused to think of Cole as the sinner.

The fact that he didn't know what to say made him angrier than all of it put together. Once upon a time, nothing could have separated Brady and Cole. Cole had been the sole person in his life—then, before, after—with whom he knew there was nothing out of bounds, nothing they couldn't share, nothing they couldn't do. Misfortune had torn that away from him. From them.

His foot was too heavy the rest of the way home, but the car was too small for the both of them. Without knowing how to respond to Cole, his thoughts trapped him in a growing swirl, forcing him inward to black holes and blacker possibilities. More than once, he caught Cole glancing at him, but he didn't acknowledge them or speak. He let Cole follow in silence all the way to his front door.

"Webster's an idiot if he thinks I'm going to be able to sleep," Brady finally said when they were inside. He tossed his keys onto the kitchen counter and opened his junk drawer, rummaging around until he found the delivery menu for Pizza Pops around the corner. "I'm used to being up all night."

"So we're not going out?" Cole asked from the doorway.

"Neither one of us is in any shape to tangle with your friends." He hesitated when he reached for the phone. "Do you eat regular food, or just...you know."

Cole nodded. "I don't get any nutritional value from it, but it doesn't make me sick or anything."

"You want to split a meat feast?"

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From the way Cole's brows shot up, he thought he'd have to undergo another Q&A on why he was asking. But Cole simply said, "Sure, that sounds great."

Cole retreated into the living room while Brady made the call. On a whim, he ordered a couple pints of Ben & Jerry's to go with it. Hell, if he was having a decadent night in, he might as well make the most of it. When he hung up, he found Cole crouched in front of his meager DVD collection.

"All the good stuff is in the bedroom," he said. "I usually watch something when I'm working out."

Though Cole nodded, he was slow to put away the DVD he'd been holding. His mouth opened to say something, and Brady immediately fled to the bedroom, unwilling to listen to anything right now other than the din of Vin blowing the fuck out of some aliens.

They sat together on the couch, not touching but not at opposite ends either. Brady focused on the movie, though he didn't bother stopping it when the pizza arrived. They ate in silence, as if this was something they did every night, and when they had shoved the empty box away, Brady stretched out his legs to rest his feet on the coffee table.

"I can't remember the last time I did something like this," Cole said quietly beside him.

"What?" Brady didn't look away from the TV. "Watched a movie?"

"No. This." He gestured around them, between them. "It's just...cozy."

"And vampires don't do cozy, is that it?"

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Cole snorted. “You saw Dara and Pete. What do you think?”

What Brady thought was it was getting harder and harder to pay attention to the movie. Not even Vin’s sexy voice was doing it for him right now. He couldn’t block out the sight of Cole’s long leg just inches away from his. He couldn’t avoid the glimpses he caught of his long, slender hands. He couldn’t forget what it had been like to hold him in the shower the night before, to carry him to bed, to have him crawl back in beside him after Brady had invited him.

“I’m not complaining,” Cole said. “Today’s been one of the best I’ve had in a while.”

“Getting drilled by Webster and eating leftovers I got from the hospital marks a good day for you?” Brady shook his head. “Your life is a serious shade of fucked up.”

His breath caught when Cole rested a hand on his thigh. He couldn’t feel the weight, and there wasn’t any heat, but he felt it, just the same. It dawned on him after staring at it for several seconds that he would have knocked it away forty-eight, even twenty-four, hours earlier. Now, he simply waited. Waited for whatever it was Cole wanted to say. Or do.

“You know it’s because of you.” Though his voice was much lower than the noise coming from the TV, Cole’s words came through as clear as if he’d whispered them right in Brady’s ear. “Whatever happens...thank you. For not kicking me out.”

“You don’t have to thank me. We made a trade.”

“You don’t believe that. Not entirely.”

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No, but Brady wasn't going to say that out loud.

"If you want to drive me to the BART station where I left my car," Cole continued, "I can be out of your hair for good now that you know who you're after."

Slowly, Brady slid his gaze from Cole's hands to his face. His dark eyes were deadly serious, no hint of a smile, no sense of untruth. He should have felt relief; getting rid of Cole would make his life infinitely easier.

What he felt was a black hole, eating away at his stomach.

"They'll kill you if they find you," he said.

"So I don't let them. I'll leave the Bay area."

The hole grew deeper, darker. Acid started to bubble, licking its way into his throat.

"You tried leaving once. It didn't work. You came back."

"And look what happened." Cole shook his head. "This is the best solution. For both of us."

"No." The force of his denial surprised even him. "It's not." He sat up, breaking the tenuous connection between them, and snatched up the remote to turn off the movie. "You're not going anywhere until I know you're safe."

"I've taken care of myself for a long time," Cole argued. "One bad choice doesn't mean I can't move on."

"A bad choice would be walking out when it's most dangerous. A bad choice would be leaving when I tell you to stay."

"The longer I stay, the more danger I put you in. Dara knows you're a cop. It's not going to be hard for her to figure out what your name is, or where you live." Cole leaned

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forward. “Think about it for a second. Why turn yourself into a bigger target than you already are?”

“I’m already a big target. It’s not going to get any smaller just because you’re not here.” He swallowed against the burn at the back of his throat. “I don’t want you to go.”

Surprise registered in his eyes, but otherwise Cole remained motionless. “Are you sure?”

Somehow, saying the words made admitting it to himself easier. Brady nodded. “I’m not going to turn my back on you because things are a little rough right now. And you saved my life. That counts for something.”

“That’s not why I did it.”

“I know.” He ran his tongue over his dry lips. “Which makes it all that more worthy.”

His heart thundered inside his chest. He had no doubts Cole heard it. Maybe he even felt it. Vampire physiology was a mystery to him. Cole’s wasn’t. Or he hadn’t been. But holding him had been just like in college. Before everything had gone to hell.

“Is that why you keep trying to make me feel at home here?” Cole asked softly. “With the movie, and the pizza, and the bed...”

He hadn’t been making a conscious effort, but now that Cole pointed it out, it looked obvious. “I suppose that’s too mundane for a vampire like you,” he said, trying to distance himself from the entire thing. He tore his gaze away and reached for the remote again. “All you had to do was say no.”

Cool fingers wrapped around his wrist before his fingers

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touched the plastic. “It’s not mundane. It could never be mundane. Not with you.”

Brady closed his eyes when he felt Cole touch his nape. Two days ago, the shivers that ran down his spine would have been from terror. Loathing. Disgust. He didn’t feel any of that now. The caress was too gentle to be frightening, too soft to be hated, too tender to be reviled. He held perfectly still as the cushion bent beneath him, Cole’s long body pressing closer until it was all he felt, all he knew. When he inhaled, his nose filled with the scent of Cole’s skin, refreshed from the soap and shampoo, and his body knew only one thing.

Not that this was a vampire who sat next to him, who held him utterly still.

Just that it was Cole. Cole who had been gone for so long. Cole who had filled his life with love and laughter when he’d been around. Cole who had come back, for whatever reason.

Blindly, he turned his head. With the reach of a drowning man, he grasped the back of Cole’s neck and pulled him close. He didn’t stop until their lips fused together.

CHAPTER 8

Cole's first instinct was to push Brady down to the couch and devour him whole. He tasted the same, he smelled the same, and God, he even kissed the same. His fingers still did the little flexing thing against Cole's neck as they kissed, too, like he needed to feel the ripple of every muscle he could. Everything that was in Cole screamed to take what Brady offered and then take some more.

The hardest thing he'd done in a very long time was ignore his instincts.

Instead, he let Brady control the kiss, opening when his tongue touched Cole's lips, masking his fangs when Brady sought out the corners of his mouth. He could retract them

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when he dealt with humans, hiding his true identity, but it was harder in the face of desire. When he was hungry, or when his desire flared, his control over them slipped. He didn't want to waste attention thinking about his teeth, when he had Brady doing what he'd always considered unattainable.

Cole kept a hold of his wrist, pulling it close to his chest. Brady opened his hand, flattening it against his shirt, and the heat bled through until Cole wondered if he'd have a print burned onto his skin. A whimper escaped his throat. Nothing had felt this good in a very long time.

When Brady broke away, his breath came in ragged gasps. His eyes had long ago darkened, but now they burned with an intensity Cole didn't recognize. There was anger, and frustration, and he sure as hell didn't need to feel the hard line of his arousal pressing into his hip to know lust was there, too.

"Don't fuck with me," Brady rasped.

Cole shook his head as well as he could. Brady's hand had tightened at his neck. "I'm not. I can't."

"You make me forget."

He waited for Brady to elaborate, but it never came. "Forget what?"

A small shake of his head. "That you're dead. That it's not really you."

Frustration welled deep inside Cole. Without thinking, he knocked away Brady's grip. It took little effort actually. Even healing, he was much stronger than Brady ever could be.

"How long are you going to keep that up?" he demanded. "This is me. This is what you've got. It doesn't have to be like

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you keep insisting.”

His jaw hardened. “Nothing is going to change the fact that you’re a vampire.”

“But you kissed me anyway.”

“I told you—”

“Did you feel my fangs?”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

When Brady tensed to stand, Cole grabbed his shoulder and pushed him back to the couch. “Did you feel my fangs?” he repeated.

In the battle behind Brady’s eyes, anger was winning. His teeth clicked when he clamped his mouth shut, and several seconds passed before he finally exhaled. “No. I didn’t. But—”

“Stop making excuses.”

He covered Brady’s body with his own, heedless of the injuries still mending on his chest, and slammed their mouths together. Brady struggled for all of a second before he grasped the sides of Cole’s head and held him in place. Their hard flesh ground against the other’s, but Cole concentrated on sucking Brady’s tongue into his mouth. He deliberately let his fangs descend so they scratched over Brady’s tender flesh, and when the first droplets of scalding blood hit his taste buds, he growled.

Neither stopped the kiss. Cole sucked at each thin line, while Brady lashed out at him. If Brady felt a sting from the cuts, he ignored it. He forced his knee between Cole’s thighs and slowly reversed their positions, until he stretched out on

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top of Cole, their cocks lined up together.

Cole pulled back first this time. He sucked at the blood caught between his teeth, his eyes narrowing as he regarded Brady's heavy breathing. "Why did you do that? Why didn't you stop me?"

Slowly, Brady ran his tongue over his lower lip. His nostrils flared. "Because I'm not going to let you fuck with me. You think you have something to prove. You don't. I know what you are, remember?"

"You said you keep forgetting."

"So?"

"Why can't I be both?"

The question visibly threw Brady. He frowned and pushed away a little, putting more distance between them in order to study him more closely. It wasn't more than a few inches; he kept their lower halves still entwined. Cole was grateful for that. One thing he'd always loved about Brady was how his bulk could weigh him down.

"Not everything is black and white," Cole went on. He softened his voice, hoping it would have a calming effect on Brady as well. He had enjoyed the coziness a lot. He wanted that back. "We're both different men than we were, but there's a lot that's the same, too." He tried to smile. "I can forget you have a pulse if you can forget I don't."

His heart twisted when Brady said, "I don't know if I can do that."

"Can you try?" He let go to skim his fingertips over the bruise on Brady's temple. "You already admitted you don't

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want me to go. That's half the battle, isn't it?"

For a moment, Brady leaned into the touch. Then it was gone, and his eyes were dark and fixed on him again. Without closing them, he settled back down, cautious with how he rested atop Cole's injuries. He tilted his head at the last moment to press his lips to Cole's, but this kiss was different than its predecessors. It was the sweet relief of a summer rain, when the stifling heat had beaten you into submission. Gentle, almost. An anomaly of tenderness from a man so hard, he broke when you touched him.

If he'd needed to breathe, Cole would have choked because his chest tightened to the point where it would have failed to work any longer. He didn't pursue deepening the caress, but he couldn't keep his eyes open like Brady did. He'd drown otherwise. He had to squeeze them shut, because everything would become too overwhelming then, and he really would scare Brady away for good.

One of the things about being a vampire he hadn't shared with Brady yet was that it wasn't just physical senses that became more acute. Emotions did as well. He loved harder, lusted more, hated more violently than he ever had when he was alive. He'd mastered keeping them under control, but when it came to Brady, he had never been rational.

Brady stopped the kiss first. Rather than pull away, he rested his forehead against Cole's, his mouth hovering.

"You know we don't have any kind of real future together," he murmured.

Cole sighed. "It does seem kind of impossible."

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“I’m not ever going to understand the blood thing.”

“I know.”

“It’s hard enough being gay. I can’t imagine what it’s like being in love with a vampire, too.”

Cole tightened at the word he’d never thought to hear from Brady again. “I always thought you could do anything you set your mind to,” he said carefully.

Brady smoothed a hand down Cole’s side, settling on his hip. His broad fingers slipped beneath his ass, just holding him.

It was even more tender than the kiss. Cole almost broke again.

“I’m not really in the mood to finish watching the movie,” Brady said.

“What *are* you in the mood for?”

The tip of his tongue traced over Cole’s lower lip. “Don’t laugh.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise?”

But you think a vampire’s word means nothing. “Of course.”

His breath seemed even warmer than it had before. “I want us in bed. Stretched out next to each other. Like this afternoon, except...not sleeping.”

Cole’s eyes shot open. “Yes. God, yes.”

Brady didn’t wait or ask for confirmation. As soon as Cole agreed, he peeled away, taking Cole’s hand with him so that he was forced to stand when Brady did. Without looking back,

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he led him out of the living room and down the hall. His steps had never sounded so loud. Nothing had ever sounded so loud. Cole wondered if his senses would explode.

In the bedroom, Brady didn't bother with the light. He stopped them next to the bed and turned to face Cole directly. The glow in his eyes wasn't anything Cole had witnessed since coming to him, a tentative hope and expectation as they simply looked at each other. Slowly, Brady grabbed the hem of Cole's shirt. Cole lifted his arms to help him pull it over his head, and still, neither of them said a word.

Brady caressed the skin around the bandages. His fingers trembled. It was slight, and nobody human would have noticed, but Cole did. He watched, enraptured, as Brady touched here, there, circled his nipple, smoothed a palm over Cole's shoulder. Learning his body. Like he'd forgotten.

Or like he always knew and didn't dare allow the luxury of remembering.

Cole held still. He was afraid to move. Afraid to break whatever spell had been cast over Brady. He didn't want to lose a moment of this, in case Brady refused another opportunity. That was more than possible. His need might be sated by whatever he hoped to gain from this contact. Everything could go back to exactly like it was before in the light of day.

Brady bent his head. When warm lips touched the hard edge of his shoulder, Cole closed his eyes and shuddered.

"What's wrong?"

Though Brady barely whispered, the words boomed in

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Cole's ears. "Absolutely nothing," he replied. "Don't stop."

Another kiss grazed his skin. "I don't think I could even if I wanted to." His hand curled around Cole's wrist and brought it to his shirtfront. He didn't have to ask, but Cole knew what he wanted. They had learned their language early. And well.

Brady's mouth never left as Cole slowly pulled the fabric free of his pants. He undid the buttons, one by one, taking care with each until the shirt hung open. Brady straightened then, and dropped his hands to his sides. His gaze never wavered while Cole pushed the garment off his shoulders. He didn't even flinch when Cole stopped it from dropping to the floor and tossed it over the treadmill.

Salty skin begged to be licked, teased, tasted. Cole itched to push Brady to the bed and smother him with kisses, but he knew better. Fangs off. Not until Brady asked.

He didn't. His hands returned to Cole's body, lower now, smoothing over his stomach to settle at his waistband.

Cole didn't have to help him take off the jeans, but he had to clench his hands at his sides in order to keep from grabbing. The heat scalded where Brady's fingertips made contact, and though he didn't once touch his cock or balls, Cole was hard and aching by the time he stood naked. His erection jutted from his body, and Brady paused before straightening, his focus firmly on Cole's groin.

"It's hard to see you look almost exactly the same," he said softly. "Even this. But I miss the color of your skin, how dark you'd get out in the sun."

How was he supposed to answer that? *Sorry about the sun*

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allergy, but hey, I save on sunscreen! So Cole kept his mouth shut and just touched Brady's cheek.

Brady exhaled loudly and straightened. Before Cole could do anything, he bent his head and kissed him.

Cole moved first. He wrapped his arms around him and opened to the onslaught, letting Brady take whatever he wanted. He would have promised to walk out into the sunrise in that moment, if Brady had asked. Nothing had ever tasted as good as his tongue sweeping through Cole's mouth. When he hauled Cole tight to his chest, nothing had ever felt so good, either.

Brady guided him to the bed without breaking away from the caress. He folded over him like they'd done it every night for the past ten years, and though it blocked out the rest of the light from the hall, Cole didn't need it to know, to feel, to experience everything. The rough scrape of denim over his thigh made his balls throb. The rougher touch of Brady's callused fingers made his heart ache.

He indulged in the need to touch him when Brady slid his mouth down his jaw. Cole mapped over the flexing muscles in his back, groaning at the hot glide of lips along his neck. He turned his head, tilted his chin, anything to get Brady to go farther. *Don't stop*, he wanted to say. Maybe he even said the words out loud.

But Brady didn't answer. Unless his response was to move lower, down to Cole's nipple.

When his tongue flicked over the tip, Cole arched away from the bed. Brady immediately clamped a hand on his hip

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and pushed him back down.

“I’ll say this for your speedy healing...” He circled the sensitive flesh, denying Cole any kind of release. “I don’t have to see you hurt for very long.”

Considering how bitterly Brady had looked at him when he’d first answered the door, Cole knew just what a concession that really was. “I’m sorry it came to this at all,” he confessed.

Brady traced over the taped edges of the bandages. “I’m going to kill that bitch the next time I see her. If I can’t lock her up, that’ll be my justice.”

Fear gripped his veins. “She’s dangerous. You need to stay away from her.”

“Even more reason for her to be dead.”

“I don’t want you to get killed.”

Brady finally looked up. “And I don’t want her to go unpunished. For everything she’s done.”

His full meaning didn’t sink in until he had bent his mouth back to Cole’s stomach. Unable to stop himself, Cole grabbed Brady’s shoulder and pulled him up, slamming their mouths together. He forgot about his fangs. Forgot about wanting to protect Brady. Forgot about everything. They kissed like yesterday had never happened and tomorrow didn’t matter, and when Brady guided Cole’s hand to his erection, Cole didn’t restrain his eagerness to feel even more.

He wasn’t sure how or when Brady lost his pants. He only knew the heat of his mouth, the hard press of shoulders bearing him into the mattress as Brady grasped his cock, too.

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Together, they found a smooth tempo, pumping the other's length from root to dripping tip. The smell of pre-come mingled with the musk of Brady's skin. Both scents were like nothing Cole had ever experienced before. They'd never been that sharp, that delicious when he was human.

He wouldn't tell Brady, but getting to savor all of it as a vampire was going to make this one of the most amazing nights of his life.

They rocked against each other, never letting go. Brady slipped his thigh between Cole's legs, and the pressure against his balls was exquisite.

"Harder," he whispered between kisses. He groaned when Brady complied. His grip tightened on Brady's length, as if in trade, and almost immediately, Brady's groan echoed his.

When Brady caught his tongue on a fang, blood erupted over Cole's lips. Hot, coppery liquid burned down his throat, better than the taste he'd had on the couch, better than anything he had ever imagined. It went straight to his cock, straight to each nerve ending, lighting each and every one to molten core temperatures.

He didn't even have a chance to cry out before he erupted. Brady clamped his mouth over Cole's as the shudders wracked through his flesh. His come made Brady's continued strokes slicker. He wanted to beg him to stop, that he was too sensitive, that it was all just too, too much, but that would mean tearing away his mouth, finding his voice. It was lost, just as his heart had always been lost, and he clung to the only man who had ever made him forget that the world really

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wasn't a great place when it came down to it. It was only great when he wasn't alone.

Brady grunted. In the next second, the vein pulsed beneath Cole's palm, and hot fluid spilled over his fingers. He bit into Cole's lip, probably an involuntary action from the force of his shaking body, but the effect was magnetic. Cole growled and flipped Brady onto his back, straddling him as their cocks got trapped between their bodies.

Brady blinked. It took a moment for his brows to draw together before he reacted. His arm swept upward in a practiced move and knocked Cole off-balance. He coiled his leg around the back of Cole's and proceeded to twist both of them to their sides.

"Don't do that," he warned.

"Then don't bite a horny vampire," Cole shot back.

Another retort formed on Brady's lips. Cole braced for it to come, but after a moment, the line between Brady's brows smoothed out, and a chuckle rumbled from his chest. Within seconds, it became full-blown laughter.

It was the first time in three days he'd heard Brady laugh. It was enough for Cole to smile and accept the loose embrace of Brady's arms.

"We're so fucked up," Brady said when it finally began to ebb. "Or maybe that's just me."

"No, it's both of us." He risked smoothing his hands along Brady's arms, stealing the heat. "But I'm good with it if you are."

Brady rested his head on his arm and regarded him softly.

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Sweat glistened at his temples, highlighting the florid colors of his bruises, but the exhaustion reflected in his eyes wasn't from his injuries or work. Cole recognized the repletion all too well.

“We'll see,” he murmured.

Then he smiled.

It was the most beautiful thing Cole had ever seen.

CHAPTER 9

Brady didn't even pretend to understand how he could sleep with Cole in the apartment. Doing so would force him to consider inviting Cole to his bed, or jerking him off when they got there, or holding him for hours afterward. They hadn't really talked much. Brady hadn't let him. But holding Cole had the equivalent effect to pushing himself to the brink of exhaustion. Within minutes of coming, of having his familiar lean body molded to his, Brady had fallen asleep.

He didn't know if Cole had succumbed so quickly. He did know that when he woke up just before dawn, Cole was out, his lashes stark against his pale cheeks, the bruising nearly gone from his last fight. Brady had been rock-hard, nestled

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against his tight ass, but he'd slipped out from beneath the blankets before he yielded to the urge to fuck Cole.

Cole didn't wake up. Brady took that as a sign.

He waited until after the sun was fully over the horizon before venturing outside to check around. The daylight was blinding, enough so he debated running back inside for his sunglasses. That would have obscured his vision, however, and he refused to miss a detail simply because it was a little bright. Something Cole had said had stuck with him. Dara knew he was a cop. She'd figure out how to find him.

Brady needed to know he hadn't already been caught out.

Nothing looked amiss. The buxom redhead two doors down tried to finagle him into a conversation about exercise, but he waved off her compliments to his body with more good nature than he usually showed. She hadn't tried talking to him before. Interesting. Except it made him wonder if she approached him now because he looked more accessible or simply because he was out in the daytime and that made him normal.

He scoffed as he returned to his apartment. Normal had gone extinct with the dodo.

Though it was tempting to go stand in the doorway and just watch Cole sleep, Brady settled for merely glancing in to make sure he was still out. He scribbled a note and then spent five minutes trying to decide where Cole might see it. Normally, he would have stuck it to the mirror, but the lack of reflection made it unlikely Cole would even look in that direction. In the end, he left it on the treadmill where Cole had

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discarded his clothes the night before. The man still had to get dressed after all.

He swung by the station first, but Webster was already gone for the day. A quick perusal of the case file revealed nothing new, although the prints had come back from the lock. An unknown. Their caller, obviously. A potential witness. Thankfully, they didn't match the prints Webster had taken from Cole.

Brady finished the rest of his errands quickly. It wasn't quite noon when he unlocked the front door of his apartment, but the sound of the shower greeted him, making him pause half in, half out. He hadn't anticipated Cole would be awake. He wasn't sure what to do now.

A neighbor opening his door to go out to his car spurred him to go inside. He wasn't in any mood to deal with more people, and the items he'd bought needed to get put in the refrigerator. Blocking out the soft noises coming from the bathroom, he busied himself in the kitchen, but it didn't take any time at all to empty the sacks.

The shower still ran.

He couldn't avoid Cole forever.

Cole called out when he knocked, and he pushed the door open just enough to let his voice filter inside without entering. "I've got more blood if you're hungry," he said, ignoring the roil of distaste that threatened his stomach. "Whenever you're ready."

"Thanks." The rings scraped across the bar, but the water was still running. "Do you have an older towel I can use? I

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couldn't find one and one of the cuts opened up while I was washing."

"Sure. Hang on."

Grabbing one of his exercise towels from the closet, Brady entered the bathroom this time, setting it on the sink. Cole was safely behind the curtain again, but his silhouette through the translucent plastic riveted Brady's gaze. He wished his body would stop responding to every little thing when it came to Cole, but that was the way it had always been. Apparently, his body didn't care too much that Cole wasn't even alive.

"How are they doing otherwise?" he asked, hoping that talking about savage injuries would be enough to distract him.

"The other cuts? Pretty good, actually." Cole ran his hands down his chest as if testing them out. Brady bit the inside of his cheek to keep from groaning. "I wasn't really awake when I got in here. That's why one of them is bleeding again."

"I can help you wrap them again if you want me to."

Cole paused. When Cole looked at him through the shower curtain, Brady wondered just how clearly he could see. "I'd say you don't have to do that, but I think we've moved past that, haven't we?"

His answer wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever said, but Brady knew it was at least the truth.

"We've moved past a lot of shit, Cole." He backed up. "Come on out when you're ready."

Ten minutes later, Brady sat on the couch watching the end of *Pitch Black* when Cole walked in. He was bare-chested, his jeans riding low on his hips, and Brady did his best not to stare

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at the narrow trail of hair disappearing beneath his waistband.

“Let me get the first aid kit,” he said, turning off the TV. He rose and headed for the kitchen again. “Go ahead and sit down.”

His hand shook as he reached for the kit in the cupboard. Brady clenched his teeth.

This is ridiculous. Stop acting like this means anything.

Except he thought it did. He'd let Cole stay. He'd *insisted*. He'd wanted him in his bed, and he'd wanted to hold him. Hell, he'd wanted a lot more than that, but there was at least a grain of common sense holding him back from going that far.

Yet.

He squeezed his eyes shut as the memory of being nestled in Cole's ass came flooding back. It had been a long time since he'd had sex, especially with someone who got to him like Cole did. That was a list of zero, actually. Nobody got to Brady like Cole.

“You don't have to do it.”

Cole's soft voice startled him. Jerking away from the counter, he stepped back, holding the first aid kit between them like it might actually succeed as a shield. Cole immediately looked away, but not before Brady caught the flash of melancholy in his dark eyes.

“I have to eat anyway,” he continued. “If you leave the box on the counter, I can wrap myself up while I'm heating it.”

“It's not that I don't want to do it,” Brady argued. Except he wasn't moving, and he couldn't seem to let go of the first aid kit.

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“It’s because you might actually want to, and you hate yourself for it. I know. Trust me. I know.”

Brady exhaled loudly, but it didn’t do anything to make him feel better. “I didn’t expect last night to happen.”

“Neither did I.”

“I don’t know what to do with it.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“I don’t?” He gestured with the box toward Cole. “You’re stuck here for the duration. And I’m not going anywhere. I can’t just ignore that you’re here.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t have to make it so hard for you either. I’ll sleep on the couch tomorrow. And tonight, I’ll go out and look for Dara myself—”

“The hell you are!” Brady stormed forward and grabbed Cole’s arm. “Which part of, ‘you’re not going anywhere until I know you’re safe,’ is so hard to understand?”

Cole stiffened, though he didn’t pull away. “I’m not going to make this harder for you.”

Brady shoved him back against the jamb, pinning him with his larger body. Cole’s injuries looked light years better; Brady suspected he could gain the upper hand with only a minimum of effort. But Cole didn’t. He remained motionless, his eyes darting from Brady’s to his mouth and back again.

“The only one making this hard for me is me.” Brady kept his voice even, though it took every ounce of control he had. “I’m the one who invited you. I’m the one who kissed you. I’m the one who needs to figure out what the fuck he wants.” He licked his dry lips. “Something tells me you already know

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what it is you want.”

“Which is why I’m trying to make this easy for you,” Cole replied, matching his tone. “You think I want to fuck this up?”

“I think we’re skating on thin ice. I think we’re going to sink if we’re not careful.”

“So we be careful. I’m all right with that.”

Brady took a deep breath. “Well, I’m not.”

He moved before he could talk himself out of it. His mouth sealed over Cole’s, and though he didn’t push past the immediate defenses, he held firm, tossing the first aid kit to the side so that he could have both hands to touch.

Cole moaned. He touched Brady’s waist, hands like butterflies, unable to settle for fear of being caught. Brady wanted it harder, more, anything but this ephemeral teasing, but Cole never pushed.

So Brady did.

He cupped Cole’s face and pushed past his willing lips. Last night, he’d sought the fangs to prove something to Cole, but now he found them simply because they were a part of his lover. That realization that he still—and had always—thought of him in such terms would have made him pause any other time. Now, it was just a fact that Brady knew he had to accept.

His arousal ground against Cole’s hip. When Cole tried to slide his hand over it, Brady caught his wrist, twisting his arm up and over his head.

“That’s not what I want,” he rasped.

Cole’s eyes were black, hungrier than he’d ever seen. Brady had kept the lights out last night for a reason. He’d

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cradled him from behind in the shower for the same reason. In the metaphorical light of day, he couldn't avoid the truth any longer. Oddly enough, it wasn't so bad.

"What do you want then?" Cole asked.

Brady replied by dropping his mouth to Cole's throat, sucking at the tender skin before licking farther downward. He avoided the exposed cuts, the pungent scent of fresh blood still too heavy for his liking, and slid his grip down Cole's arm as he went to his knees. He ended facing the long line of a cock that he'd always thought was the prettiest he had ever seen.

He wanted to see it again. Only that was enough for him to finally let go.

Though his hands shook, it was as much about his desire as it was anything else. He fumbled with the button on the jeans, and the flared tip came into view. Cole hissed when he leaned forward and flicked his tongue over the wet slit.

Then Brady was the one to moan.

"God, you taste so good," he said. Not the same, but still just as mouth-watering as ever. The heat wasn't there, the way it had felt when Cole's come would sear his tongue when he shot across it, but everything else was just as he remembered. Better. Because it was real. No fantasies this time. No longing for what used to be.

Cole dared to caress the side of his face, his graceful fingers dancing over the contours. "You don't have to do this."

"There isn't any have to about it." Brady dragged the zipper down, revealing inch after inch of pale, perfect cock. "I

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want this.” *More than either of us knows.*

He pushed the jeans off Cole’s hips, letting them puddle at his ankles as he focused on his prize. Cole didn’t move, didn’t stop his soft touches, but Brady felt the anticipation coming off him in thick, dark waves. Too bad. He wasn’t going to rush this for anything or anyone, not even Cole. He’d taken this step and he was going to savor it, even if it was the most foolish mistake he’d made in ten years.

He ran a single finger down the slightly curved length, tracing the thin vein. In silent encouragement, Cole widened his legs when he reached the base, and he stroked the lightly furred sac. It tightened before his eyes. Licking his lips, he leaned in, first nuzzling his nose into the musky skin at the base of Cole’s cock, then darting his tongue out to drag it over his balls.

A wave of want washed over him. Brady gripped the long shaft, closing his eyes to stave off the vertigo as he sucked the sac into his mouth. He remembered this. Remembered the shape against his tongue. Remembered the small spot near the bottom that was completely smooth, devoid of hair and silky to lick. When Cole tensed, he remembered how he would cling to Brady’s shoulders, unmoving most of the time as Brady went down on him. He only ever started thrusting toward his climax, like he was holding it all back to heighten the orgasm.

As far as Brady was concerned, that was perfectly all right. He knew he needed the control Cole was offering. The fact that Cole knew it, too, made it all that much better.

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He lavished his balls with attention until his lips were numb, and still, it wasn't enough. He dragged the flat of his tongue up the length of his shaft, and when he reached the flared head, caught the soft edge with his teeth.

Cole jerked. His hand shot out and gripped the top of Brady's head, holding him back from taking more into his mouth. "Be careful with the biting," he warned. "I meant what I said last night."

Brady had to pause and consciously reflect to try and remember. His blood cooled slightly when the words came back to him, but not enough to make him stop. "No biting," he said gruffly. "Got it."

When Cole's hold eased, he licked over the spot he'd nibbled. He tilted the shaft away from his flat stomach and circled the tip once before taking it into his mouth. Normally, he would've caught and held it there with his teeth, but Cole's warning rang in his ears. Brady used his lips instead. He tightened the suction, diving into the slit to tease out more of the delicious pre-come.

They groaned in unison.

"You're so warm," Cole murmured. His fingers returned to caressing. "You don't know how often I dreamed about this, Brady."

He could. For every nightmare, there had been a darker dream, a fantasy where Cole came back, where fate wasn't nearly so cruel. Brady massaged his firm hip, reminding himself this wasn't just another of those, and slid farther down the smooth length. The pace he set was slow enough to savor,

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fast enough to make his lips vibrate. It was enough to make Cole moan, too, and that, more than any of the other, made it all worth it.

He kept from swallowing him whole as long as he could. He'd never been the best at deep-throating anyway, and Cole's length had always been a stumbling block. "It's okay," Cole used to say. "This feels amazing anyway."

Except it wasn't okay to Brady. Thankfully, sporadic practicing gave him confidence it might be easier this time.

When Cole touched the top of his head, Brady knew he needed more. Releasing one of the hands that pinned his pelvis to the wall, he reached down to fondle the tight sac, pulling all the way to the tip of his cock at the same time. He held Cole there for a minute, swirling his tongue around the head. Cole grunted in frustration, but his tensing fingers against Brady's scalp pushed him back down.

He let him. Maybe if he'd pushed back, Cole would have stopped. It wasn't even that Brady was so far gone, aching inside his jeans, that he'd lost all common sense. He wanted it, as much as Cole did. He dropped his jaw, and he took a deep breath, and the moment he felt the tip nudge against the back of his throat, he swallowed.

Hard.

Cole cried out, a frantic sound that came with a twitch of his shaft. Brady swallowed again, breathing shallowly through his nose, and closed his eyes. Nothing had felt this good in years. It was better than having Cole's cock in his hand. He imagined that the only thing that might feel better was having

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Cole's ass squeezing around Brady's length.

He stayed there until his lungs burned, then slid up and took a deep breath. Before Cole could push him back down, Brady moved on his own accord, burying him in his convulsing throat a second time.

That was all it took.

Cole's hips snapped, and Brady swallowed each blast of come, unwilling to lose a drop. Cole eased his hold enough for him to slip up a few inches and catch some of the cool fluid on his tongue. He groaned at the very first real taste. It was even better than he remembered, sweeter, saltier. He took it all, panting for breath by the time Cole leaned back against the wall.

“Brady—”

He straightened and slammed their mouths together, even though his head swam from the need for air. Cole wrapped his lean limbs around Brady, clinging to him in desperate need as their tongues twisted and tangled. Brady didn't know who was holding who up; likely, it was both of them helping the other.

He didn't have to think too hard to realize he liked it like that.

CHAPTER 10

Brady expected sundown to bring a change in Cole. Creature of the night and all that jazz had to mean something. What he got was a vampire stretched out on his couch and a phone call from Webster.

“We figured out who broke into the frat house,” he said without bothering with a greeting.

Brady’s gaze snapped to the kitchen doorway, but Cole was too busy laughing at *Seinfeld* to have heard Webster. He retreated to the farthest corner away and asked, keeping his voice lowered, “Who is he? Did you bring him in for questioning?”

“Didn’t have to. He’s laid out on a slab in the morgue.”

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Brady listened in chilling silence as Webster explained how the John Doe's prints matched the ones lifted from the busted lock. His heart skipped a beat when he heard how the man had died.

"Doc Sewell says it's the strangest thing," Webster said. "The body was drained, but whatever animal tore his throat out didn't bother trying to eat it or anything. Just left it in the alley for the girl at Starbucks to find this morning."

Brady had the answers to clear up the confusion, but Webster wouldn't believe a word about vampires roaming the streets of San Francisco. Dara and her buddy Pete had apparently tracked the intruder down first, silencing him before he could say anything about what he might have seen.

He rubbed his eyes, suddenly weary. Right now, being a cop felt like a fucking waste of time because he couldn't do a thing to bring some peace to the victims' families. Vampires killed their boys, vampires killed the one person who might be able to bring them some closure, and he couldn't say a word.

"No clue on who the guy is?"

"Nope. Looks like a grifter who's stayed off the books so far. Young kid. Probably hung out with the college boys, but I'll check the missing persons and see what I come up with."

"We should get a sketch out to the media if nothing turns up. Somebody has to claim him." He glanced up to see Cole standing in the doorway, his eyes solemn. "Call me if anything else develops."

"Who did they find?" Cole asked as soon as he hung up.

"Our B&E. Dead. Someone ripped out his throat."

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Cole stiffened. “You think it was Dara?”

“Who else would it be?”

“Where did they find him?”

“Drained outside a Starbucks.” Brady shook his head as he opened the refrigerator for a soda. “Your friend has a sick sense of humor.”

He expected a protestation that Dara wasn’t his friend, but when Brady glanced back, the doorway was empty. Frowning, he ventured out to find the TV off and Cole tying one of his shoes.

“What are you doing?”

Cole didn’t look up. “We have to go check out the body. It’s at the morgue, right?”

That didn’t actually answer his questions. “Yeah, but we don’t even know who it is. Right now, it’s a John Doe.”

“That Dara killed.”

“We think.”

“Two seconds ago, you said it couldn’t be anybody else.”

“That was before you wanted to go storm the castle.”

Cole stood and shook his head. “It doesn’t really matter who killed him. He was drained. We have to go and make sure he doesn’t rise again.”

It took a moment for Cole’s intent to sink in. “A vampire? You think he was turned?”

“I don’t know. I *can’t* know. But do you want to risk it?”

Brady took a step closer, searching Cole’s even features for some sign of what he was thinking. “And you’d kill him?” he pressed. “Another vampire. You’d actually do it.”

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“Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“I know how you feel about vampires, Brady.” Cole stole the rest of the distance between them, hovering inches away. “And I know that if I stand any chance at all at getting some kind of future with you again, I can’t tolerate creating more killing machines. Because that’s what he’ll be at first. He’ll be alone, without anybody to tell him what to do, just like I was. And he won’t be able to control the thirst. Just like I couldn’t.”

He hadn’t thought about the future, not in any specific terms. The day had been pretty amazing after the blow job, if only for its unexpected normalcy. It had felt right having Cole in his living space again, talking with him as he helped fix dinner, messing around some more while they waited for the sun to go down. But that was as far as he’d considered. One day at a time. More was beyond his means.

Not beyond Cole’s, though. Cole obviously had given it a lot more consideration. And the bitch of it was, he was right. Brady would never be able to stomach indiscriminate killing, whether it was a vampire or not. The fact that he could still enact some kind of justice, stop people from dying, hadn’t even occurred to him. Until now.

“You’d be able to tell from looking at the body?” Brady quizzed.

For a moment, Cole glanced away. “Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t know.” His gaze returned, a fresh fire burning in the brown depths. “I do know that if he was killed last night and turned, he’ll rise tonight. And we can be there when it

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happens.”

That was enough for Brady.

“Wear one of my jackets,” he instructed, turning on his heel for the bedroom. “It’ll help hide you a little bit because it’ll be too big for you. We can’t risk having you ID’d when we’re going in.”

Cole trailed after him. “Is the morgue empty at night?”

“Where his body will be. But I still don’t want to run the risk.”

Cole didn’t speak again until after Brady had briskly gathered the coat and a few of the stakes he kept stashed away. “Am I wrong?” He blocked the doorway, refusing Brady the room to leave. “About the potential for us.”

He was tempted to lie. He didn’t need to encourage the thought that Brady could welcome Cole back into his life. Of course, he’d look like the biggest hypocrite then, since he’d been hard-pressed to keep his hands and mouth to himself for the past twenty-four hours.

But he didn’t have to indulge that desire now.

“No, you’re not wrong.” He jerked his chin toward the front door. “Let’s go. I don’t want to lose this guy.”

* * *

Brady led the way through the abandoned morgue hallways, with Cole right on his heels. Well, he assumed Cole was on his heels. Without looking around to check, it was impossible to tell. Cole was absolutely silent as he moved stealthily along. It was a little sobering to think all of Brady’s

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careful alertness prior to Cole's re-entry to his life was mostly a waste of time.

He avoided the corridors he knew had cameras, grateful they didn't even encounter a technician before he found the correct doorway. When he tested the knob, it turned easily, and he opened it just enough for both of them to slip inside.

His throat clogged immediately. He loathed the scents of death. The morgue was the worst. Bleach, stale blood, decaying flesh, and old urine combined into a cocktail that never washed away, no matter how often you showered after leaving. He had no idea how the coroners did it.

Cole seemed oblivious. He stood motionless near the door, only his eyes darting around. They settled on a bottom drawer on the opposite wall.

"He's in there."

Frowning, Brady glanced back and forth between them. "How can you tell?"

"Dara's scent is all over this place." Cole rolled his shoulders. He was starting to look uncomfortable. "There's no doubt she's the one who killed him."

He'd known that, but having it confirmed in such a monstrous way gave Brady the creeps. "So let's get this over with." He palmed the stake he'd had tucked inside his coat and walked over to the drawer. He paused with his hand on the handle when he realized Cole hadn't moved. "What's wrong? Don't tell me we have to wait until he actually comes to life to kill him."

"No, no, that's not it."

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“Then what?”

Cole looked around the large room, fidgeting more with each passing second. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It just feels off, for some reason. Something’s bugging me.”

“Are you backing out of this?” He was more than a little surprised he hadn’t tried that already. “Go back to the car if this is going to bother you. I’ll take care of it.”

His dark gaze swiveled back to bore into Brady. “I know how paranoid you’ve gotten over the past few years, but have you ever staked a vampire before? It’s not as easy as the movies make it look.”

He snorted. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

As Brady yanked the drawer open, Cole was at his side. He covered his hands, preventing Brady from letting go of the handle. Though he glanced at the covered corpse inches away, Cole fixated back to him just as quickly as he’d covered the distance between them.

“A stake isn’t like a knife,” he said. “It takes a lot more force to smash sharp wood through bone than it does a blade. And if you miss? And he’s turned? You’re going to have one pissed off vampire here, hungry and ready to tear your throat out.”

“You’re the one who was getting ready to run. I’m doing what we agreed had to be done.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You said it feels off.”

“It does.” Cole looked down at their joined hands. “I think...I think it’s because all I can smell is Dara. It’s

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throwing me.”

Flashes of what the female vampire had done to Cole the last time they’d encountered her went through Brady’s mind. Some of his irritation dissipated. Of course Cole was out of sorts. He was still healing up from more than one attack from the bitch. He was probably more than a little afraid and too embarrassed to admit it.

“So let’s do this and get it over with.” Letting go of the handle, he grasped the back of Cole’s neck and pulled him close, tilting him down slightly so their foreheads touched. “Then we’ll get home and get that last night of R&R Webster is making me take.”

Cole closed his eyes, edging even closer. “God, that sounds good.”

“I’m going to have to go back to work tomorrow night, but maybe we can work something out.” This was the weirdest place to feel the compulsion, but Brady wanted badly to kiss Cole again. Instead, he pressed the stake into his hand, hoping that the sooner they got out of there, the sooner he could do exactly that. “We’ve probably got a lot of talking ahead of us.”

“Yeah...”

The single word floated between them. The muscles beneath Brady’s fingers flexed, and he turned his head in time to meet Cole’s soft kiss. So much for oddball locations. It felt too right, too real to care that they were doing this over a dead body.

“Well, isn’t this quaint.”

The female voice cut through Brady, but it was Cole who

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snapped away. They turned in unison to see Dara and Pete standing inside the room. Pete lounged lazily against the closed door, blocking it from being used, while Dara smirked at them with heavily painted lips.

“I knew I smelled you all over this place,” Cole growled.

Dara clicked her tongue. “Maybe you should have actually listened to your instincts then. I can’t believe you actually fell for this, except, you know, I kind of can. You always were a sucker, Cole.”

Fell for this. It had been a set-up. A lure to draw them in. She couldn’t have known that Cole would show up, though. That meant her trap had been designed for Brady.

Cole came to the realization at the same time he did.

“You bitch.” His grip tightened around the stake, and he stepped forward, putting himself between them, just like he had at the frat house. “Leave him alone.”

“Aw, don’t like me playing with your new toy?” Her lip curled into a sneer. “You never did learn how to share.”

“Why bother with him anyway?” Cole pressed. “It’s not like the cops can actually do anything about you and the frat boys.”

“Don’t you know anything? The last thing we need is a cop who decides to be some vampire vigilante. No witnesses. That’s the rule.”

“That’s your rule.”

“That doesn’t make it any less valid.” Dara strolled casually forward, surprisingly silent in spite of her voluptuous curves. “I’m going to cut out his eyes, just like we cut out

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those delicious hearts. And you're going to be the one who bleeds him dry. I want the last thing he sees to be your fangs, Cole. Maybe then I'll consider letting you live."

He was tired of being talked about like he wasn't even in the room. "I've already seen Cole's fangs," he said, stepping up to Cole's side. He knocked away the warning arm Cole swung in front of him to prevent him from getting any closer. "Frankly, I'm not impressed with any of yours."

Her gaze raked down his body, her nostrils flaring. "Nice try. I can smell he hasn't bitten you. Now fucking you seems to be another matter..."

"You're not going to lay a finger on him," Cole threatened. "I'm not going to let you."

"Oh, that's so cute. Protecting your cop boyfriend. Like you actually stand a chance."

When Cole glanced at him, Brady realized he fully expected a stream of protestations. But what was the point? She knew they'd had sex, and for all his initial fears, Brady knew he didn't see Cole in the same old light anyway. He wouldn't have initiated the sex this afternoon if that was the case.

"If you think you can fuck with me like you did the frat boys," he said instead, "think again. They didn't know the kind of monsters they invited in. I'm fully aware of who and what you are."

Her eyes flashed. Brady never saw her move.

Pain seared across his throat as he was knocked back across the dead body stretched out on the slab. Growls pierced

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the air. He didn't know where they came from, not with how he tumbled from the corpse, over the edge to the floor. He landed on his shoulder, twisting his head at the last minute in order to protect his spine. A second bolt of pain shot up his arm, and when he tried to roll into a more defensive position, he saw scarlet droplets splattered on the white tile.

Brady touched his neck. His fingers came away sticky and wet, his blood hotter than his skin. He touched again, probing the injury. She'd slashed the surface, probably in an attempt to get to his jugular, but she hadn't gone deep enough. The blood flowed, but didn't spurt. He'd seen more than his share of injuries to know it was dangerous but not fatal. He'd live.

His head whipped around to see Cole and Dara fighting on the other side of the slab.

He wasn't so sure he could say the same thing about Cole.

Pete wasn't participating in the fight. His role seemed to be to guard the door and make sure nobody got out. Dara, on the other hand, was intent on Cole, fangs snarling, eyes furious. She had already knocked the stake Brady had given him from his hand. Now it rested against the far wall, well out of everybody's reach. Fresh cuts scored Cole's cheek, the blood stark where it dripped down his pale skin.

Brady acted on instinct. He'd done the same at the frat house, and frankly, he wasn't sure a day would come when he didn't.

He vaulted over the corpse, tackling Dara from behind. None of the trio had been paying any attention at all to him. He landed with full force against her shoulders, and it made

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both of them topple forward into a tangle of arms and legs. Her deadly nails scratched across his arm, but his jacket protected him this time. He couldn't afford another slash across his throat, however. He was pretty sure the smell of his blood was going to work severely against him any moment now.

Cole grabbed for Dara's arm. Brady thought it was an attempt to pull her off, but it failed. She writhed within his grasp and slipped free, dragging Brady with her.

"Get the stake!" Brady shouted.

His order caught Pete's attention, too. Both male vampires snapped their heads to the side, zeroing in on the discarded piece of wood. He saw Pete spring forward at the same time as Cole, but then Dara threw him against the bank of drawers, and all he saw was stars.

His head was woozy. He was losing more blood, and his collar was sticking to his skin. If his shoulder wasn't dislocated from how many times he'd landed on it, it would be soon. Every flex of his fingers made his entire left side throb in pain.

He was never going to beat her with physical force. The second she whipped her gaze around to meet his, Brady knew what he had to do.

He kept his body angled away from her in order to reach inside his jacket. His palm was slick where he grappled for his holstered weapon, but he caught it in his grasp as he lashed out with his heel to keep her away. The force of his kick jolted up his leg. It succeeded only to make Dara stumble backward a

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couple steps.

That was all he needed.

The gun's retort exploded within the morgue walls. Cole and Pete froze where they fought over the stake, but it was the bloom of red on Dara's pant leg that Brady focused on. He hadn't aimed for her heart. That would have been stupid. She didn't need it to function.

She did, however, need kneecaps if she wanted to walk.

Brady shot out the other one as soon as she listed to her injured side.

Pete snarled and tore away from Cole. He hurled through the air, but rather than going to help Dara, he aimed for Brady.

Two shots went wide of Pete's blur before he slammed into Brady. For the second time, Brady crashed into the wall, the distinct sting of fangs sinking into his neck a moment later.

Vaguely, he heard more fighting, but he was too focused on trying to get Pete off him to pay the others more notice. He pounded the butt of his gun against the vampire's head, again and again, but each blow was weaker than the last. His veins burned from the hard pulls at his blood, and he could literally see the room getting darker with every passing second.

Dara screamed. It tore Pete out of his throat for a cool, blessed second.

Then Pete screamed. Dust exploded in Brady's face. He didn't close his eyes in time, and the flying ashes stung where they hit his eyeballs.

"Fuck!" Brady dropped the gun and tried to cover his eyes. Squeezing them shut gave him a measure of relief, but it felt

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like his body was moving through tar. It took too long for his hands to reach his face.

Cole's cool fingers wrapped around his wrists, gently prying them away. "We've got to get you to a doctor. Your shots are going to have security here any second."

The import of what Cole said sank in. Brady forced his eyes to open, and though his vision was bleary, there was no mistaking the beating Cole had taken.

"Which means they're going to find you," he said. "Webster already thinks you're in this up to your neck."

"I can get you out."

"And how do I explain my bullets on the scene? And my injuries when I'm supposed to be resting?" He tried ineffectually to push Cole away, but he was inordinately solid all of a sudden. "Go. I'll be fine. The guards aren't going to let me bleed to death in front of all the corpses."

"I'm not leaving you hurt like this."

"And I'm not putting either one of us through the ropes trying to explain why you're in the middle of a scene again." Since pushing him away wasn't working, Brady curled his fingers into Cole's shirt and yanked him close. Their mouths crushed awkwardly together in a brutal kiss. "Get out of here. For both of our sakes."

He meant what he said, but the lingering taste of Cole on his lips was almost enough to pull him back for another, in spite of the impending danger. Only Cole's sideways glance toward the doorway kept him from doing it. The voices came a moment later.

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“Please go, Cole.” His tone held a desperate entreaty it hadn’t earlier.

Cole finally straightened. “I’m coming back.”

Brady didn’t blink. “I’m counting on it.”

He watched the blur of his body as it disappeared out the door, then slumped against the wall. By the time figures too loud and too squat to be his lover showed up in the entrance, blessed blackness was already taking root.

CHAPTER 11

Webster didn't want to close the case. Brady didn't blame him.

"There's nothing linking him to any of the frat boys." *Him* was the John Doe in the morgue. "All we know is that he was there."

Brady slipped on his left shoe, propping his heel against the footboard in order to try and tie it. His right arm was in a sling, a necessary precaution in order to help his dislocated shoulder heal faster. It made trying to do anything he normally did with two hands incredibly difficult. The nurses had learned the first night how much he hated feeling helpless.

They weren't his only injuries. His throat was still

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bandaged. The doctors said those would scar.

He hated those, too.

Webster prowled around the edge of the room. Brady didn't think he'd stopped moving since he'd shown up to drive Brady home. "We know he had a buddy."

"A buddy with two of my bullets in him. He's not going far."

After waking up in the hospital, Brady had had little choice but to lie through his teeth. None of the security tapes showed anything useful, so he'd concocted a story about surprising a man with their John Doe. He'd had to be vague about the bite marks on his neck, but there was no getting around the fact that he'd discharged his weapon. Without a body, he could only claim that the attacker had run off.

So far, Webster had only encountered dead ends. Now that the hospital had finally agreed to release him, Brady knew he expected the pair of them to tackle the case with even more gusto.

"I wish we could find that kid who helped you out the other night." Webster sighed and picked up the sack with Brady's ruined clothes in it. "I'll bet anything he's involved in this."

Brady didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to think about it. That was all he'd done for the past three days while he'd been cooped up in this antiseptic hospital room. He had no idea where Cole was or if he'd ever see him again. And he wasn't sure if that made him angry or relieved.

"Let's just get out of here."

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The ride to his apartment was silent. Talking to Webster had never been an easy thing, but it was worse now. They didn't agree on the case. They didn't agree on Cole. They were both haunted by the deaths of the frat boys, but their reasons were so different, they might as well have been in different time zones. Nothing got resolved in the tense, twenty-minute drive, and when Webster offered to help him get inside, Brady turned him down.

Webster looked relieved.

“You going to take the leave or not?”

Brady shook his head. “A bum shoulder just keeps me out of the bar fights for a few days. We've got too many open cases for me to slack off now.”

He waved Webster off without looking back. The car roared to life behind him and drove off.

Brady didn't look over his shoulder once as he walked to his front door. He fumbled getting his keys out of his pocket, and it wasn't until he pushed it open to greet silent darkness that he realized just how unaware he'd been. Was that necessarily a good thing? Dara was dead. Her sidekick was gone. He was pretty sure Cole didn't have any intention of hurting him. That seemed like the perfect recipe for his complacency.

But just because three specific vampires weren't a threat to him didn't mean others didn't lurk in the shadows, ready to spring. He might be able to relax more during the day, but he wouldn't let his guard down at night. He had no desire to end up on a slab like their John Doe.

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As he hustled around the apartment, his steps echoed back to his ears, loud enough to prompt turning on the television. Everything seemed farther apart. Empty. Did he really not own that much stuff? Leaving the TV blaring, he dumped his ruined clothes in the trash and walked the endless hallway to the bedroom, trying to strip along the way.

That failed, too. He had to struggle too long with his brace in order to get out of his shirt. By the time it was off, he wasn't even that much in the mood for a shower anymore. He wasn't sure what he was in the mood for. Something was wrong. Askew. Like someone had come in while he was in the hospital and moved everything two inches to the left. It was ridiculous, of course. His door had been locked. Nothing was missing. Maybe his paranoia hadn't taken a complete vacation after all.

A nap didn't do anything but kill a couple hours. Neither did sorting his laundry. Somewhere around five he ordered a pizza and slouched in the corner of the couch, not really watching a cut-to-hell version of *Karate Kid* he couldn't be bothered to switch away from. Nothing worked.

He was grateful for the knock at the door when it came. His muscles screamed as he stood and grabbed his wallet. Sitting for that long wasn't doing him any favors. If he thought his shoulder could handle the jostling, he'd do a few miles on the treadmill after he ate. Hell, he'd do a few miles even if it couldn't take it.

"How much..."

The query faded on his lips.

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Cole's dark eyes fixed on his, the pizza box balanced in his hand. "The kid recognized me from when we ordered the other night. Did you get a meat feast?"

It took a second for the casual question to sink in. "Yeah."

His pale skin was flawless. It stretched like a blank canvas across his exotic bone structure, unmarked by any of the events from the past week. Nothing marred his neck, or the vee of chest visible at the open neckline of his shirt. Brady got caught on the clothes for a second. Those were new. Different. Not the ones he'd bought for Cole.

"Your pizza's getting cold."

The reminder about his food snapped him out of it. "Oh. Right." He stepped to the side, giving him room to enter, but when Cole didn't move, Brady frowned. "I thought vampires only needed to be invited once."

Cole looked uncomfortable at the question, shifting slightly where he stood. "They do. I just wasn't sure if you wanted me around. After everything. I mean, I didn't go to the hospital to see you because I figured you didn't want to have to explain my presence in case somebody asked questions."

Cole's thoughtfulness stunned him. He'd been wondering just that, why after everything Cole would keep his distance. Brady had been more than a little hurt when it didn't even look like he had bothered to see how he was, but he'd brushed aside the pain to concentrate on getting out of there.

"I wouldn't have told you to come back if I didn't want you to." He reached across the threshold and grasped Cole's wrist, tugging gently. "Now get your ass in here."

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The door whispered shut behind them. All of a sudden, his apartment didn't feel that empty anymore, but that could have been just as much for the fact that his stomach growled at the smell of the pizza as it was Cole's arrival.

Cole broke the contact first, disengaging gently to head past him for the kitchen. "How long do you have the sling? Nothing is broken, right?"

"Docs said a week. Give it a rest before I mess it up again." He followed behind, watching gratefully as Cole took care of dishing out his food and grabbing a beer from the fridge. "You're not just dropping off my dinner and taking off again, are you? I've been worried for three days about what happened to you."

Though Cole didn't look up, Brady caught his pleased smile before his hair fell forward and hid his profile from view. "I'm here for as long as you want me around." He sucked away a spot of pizza sauce from his thumb. The sound went straight to Brady's cock. "And I'm sorry you worried. That wasn't my intention."

Brady closed the distance and grasped Cole's wrist. While Cole tilted his gaze in Brady's direction, Brady pulled it to his mouth, sucking the wet thumb into his mouth to chase the rest of the sauce. There wasn't any left, which meant all he tasted was pure, unadulterated skin. His lashes fluttered shut. God, he wasn't sure anything had ever tasted this good.

Cole stared at the junction of mouth and thumb. "I thought I was the one with the oral fixation." His voice had gone husky in the space of seconds, and the muscles in his hand

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twitched when Brady slid down to press a kiss to his palm. “This wasn’t what I expected.”

His eyes burned. “I didn’t expect to miss you as much as I did.”

“What are we doing?”

“I have no fucking clue.”

He also wasn’t letting Cole go. His fingers refused to open and release the man’s wrist.

“You said we had a lot of talking to do.” Cole finally looked up, and there was a burn in his eyes that pulled Brady even closer. “I know that hasn’t gone away.”

“It hasn’t,” Brady agreed. “Do we have to do it now?”

“What else would we do?”

His thumb caressed over the thin skin of Cole’s wrist, and his gaze dropped to Cole’s mouth. “I think we can come up with something.”

“Your pizza will get cold.”

“Fuck the pizza.”

Cole snorted. “Something tells me it’s not the pizza you’ve got in mind.”

“No, it’s really not.” His stomach growled again. “Ignore that.”

Carefully, Cole reached up and uncurled Brady’s hand. Though he didn’t use force, there was no denying his strength. “Do me a favor and eat first, okay? Give yourself some time to get used to me being here. You might change your mind.”

Something inside Brady snapped. With his good arm, he shoved Cole back, pinning his shoulder to the wall. “Change

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my mind? You walking through that door was the first thing that's felt right for the past three days. I'm not going to get any more used to you here than I am right now."

He was lucky Cole didn't push back. That was a fight he'd lose without even blinking.

"A week ago, you hated me."

"A week ago, I didn't know you weren't going to rip my throat out."

"You still hate vampires."

"I hate anything that hurts other people. Try again."

"I'm still going to need to feed." Cole glanced at the bandages covering the injuries on Brady's neck. "I stop drinking blood and I go crazy. Literally. You think you can live that?"

"Did you lie to me about needing to kill to do that?"

"No."

"Then I find a way to deal." His fingers flexed into Cole's shoulder, and he stepped as close as his sling would let him. "What I know is, it's better with you here than it is when you're not. I spent the whole day home, wondering what the hell was wrong, and the second you walked through the door, I felt better. I'd have to be an idiot not to know it's because of you."

Every word he uttered softened the stone set of Cole's face. Like he'd locked everything he was feeling away in fear of what Brady might admit. By the time Brady finished, the emotion in his eyes gleamed more brightly than anything he had ever seen, and there was a definite tremor in his hand

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when he lifted it to the back of Brady's neck.

"Coming to you for help was the smartest thing I've done in years," he whispered. He pulled Brady forward until their brows touched. "Thank you for that."

All it took was a slight tilt of his head for their mouths to meet. Instinct and need took over then.

The kiss was soft, Cole's lips pliant. Brady traced the slightly parted seam, but even though Cole opened to him, he didn't press inside. Not yet. He wanted to savor the connection for a moment. He didn't have to give this up. Everything he had once thought lost was here again, ready for him to take, ready to embrace.

"Does this mean I can spend the night?" Cole said when they parted.

Brady kissed along his jaw, sliding his hand down Cole's arm to twine their fingers. "This means if you try leaving me now, I'll stake you."

Cole chuckled. "Duly noted."

Though it took restraint he didn't realize he possessed, Brady peeled away, keeping their hands joined. He led a willing Cole out of the kitchen, down the hall, all the way to his empty bedroom, only stopping to turn around and kiss him again. This one was harder, more possessive. He thrust his tongue into Cole's mouth as soon as his lips parted, and he swallowed down every groan, every whimper, secreting them away for relishing later.

Cole smoothed his long hands over Brady's back, touching in ways they hadn't since their mutual handjob. Each was a

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stolen moment from history, times when he would have recognized Cole's caresses with his eyes shut, times when he could have mapped out the other man's body from memory. Those didn't seem so far away anymore. In fact, it felt like everything he had ever wanted was right here, just for the taking.

"What do you want?" Cole slipped his fingers into the back of Brady's waistband, tilting his head in order to let Brady continue tasting. "Anything. You name it."

His body thrilled at the prospect. "To fuck you," he said. "To bury myself into you so deep, it'll take me a week to crawl out."

A shudder rippled through Cole. "I've been jerking off for three days, wishing for the same thing." But he pulled away from Brady's mouth, a slight frown drawing his brows together. "But your shoulder kind of screws that up for a while, doesn't it?"

Brady scowled. For a second, he'd forgotten all about the damn sling. His gaze flickered to the bed, the possibilities rolling around in his brain. He wanted this. He'd come so far—they both had—that it seemed ridiculous they couldn't have this one thing now.

"You could ride me." The suggestion seemed obvious now that he said it aloud. "I'll take the sling off so I have use of my arm, but you'll be on top, so it won't have any pressure on it to aggravate it."

Cole's eyes widened. It wasn't until that moment that Brady realized the import of what he'd said. Letting Cole be

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on top implied a trust there that hadn't existed before. On his back, it would be harder to struggle, should Cole press his advantage in a way Brady didn't like.

"I know you want what I do," he said, finishing the thought. "And we have to start somewhere."

Cole brought his hands up to Brady's neck, where the sling was fastened. "Let me do all the work. I'll show you, you won't regret it."

Brady stood there, motionless, while Cole slipped his arm free. He couldn't move. His muscles refused him that right, even if he wanted it. It was as if they had been waiting for this as long as his heart had and, now, they would take every touch, every caress, every inch of contact Cole was willing to give.

He barely felt a twinge when Cole managed to get the shirt over his head. His arm ached from inactivity, but letting it hang loosely at his side eased some of the tension. That was the hardest part of all. He itched to touch Cole. But he stayed still, even when Cole dropped to his knees to work on his fly.

Brady had been hard from the moment he'd pressed Cole to the wall. Just the sight of the top of Cole's head was enough to make his heart feel like it was going to burst through his ribs. Then he remembered the fangs, and some of the desire ebbed for a moment.

Cole froze in mid-pull of the zipper, and looked up. "Do you want me to stop?"

How did he know? As soon as he thought it, however, Brady knew the answer. His body would forever betray him

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from now on. No secrets. No hedging. Cole would forever have the advantage, while Brady was stuck relying on the old clues.

When he didn't answer right away, Cole started to sit back on his heels. Immediately, Brady's good hand shot out and gripped his shoulder.

"Don't stop." Trust had to be complete. "Please."

A slow smile curved Cole's mouth, and he pulled the zipper down the rest of the way. "Since when have you ever known me to let my teeth get in the way?" he teased. He didn't look away as he pulled the jeans down Brady's legs, even with his erection springing free. "Until you're ready, I know the rules. Fangs off."

Until you're ready. His heart skipped a beat at the words. Would he ever be ready? As scary as it was, Brady thought the answer was yes. If he could trust Cole in his bed, why couldn't that extend to something more? In time. When he was ready.

It felt like he got punched in the chest when Cole ran his fingertips up the length of his shaft. No other contact. Just silky skin against his hot flesh. Down. Up again. Down farther to trace along his balls.

Brady hissed.

"You were always so sensitive," Cole murmured.

His touch glided up again, but his head bowed closer. When his tongue ran over the same path along the sac, Brady's thighs trembled.

"Only with you." He gripped Cole's neck, pulling him in until his nose nuzzled the base of Brady's cock. "It's always

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only been you.”

Cole mouthed his balls, at the same time turning his wrist so that his knuckles grazed along the shaft instead of his fingertips. The slightly rougher contact extended the tremors in Brady’s legs down to his knees. Hot, cold...his flesh couldn’t decide what temperature it wanted to be.

“I better not get you too excited,” Cole said. He stood with a smile, his hands resting on Brady’s shoulders to guide him back to the bed. “You’ll come as soon as I get you in my ass, otherwise.”

Brady stretched out. It was a bigger relief than he anticipated. “You’re not mocking my stamina already, are you?”

“Me?” A devilish glint played in his eye as he started to strip. “Never.”

Each button revealed a new patch of perfect skin, pale and mouthwatering. Cole took his time, giving Brady ample opportunity to just stare in rising lust. He licked his lips at the first sight of a dusky nipple, and his nostrils flared when Cole pushed his jeans down his slim hips. He remembered all too well what it had felt like to have that long, slim cock erupting in his hand, in his mouth. This time, he was going to make Cole shoot without ever touching it. That was his goal.

“Do you have lube?” Cole asked, once he was fully nude.

“Nightstand.” An awful thought occurred to him as Cole opened the drawer. “Except I don’t have any condoms. Shit.”

Cole squirted a generous portion of lubricant onto his fingers and grinned. “Didn’t I mention one of the pluses to

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fucking a vampire? Human diseases don't affect me. So unless you want a condom to save on the mess, we don't need it."

Relief flooded through him, quickly replaced by a fresh, gnawing hunger. His stomach tilted at the same time the mattress did, when Cole climbed on to kneel between his legs. He watched, riveted, as he grasped Brady's cock with both hands, his fingers slippery and cool. Cole worked them up and down, around and around, reaching everywhere it was physically able to touch. Always, he kept it light. Brady wondered if he used the loose grip to heighten just how tight his ass was going to be.

The weight was all too familiar when Cole finally stretched atop him. Automatically, Brady bent his arms around Cole's back, but when his shoulder twinged, he brought the sore one back to rest at his side.

Cole's eyes sobered. "I'm going to feel guilty about what happened at the morgue until you're fully healed, you know that, right?"

It was Brady's turn to frown. "Why? You staked both of them."

"Because I smelled Dara all over the place and didn't think she might actually be there."

"You were distracted."

"Which almost got you killed."

Brady stroked up and down his spine, finally settling at the soft swell of his ass. He squeezed, prompting Cole's cock to twitch where it was trapped between their bodies. "In case you've forgotten, I run that risk every day. One of the fringe

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benefits of being a cop.”

Cole buried his face in Brady’s neck, hidden away on the side that wasn’t bandaged within an inch of its life. His tongue tickled over the skin where he lapped at it, and he began to rock gently along Brady’s body, friction building with every slide.

“That’s one of the things I hope you’re going to let me get used to,” he murmured.

Brady turned his head to graze kisses over Cole’s temple. It was a curiously tender gesture, especially in light of the desire rampaging through him, but it dawned on him that dichotomy had always been there for them, regardless of the state of Cole’s pulse.

“We’ve both got things to work on.”

He reached between their bodies and grasped his cock, nudging Cole upward in order to angle the tip down. It bumped over Cole’s balls, making him hiss into Brady’s neck, but when it came to rest at his unstretched opening, he immediately relaxed. He shifted his hips, catching the cock between his cheeks. Brady didn’t have to do anything but hold his shaft steady while Cole slowly started to sink onto it.

Cole hadn’t done anything to prep himself. All he’d done was apply the lube to Brady’s cock. That meant Brady felt every inch of muscle constrict around his cock, fighting the intrusion before ultimately yielding. He heard the whimpers echo into his skin as Cole refused to stop to adjust or even slow down. He tasted the copper of his own blood as he bit his

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cheek to keep from crying out at the ecstasy of it all. He held on to Cole's hip for as long as he could before finally giving in, sliding it up his back to tangle in his hair and yank his head back.

This close, Cole's fangs were unmistakable, but Brady knew without checking that he hadn't broken skin. He tightened his grip and drew Cole down until their lips skimmed across each other. Not quite a kiss. Not just a caress. An exchange. Of something more than he thought he'd ever have again.

"More," Brady panted.

Cole gave it to him without hesitating.

By the time he was fully sheathed, they were both shivering. Cole bent the slight fraction necessary to seal their mouths, silencing any protest Brady might have ventured when he began to rock back up his length again. The strokes were short, as if Cole couldn't bear for Brady to leave him, but the distraction of the increasingly desperate kisses held Brady back from pushing for the penetration he knew they both wanted.

Once, he caught the tip of a fang when his head started to swim from the pleasure. The faint sting served as a reminder but not a hindrance to continue the caresses. Cole didn't push and Brady didn't falter, and the kisses went on, a raft thrown amidst the sea swelling around them.

He wasn't sure which one of them started moving faster. It might have been Cole, eager to feel more of Brady's thick

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length sliding in and out of his hole, or it might have been Brady, needy of the release joining with Cole gave him. Though he'd had his share of casual encounters over the time separating them, nothing had come remotely close to the emotional connection he'd had with Cole. He hadn't dared let it happen. The thought of losing another nearly broke him, and he shored up those walls in order to ensure it never happened again.

So this, this delectable union of their flesh, this was the first sex he'd had in a decade that he'd even pretend to call lovemaking. It banished all thoughts of every faceless partner he might have had, burned away every memory but those Cole created with his hands and skin and mouth. If Brady was grateful for anything as their bodies quickened, it was that Cole made it possible to move on.

Funny how the one who'd stopped him in his tracks was also the one to prod him along again.

Though Cole never perspired from their exertions, the sweat shining across Brady's skin rubbed off on him, easing the slides of their chests as they moved against each other. The constant wet tip of his cock only added to the erotic sensations. Brady loved how it dragged over his stomach, how he knew without exchanging words or touching his length just how excited Cole was.

He also knew the exact moment he hit Cole's prostate.

Everything in Cole clenched. He tore his mouth away and stared down at Brady, his lower body never ceasing the

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bruising strokes. The battle warred in his dark eyes, but Brady refused to relinquish the control now that he had it. He snapped his hips at the same tempo, the same angle, determined to drive Cole over the edge. He needed it. He needed it more than his own release. He needed it to be his name Cole shouted when he came, his body Cole worshiped with attention when they were done.

“I never stopped loving you,” Cole said.

The words were a jolt through his system.

His thrusts faltered for a fraction of a second, but Cole denied him the freedom to do more than that. Within two more strokes, Cole cried out, Brady’s name spilling from his lips, and sticky come shot along their chests. He slammed their mouths back together, heedless of fangs, heedless of pain, heedless of anything but the bliss spilling between them.

Brady could barely breathe when his orgasm exploded through him, and he drove into Cole’s body one last time as everything began to gray around the edges. By the time his cock stopped twitching, he was gasping for air, all his muscles melting into the mattress.

Their kisses slowed into long caresses that didn’t want to stop. Cole slipped an arm beneath Brady’s back, a position that was entirely new for them, and Brady returned the embrace just as tenderly. Neither seemed willing to separate. That was fine. If Cole wanted to fall asleep on top of him, he wasn’t going to object.

“I had hopes,” Cole confessed when he finally rested his

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cheek against Brady's unharmed shoulder. "I didn't honestly think anything would happen with them."

"I tried not to think about it at all." With Cole's already out there, it felt safer making his own confession. "I've done things one day at a time for so long, I'm not sure I know how to live otherwise."

"We'll figure it out together."

"Together."

"Wasn't that the way it always was? You. Me. When everything else went to hell, we always had each other."

"Yeah." Brady swallowed the lump in his throat. He couldn't say the words he knew Cole probably yearned to hear, but they weren't nearly as far away as he would have expected. They hovered there between them, there in every caress of Brady's hand, every brush of his lips. "Together is easier if you're not missing during half the day, you know. Move in here."

Cole went still. "You mean that?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I didn't."

When he lifted his head, Cole was grinning broadly. "You're going to need help until your shoulder is healed anyway."

"Exactly."

"Like showering. Sponge baths would be infinitely easier."

His mouth canted. "Infinitely."

Cole's smile faded slightly. "How are you going to explain me to Webster? He's going to question it, won't he?"

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“Probably.” He cupped Cole’s ass and ground their hips together. “I’ll just tell him I paid you back for saving my life with a good fuck and we’ve been seeing each other ever since.”

Cole’s laughter echoed through the apartment.
It was the best thing Brady had ever heard.

VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

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* * *

**Don't miss *Blood Of Souls*, by Vivien Dean,
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There isn't anything Annie Pontin won't do for her lover, the reclusive artifact collector Quin Black. As his personal assistant, she even takes care of the most valuable item in his

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