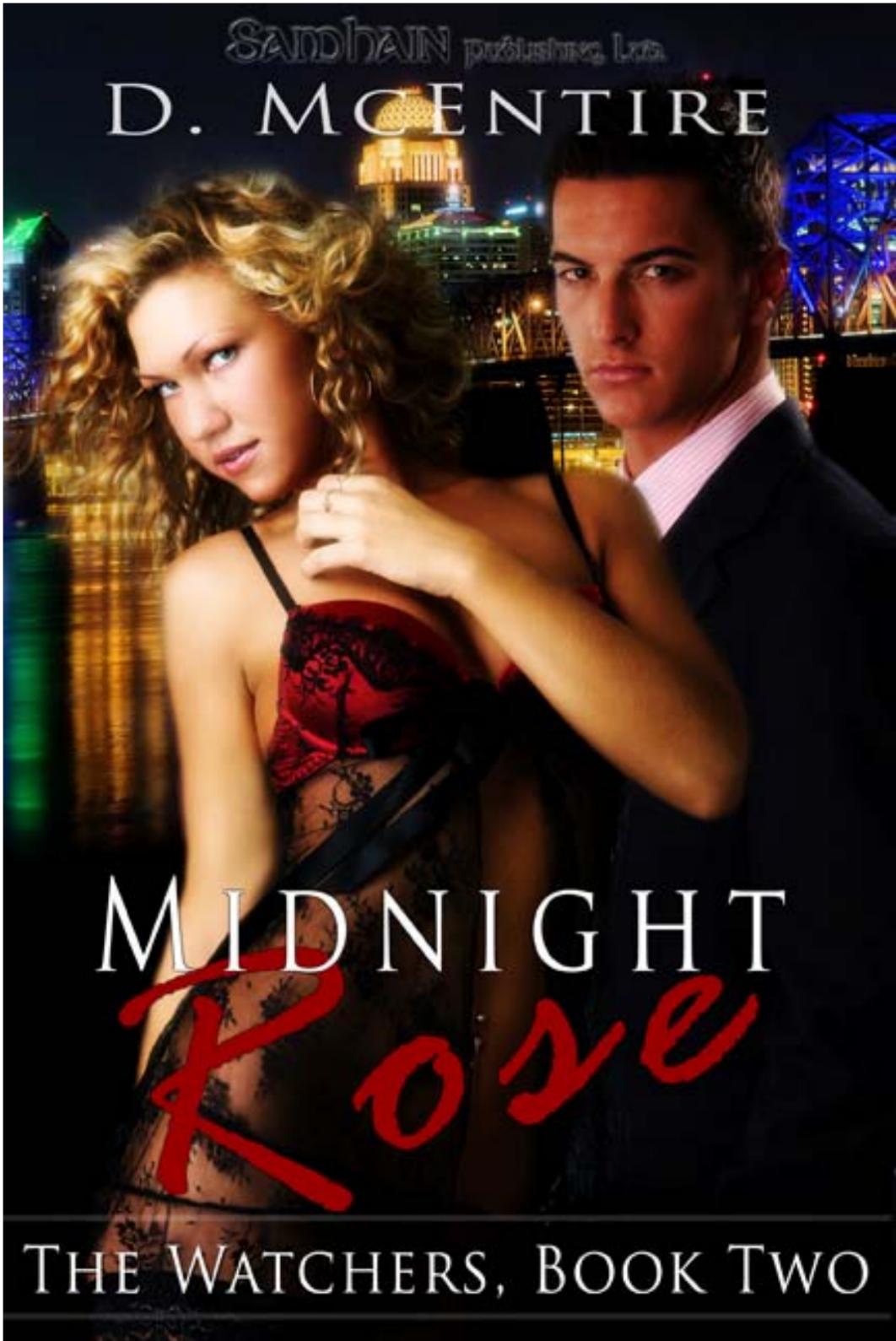


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D. MCENTIRE



MIDNIGHT
Rose

THE WATCHERS, BOOK TWO

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Midnight Rose

D. McEntire

Dedication

I want to thank all of those who have read *Midnight Reborn—The Watchers*, Book One—for your support and compliments.

Prologue

Last week...

Rosa knelt on the floor of Darla's apartment, trying to clean the massive puddle of blood, which had spread and seeped into the fabric of the carpet. She was trembling from the night's horrific events and trying desperately to hold herself together even as the memories continued to play out in her head.

Robyn Andrews, Rosa's best friend, had been shot protecting Darla and her one-year-old daughter Abigail from Jake Carter, a sadistic, drug dealing madman who had held Robyn and her mother captive for years at his ranch in Texas.

Jake had managed to track Robyn down to this place, where he had told them his plans to kill Robyn and take Rosa back to Texas as his *playmate*. The thought made Rosa shiver.

If the Watchers, Trigg and Vane, hadn't gotten there in time...

Rosa took a deep, shuddering breath and stopped the ruthless scrubbing of the red stain on the carpet. "This seems like a bad dream," she whispered, her heart in her throat, knowing Robyn's life was hanging by a mere thread. It sickened her to think Jake may have succeeded in his quest to kill her best friend.

As she swiped a tear from her face, she thought about Vane. If it hadn't been for his strong arms comforting her only moments ago, she would have fallen apart.

Darla's phone rang, and she jumped. Sniffling loudly, she lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Rosa, it's Vane. Are you okay?"

Rosa tried to keep the next snuffle quiet, but wasn't successful.

"Yes, I'm okay."

She heard Vane sigh on the other end of the line, and something told her the nightmare wasn't over.

"Rosa, God, I hate to ask you to do this. I would do anything to keep you far away from this mess. But, I found the building's security guard. Jake killed him."

Rosa waited as Vane hesitated.

"There's a lot of blood—"

"I understand," Rosa broke in. She did understand, though she didn't like it. The evidence of what had happened tonight needed to be taken care of.

"Ah, Rosa. I'm sorry."

"I'll be fine, Vane...and thanks."

Rosa heard the click as Vane disconnected the call. He was borrowing her SUV to dispose of Jake and the guard's bodies. Human bodies didn't pull a Pop Rocks routine and disintegrate like vampires. She had no idea where he was taking them, and she didn't care.

With shaking hands, she replaced the receiver in the cradle, then sank to her knees, covered her face with her hands and cried.

Chapter One

Present...

As the last notes faded, silence filled the bar. It took several moments for a slow, congenial clap to begin before more patrons joined in. Rosa turned to the house pianist and gave him an apologetic look before stepping off the stage.

Rosa mentally berated herself for the night's performance. She was a professional and tonight's crowd at the Black Panther Lounge had deserved better.

She was a highly regarded singer at the up-scale bar in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, and she drew in large crowds. Her singing career meant everything to her. She took pride in her singing abilities—her voice was melodic and often called *mysterious*. When she sang, the sound would flow throughout the bar, captivating her audience. Her songs were full of emotion, filling the hearts of the crowd with their essence.

As she made her way down the stairs, she let out a heavy sigh, knowing her performance tonight ranked somewhere between *sucked* and *please make my ears stop bleeding*.

She was still trying to get over the shock of almost losing her two best friends, Robyn and Darla, earlier that week. If Robyn hadn't pushed Darla, who had been holding Abigail, out of the way of a bullet, Darla, Abigail or both, would be dead. The thought of losing any of her friends made her chest tighten.

Rosa skirted a few of the bar's patrons and found an empty chair. She needed to adjust the strap on one of her heels, which had been cutting into the back of her ankle all night. With a groan, she plopped rather unladylike down on the chair, then bent over and undid the strap.

Her eyes closed at the sudden relief of having the painful shoe finally off her foot, and her thoughts began to wander, something she felt unable to stop herself from doing the last few days.

Thoughts of Vane and how he had comforted her that night filled her head. The act still surprised her since it was her experience a man in the presence of a crying woman would run the other way, but not Vane. He had tried his best to soothe her, even apologized profusely for assigning her the task of cleanup.

A tap on Rosa's shoulder made her jump, and she let out a short squeak.

"Whoa, there. It's just me. Are you all right?"

Bryan, the lounge's piano player, stood before her with a look of concern on his face as he held out a glass of red wine.

Rosa gave him a weak smile and tried to slow the frantic beating of her heart. She had become jumpy lately.

"Oh thanks, Bryan," she said as she accepted the drink, grasping the glass in both hands so her trembling fingers didn't spill its contents on her dress. A ruined dress would be all she needed to top off her night.

Rosa shook her head slightly and sighed. "I'm okay, Bryan. I guess it's going to take a little while to get myself together."

Tonight's performance had definitely not been one of her finest. She knew her songs hadn't resonated the romance, passion and joy she was known for. Instead, they had imbued sadness and loss. There hadn't been a dry eye in the place when she had finished her set.

"Well, if you need anything..."

Rosa waved Bryan off, trying to convince him she was fine, and took a sip of wine.

"Uh, the boss wants to see you," Bryan said with a jerk of his head over his shoulder.

With a nod, Rosa pulled her shoe back on and buckled it, then stood, took one last sip of her drink and strolled in the direction of the owner's office. She knew the conversation wasn't going to be good. No doubt, he was not pleased with her performance, and she wasn't either.

“Come in,” Trenton Blake called from behind his closed door.

Rosa stepped inside the small, dim office. The lighting wasn’t very good, and she wondered why he didn’t do something about it. But, then again, it would mean spending money, something he didn’t do very often.

“Rosa, come in and have a seat.”

Rosa shut the door and settled into one of the two chairs in front of Trenton’s desk.

Unease settled over her as Trenton sat with his short, thick fingers steepled as if he was gathering his words carefully. His hair was beginning to gray, Rosa noted, and a long, hard life was etched on his face. Finally, he spoke. “Rosa, how are you?”

Rosa knew it really wasn’t a question. He was expecting an explanation of her train wreck of a performance tonight.

“Trenton, I know I haven’t been up to par these last couple of nights...”

“No. No, you haven’t.”

Rosa sat quietly, not knowing what he was expecting to hear. She couldn’t quite explain it herself.

Trenton leaned back in his chair and blew out a long, heavy breath, which Rosa knew was the portent of an upcoming lecture. She clenched her teeth, waiting.

“You know, Rosa, I think it was a good idea I only scheduled you for one set tonight, or you may have shut the place down. I’ve never seen so many people crying into their beers in all my life.”

Rosa winced. Trenton was being harsh, but it was the truth. Her fans were always given a good show. The songs brought them love and joy. They didn’t normally leave the bar wanting to throw themselves in front of a train.

“So,” he continued, cutting into her thoughts, “I’m giving you a week off. Think of it as a little vacation.” He gave her a smile, but it was far from humorous.

Rosa sighed and looked down at her hands, which were twisting in her lap. She knew Trenton was right. She did need some time to get her act together. Trying to drown herself in her work had only backfired.

After Trenton told her he would schedule other acts in her place to finish out the week, she rose and nodded in agreement.

As she turned to leave, Trenton spoke again.

“You’re my best performer, Rosa, and I really do need for you to work this out—whatever *it* is. I know what you’ve been through has been hard, but you need to get past it. Now, if you need anything, you give me a call, all right?”

Trenton, well known in the vampire community, had obviously caught wind of what had happened the night Robyn was shot. Not even the vampire society escaped gossip, she thought dryly.

Rosa didn’t say anything. She just smiled weakly and opened the door, stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind her. She did need some time off, but hated having more time to herself, alone, thinking.

The door to the small dressing room for the house band and singers was farther down the hall. She stepped inside and went over to the bank of lockers. Something on the door of her locker caught her eye, and she frowned. A long-stemmed, red rose was fastened to the combination lock. For the past week she had been receiving roses and little trinkets at her locker, but the giver remained anonymous.

Removing the flower, Rosa looked it over for a moment before bringing it up to her nose and inhaling its beautiful scent.

Taking another glance around the room, she saw nothing to indicate who had left the rose. A sudden thought occurred to her. Perhaps Trenton or Bryan was trying to offer comfort without the awkwardness of doing it face-to-face.

With a shrug, Rosa opened her locker and pulled out her purse, then closed the door and reset the lock. As she removed her coat from the rack, she took one last look around the room before exiting through the back door.

The lounge was only six blocks from her apartment, so unless weather was an issue she walked. As she took the familiar path home, her thoughts drifted back to recent events.

Rosa had been anxious to hear how Robyn was doing and had practically pounced on Vane for information when he had returned the keys to her SUV last week. He had assured her Robyn was doing well, along with news of a happier note. Trigg had asked Robyn to be his mate, and she had agreed.

The night breeze was cool. Rosa pulled her coat tighter, the sudden chill bringing her out of her thoughts. She crossed the street and continued walking to her apartment. Practically grimacing with every step, she couldn't wait to get home and out of her shoes.

As she passed a dark alley, she had a sudden sense of panic. In all the time she had lived there, she had never thought twice about walking home late at night by herself. *Funny how my life has changed in a blink of an eye.*

Rosa walked into the lobby of her apartment building and waved a small hello to the new security guard. As soon as her arm lifted, the memory of cleaning up the blood from where Jake had killed the previous guard and then had shoved the body under the desk, sent a wave of nausea through her stomach. Too many questions would have been asked if someone had discovered the dead humans, she thought as she stepped into the elevator. Questions that would have led to the discovery of the Watchers and vampires.

The *ding* of the elevator doors opening caught Rosa's attention, and she exited while fishing in the bottom of her purse for her keys.

Rosa stopped in front of her apartment and glanced over at Robyn's door, feeling a pang of sadness in her heart. She missed Robyn's company. They had become close friends since she had introduced herself the first night Robyn had moved in.

Once inside her apartment, she double-checked the new lock and chain she had requested, then laid her coat across a chair in the living room. Bending down, she slid off her heels, let them plop to the floor, picked them up and carried them into her bedroom.

Rosa sat on the edge of the bed. She reached over, tapped the small touch-lamp on the nightstand and stared at the soft glow of the light, wondering when she would feel normal again.

Pushing a strand of hair out of her face, she sighed. Maybe she should call her mother, she thought, hoping the sound of her mother's voice would make her feel better.

Rosa lifted the handset from the cradle and punched in the numbers.

The fax machine in the small office buzzed, then slowly spat out documents from headquarters. Vane glanced at the first page while he waited for the transmission to complete.

He had settled back into his daily routine after the night of Jake's attack on Robyn. Plans were still on to bring additional Watchers into the city for the upcoming two-week festival. Saturday night's fireworks show on the riverfront was the current event causing headquarters the most concern.

A long tone from the fax machine indicated the transmission had completed. Vane ran his hand through his hair as he picked up the pages and skimmed through the update on the plans for the event.

Leaving the office, Vane thought the house seemed eerily quiet. Tank was out of town on a mission, and Rayne had been called out as well. Trigg was in Lexington, helping Robyn recover from the conversion from human to vampire. The warrior had left word they would return to the Cell soon.

Vane was anxious to see Robyn again, or maybe it was her cooking he missed. Vane's stomach growled its answer.

Stepping into the kitchen to soothe the demands of the bottomless pit that was his stomach, he opened the refrigerator door and almost sobbed, disappointed to find only pieces of lunchmeat and a lot of empty space. Last night he had polished off the rest of the good stuff. With no one around to hound him about eating everything in sight, he had indulged himself a little too much.

"Well, I guess grocery shopping is in order," he muttered, slamming the refrigerator door closed. With a heavy sigh, he headed towards his bedroom for a shower and a change of clothes.

Slicking back his dark hair, Vane was tempted to forego grocery shopping for a trip to one of his favorite haunts. A dancer at the gentlemen's club had blown him away with her performance a few nights ago. She had long black hair and sported tattoos of roses all

over her body, even long-stemmed ones on the back of her thighs. He hadn't realized until that night he had a strong fascination with roses. Something about their beauty, soft petals and enticing scent.

Rosa.

Robyn's best friend popping into his mind out of nowhere surprised him, and he blinked several times.

With quick, aggravated strokes, Vane dried himself with a towel. He couldn't get Rosa Bella out of his head. She had turned to him for comfort after the EMTs took Robyn to the waiting ambulance, and he had taken her warm, soft body into his arms. His body still felt her, longed for her.

Since that night, Rosa had plagued his dreams. She was in his bed, her caramel-colored skin pressed against him as he covered her with his body. He could hear her whisper his name as he stared into her beautiful, smoky gray eyes, heavy with desire for him. He could feel his fangs scrape against her smooth flesh as he skimmed them down her neck.

"Damn!" he cursed and shook himself from his thoughts. His body was hard as a rock, but he knew even if he found someone to help ease the ache in his groin, he could never go through with it. His body and mind thought only of Rosa, and he had no idea what he was going to do about it.

Vane cursed some more and tossed the wet towel into the hamper. "I'm hungry for more than food. Much more."

Rosa prowled her apartment. It had been a frustrating night. First, she had bombed her performance at the club, and then her manager told her she was to take a little vacation. Now, she had a whole week to herself. *A whole week*, she thought. A whole week to wallow in memories and loneliness.

Rosa stopped pacing for a moment and shook her head. She was getting nowhere by burying herself in self-pity. She'd had a life before all this happened, and it was time to

get back to it. But, what was her life? *Not very exciting*, she mentally replied. She hadn't dated in quite a while, nor had she thought much about it. Not until she met Vane. *Vane*.

The night she and Vane had met, a thin thread had kept her tears at bay, but when it broke, she could no longer hold back the whirlwind of emotions stemming from the night's events—fear, sorrow and anger. Vane had embraced her as a man full of warmth and compassion, not as a vampire warrior—elusive and lethal. Rosa could still feel his warm, hard chest, muscular arms holding her tight, and the touch of his hand caressing her hair.

Rosa smacked herself in the forehead. *He was only consoling me. When am I going to stop acting like some Watcher groupie or a teenager on a hormone trip?*

She had seen Vane around town once or twice and knew women flocked to him. They practically swooned at his feet. An image of Vane walking down the street with women wrapped around his legs like petulant children popped into her head, making her laugh, but the humor was fleeting.

"I've got to get out of here and do something productive. Something to clear my head and take my mind off of this," Rosa said to herself with disgust. Quickly, she changed clothes, then grabbed her keys and purse on the way out the door.

"Well, this isn't really what I had in mind," Rosa grumbled as she strode through the automatic doors of the grocery store, pushing a metal shopping cart with squeaking wheels and a tendency to pull to the left.

Chapter Two

Twenty-four hour megastores were the best thing to happen to vampires, Vane mused as he parked his black Mercedes in the back of the lot where it would not get scratched.

While checking his reflection in the rear-view mirror, he ran a hand through his hair and gave himself a big smile. White fangs gleamed back at him as he checked to make sure they were clear of food.

After giving himself a wink, he stepped out of his car, locked it and strode toward the grocery store, stopping just long enough to grab one of shopping carts beside the store's entrance.

The *whoosh* of air hit him as he stepped through the double doors.

"Welcome, sir," said a smiling, older man wearing a blue vest and a rather large nametag. "Please let us know if you need assistance."

Vane nodded politely and turned his cart in the direction of the meat department. His stomach growled as his nostrils caught a whiff of fried chicken left over from the day's cooking. Inhaling the delicious aroma, he had to fight to keep his fangs from lengthening.

Studying the selection of steaks and beef ribs while slowly pushing his cart forward, he felt it bump into something. Looking up to apologize, he froze.

Vane felt his heart skip a beat as he gazed directly into a pair of breathtaking eyes on the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Rosa was standing in front of him looking as surprised as he was at their coincidental meeting.

"Hello, Vane, it's nice to see you again."

Vane was inwardly elated with the warm greeting Rosa had given him. He had hoped she remembered their embrace. He could still feel her warm, soft body pressed against him as he had held her close.

Heat rushed to his groin, and he almost groaned with his desire for her. He could picture her lying beneath him, panting hard as he made passionate love to her, kissing every inch of her body and hearing her call out his name in ecstasy.

“Ah, Rosa, such a pleasure to run into you,” Vane said, pushing aside his carnal thoughts as he lifted Rosa’s hand from her grocery cart and placed a gentle kiss on her knuckles. He heard her slight gasp of surprise and fought the urge to chuckle. After releasing her hand, he straightened.

Vane noticed her gaze travel over the meat selection, then slide over the multitude of items in his cart with a raised eyebrow.

“My goodness, looks like you’re going to feed an army.”

“Well, actually, I’m expecting Trigg and Robyn in the next couple of days, and you know how she loves to cook.” Vane was proud of his quick thinking to cover his over indulgence of food. For some reason he didn’t want Rosa to think him a glutton.

“Robyn will be back in town soon?”

Vane nodded. “Yes, and I’m sure she would be glad to see you.” Their conversation had taken a good turn, and he took it as an opportunity to set up a date. With a deep breath, he readied himself to take the plunge. “Rosa, would you like to go out for coffee tomorrow evening?” He watched her face intently and waited for her answer, silently praying she would say yes.

Rosa stared at Vane, who was showing her a brilliant smile, which made his eyes sparkle. *Those brilliant, emerald green eyes.* She had to give herself a mental slap before drool dribbled from her mouth.

Was he asking her out? She wanted to giggle like a schoolgirl.

“Sure,” Rosa kept her reply calm and cool as she nodded. “Sounds wonderful.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up tomorrow evening at eight.”

“Okay.”

There were several moments of awkward silence as Rosa thought of something else to say. “Well, I guess I had better finish my shopping. I’m glad we bumped into each other. I’ll see you tomorrow night at eight.”

Vane grinned. “Yes, I’m looking forward to it. Until then.”

Once again, he bent to her knuckles, and she held her breath as he kissed them with soft, wet lips, sending goose bumps up her arm.

With a little wave of her fingers, Rosa wished him a pleasant evening.

After paying for her groceries, she headed out the automatic doors and pushed the grocery cart to her SUV, silently cursing at its efforts to go in the other direction. She stopped abruptly when she saw a piece of paper and a long-stemmed, red rose braced underneath the driver’s side windshield wiper. Immediately, she thought of Vane.

Smiling, she removed the paper and the rose, then closed her eyes and smelled the rose, inhaling its sweet scent. Her heart beating a joyful rhythm, she unfolded the piece of paper and read the words.

Rosa,

A beautiful rose for a beautiful woman. Until then...

Rosa laughed softly, then looked around to see if Vane was in the parking lot, certain he had left the note and the rose. She was looking forward to their date tomorrow night. With a little sigh, she sniffed the rose once more, placed her groceries in her SUV, then climbed behind the wheel.

Piles of clothes lay on the bed and floor of Rosa’s bedroom. She couldn’t make up her mind as to what she wanted to wear for her date with Vane. The clock ticked away, and she was growing frantic, yet she couldn’t fathom why she was getting so worked up. *It’s only a date.*

Rosa berated herself for being silly. She settled on a nice blue sundress with a matching sweater in case the night grew cooler. She decided to pin up her thick golden hair, leaving a few spirals to tumble out onto her shoulders. Standing in front of the mirror, she hoped Vane would be pleased.

A knock at the door had Rosa becoming frantic all over again. She searched the bedroom for her silver clutch purse. After finding it, she bolted out of the room, almost tripping over the clothes on the floor. She tried to catch her breath and ran her hands down the front of her dress to smooth the fabric before opening the door.

Vane greeted her with his usual warm smile, one which made his eyes dance. He was wearing tan dress slacks, an off-white silk shirt and a pair of loafers, and his hair was slicked back, with a slight wave at the ends.

“Hello, *mi dulce*, my sweet.”

Rosa blushed as she watched his gaze travel from her feet to her hair, then back to her face. His smile never faltered, so she assumed he was pleased with her appearance.

“Hi.”

Vane held out his arm in a gentlemanly gesture while she pulled the door to her apartment shut, then checked the lock to make sure it was secure. They walked together to the elevator and silently waited.

When the door opened, Vane pressed a hand to the small of her back and gently pushed her inside, then pressed the button for the lobby. After the doors closed and the elevator began its descent, he turned and lowered his head within inches of her neck and inhaled.

“Mmm, *Señorita* Rosa. You smell exquisite. Like roses with a hint of vanilla.”

Rosa sucked in a breath, her heart beating so fast, she was sure he could hear it. She had to lock her knees to keep her legs from buckling. His smooth voice made her arms prickle with goose bumps.

“Thank you.”

They walked to his Mercedes, and he opened the door. He waited for her to get settled, then closed the door quietly.

Rosa couldn't take her gaze off Vane as he walked around the front of the car. The way he moved—slow and graceful with biceps, pecs and every other muscle she didn't know the name of bunching and moving underneath his silk shirt—was like watching the flow of water.

While she was wondering about the play of his muscles of his lower half, the driver's side door opened. Rosa could feel the heat on her face and knew her cheeks were reddening, but before she could remove the evidence of where her thoughts had traveled, Vane slid behind the steering wheel and gave her a saucy wink as he started the engine.

Busted.

Rosa couldn't keep from asking herself what he saw in her. *Why is Vane taking me on a date when he no doubt has women falling at his feet?* These thoughts began to make her feel a little uncomfortable. She pushed them aside and decided to enjoy the evening. Overthinking the situation was useless, so she told herself to have fun.

Vane parked the Mercedes on Fourth Street, then came around to the passenger side, opened her door and held out his hand. His manners were flattering, Rosa thought as she nodded her thanks and stepped onto the sidewalk. He knew how to make a woman feel special. His strong arm slid around hers, and he walked her down the sidewalk.

"They have an excellent coffee shop," Vane said, pointing to a large bookstore, which sat on the corner. He placed his hand at the small of her back and ushered her through the doors. It was the second time tonight he had done this, and she was amazed at the tingling sensation when he touched her. She wondered if Vane had felt it too.

Vane escorted Rosa to a small table in the corner where it was nice and private, wanting to focus all of his attention on her. He pulled out a chair and slightly pushed it forward after she was seated.

"What would you like to drink?"

After uttering the words, Vane envisioned Rosa at his neck, drinking her fill of him as he...

“Whatever mild coffee they have would be fine. Oh, make that decaffeinated, please.”

Her voice shattered the erotic vision like a rock through a windowpane, and he hoped the look on his face during the last few seconds hadn’t given away his thoughts. Clearing his throat, he decided to be a little bolder, do something to add a little intimacy to their date.

“Would you care to share a dessert with me?”

Her smile was knowing, and he felt his heart skip a beat in anticipation. Maybe she had seen the look in his eyes, he wondered.

“Yes. That sounds wonderful.”

“What would you like?”

It didn’t matter to him what dessert he shared with Rosa. It could be lime green Jell-O for all he cared. Just the fact they would be sharing was what mattered.

“Oh, surprise me.”

Evidentially, Rosa had the same thought, or so he hoped.

When Vane returned to the table with their coffees, Rosa had a strange look on her face. “What has that beautiful face frowning?”

“Nothing, I thought I saw someone across the street, but it must have been a reflection in the window.”

She looked up at him and gave him a slight smile, but he wasn’t convinced. Confusion may have been on her face, but he hadn’t missed the fear in her eyes.

As Rosa watched Vane walk back to the counter to retrieve their dessert, she took in his tall, lean body. The form of his butt outlined beneath his slacks made her mouth go dry. All male, and all hers for the moment.

She tore her gaze from the view of Vane’s taut backside and glanced out the window, wondering if what she had seen moments earlier had been her imagination. There had been a man standing across the street, staring at her. But, when she had blinked, he was gone. Now, she wondered if she had really seen anyone at all.

Rosa returned her attention to Vane. He was standing at the counter. She watched the young barista flirt unabashedly, and she inwardly groaned. Vane was a gorgeous guy. It was obvious he had women falling all over him. Besides, she thought, he probably came here many times for coffee, and most likely, not alone.

She couldn't stop herself from wondering how many other women Vane had sat and enjoyed coffee and dessert with at this place. She shook her head. This was just a casual date, nothing more. But she couldn't help feeling a little jealous. *Okay, a lot jealous!*

Vane came back to the table and settled in his chair. He set down a plate of the largest piece of strawberry shortcake she had ever seen, and her eyes widened. Rosa had no doubt the girl at the counter had done it intentionally, but it looked scrumptious.

"What? I wanted to make sure it was enough for two."

The look of innocence on Vane's face was priceless, Rosa thought. Vane liked to eat, that was certain, although she couldn't tell from his well-sculpted body. There wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere, at least not where she could see. She wouldn't mind searching though. The visualization of running her hands all over his sexy body sent shivers up her spine. To keep from visibly trembling, she lifted her fork and helped herself to a bite.

Rosa closed her eyes, savoring the sweet taste of the strawberry shortcake. When she opened them, Vane was staring at her intently, his face drawn tight and serious. Green eyes glowed fiercely with desire. She held her breath for a moment, afraid he was going to leap over the table and pounce.

Several heartbeats later, his face relaxed, and she smiled faintly. She could feel a blush creeping up her neck. Whatever she had done, whatever had sparked passion inside him, she had no idea, but she tucked the memory aside for something to think about later.

Vane had to hold himself in the chair and stifle a groan as he watched Rosa slip a forkful of strawberry shortcake into her delicious mouth. A drop of whipped cream had settled on her lips, and he wanted desperately to lean over and kiss it off.

When Rosa's tongue darted out and licked her lips, he felt himself harden and shifted uncomfortably in his chair to relieve some of the pressure in his slacks. The woman was turning him inside out, and she wasn't even trying.

Desire to take her right here and now coursed through his veins. He wanted to feel her warm breath on his skin and that pink tongue run along the length of his shaft.

Vane forced himself to regain control before he scared Rosa off. He couldn't tamp down, however, the strong desire to feed her himself.

"May I?" he asked as he held a forkful of the dessert to her lips.

When she hesitated, he was afraid she would refuse. After a few moments, she relented, then leaned forward and slowly opened her mouth.

Vane slid the fork into Rosa's mouth, past luscious pink lips. It was such an erotic sight he almost growled. He quickly took a bite himself, thinking it best he not try that again because he wasn't sure about his level of control at the moment. For a distraction, he began polite conversation.

"Rosa," Vane said after clearing his throat. "Tell me about your family. Were you born here in Louisville? Any brothers or sisters?"

She took a sip of her coffee and shook her head. "No brothers or sisters. I'm an only child, but I was born here in Louisville. My parents moved a couple of years ago to Tennessee after my dad retired from the police force."

Vane raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "Your father worked on the police force? Here in Louisville?" He wondered if he had ever met the man.

"Uh-huh, he did. My father was a homicide detective. Of course, he only took the night runs."

"What made you stay in Louisville instead of heading to Tennessee with your parents?"

"Well, I had just started singing at the Black Panther Lounge, and I really enjoyed it. So much, I didn't want to leave."

“Have you always been a singer? I mean, did you take lessons or something?” Vane didn’t know a lot about professional singing. He didn’t quite know what to ask, but he wanted to know more about her.

“Actually, I took classes at the School for Performing Arts while I was attending high school here in the city. Then I had a personal trainer for a couple of years.”

Rosa was enjoying their conversation, but she had no desire to talk about her boring life. What she wanted was to hear about him.

“Okay, now it’s your turn. Tell me about your family. Any brothers or sisters?”

“I have four older brothers in Cuba, where I was born and raised.”

“Really?” Are they...” She had to catch herself before she blurted out the word *Watchers*.

Vane shook his head. “Nope, just me. They didn’t feel it was their calling. They stayed in Cuba with my mother. My father died when I was young. I didn’t know him very well.”

“Oh,” she said, not having the slightest idea how to respond since both her parents were alive and well.

“What made you decide to become a...”

She waited as he took another bite, then a moment to chew and swallow, seemingly contemplating his answer.

“In Cuba, Rogues were on a killing spree, and not just humans. Even the vampire community was in danger. Their numbers kept growing and growing. They had to be stopped.”

He paused for a sip of coffee. “One evening—I guess I was in my mid-twenties—I heard a scream. I went around to the side of a building to find out what was going on, and ran into a group of Rogues attacking a woman and her young son. He must have been around seven or eight. Maybe even a little younger.”

“Oh my God! What happened?”

“Well, I couldn’t turn my back and run the other way, so I tried to save the woman, and the boy. I knew what the bloodsuckers were, and I knew what I had to do to kill them.”

“You fought them all by yourself?”

He shook his head, then forked up another bite of shortcake and raised it to her lips. She was caught off-guard, wanting him to tell her more, but she opened her mouth.

As the fork slid into her mouth, she heard his breath catch, and she stilled. After a few heartbeats, mainly hers beating double-time, Vane seemed to come back to his senses and answered her question.

“No, a Watcher was in the area. He jumped in, and we destroyed them all. That’s when I decided to join the Watchers. He helped me get started.”

“Wow. Who was the other Watcher? Not that I know very many. Actually, I only know you and Trigg, and I only know Trigg through Robyn.” Rosa suddenly realized she was babbling and stopped, a blush creeping up her face.

“Tank,” he answered. “He’s my commanding officer.”

Rosa took another sip of coffee and pondered what other things she wanted to know about Vane.

“Umm... How long are you planning on staying in the Louisville area?” She didn’t want to think about Vane leaving or being assigned somewhere else. She focused her attention on her coffee so he wouldn’t see the anxious look on her face.

“I will stay here until Headquarters or Tank tells me otherwise. Right now, though, I don’t see anything changing unless we lose a good Watcher somewhere, and someone has to take his place.”

Rosa relaxed. She felt stupid for worrying about something that hadn’t happened. And why should she worry? It wasn’t as if they were an *item* or anything. She decided to change the subject.

“Are there any female Watchers? I guess Watchers would have to be Trueborn vampires, right?” Rosa found the topic of Watchers very interesting and was glad to have this conversation with Vane.

“Yes, there are a few female Watchers. Watchers don’t exactly have to be Trueborns. There are some who are converts. Dr. Stephanus Olivia is a convert.”

Rosa was surprised by both answers, especially the fact there were female Watchers. She didn’t think a woman would be strong enough to take on rogue vampires. Suddenly, she remembered something Vane had said after returning her SUV keys after Robyn’s shooting. “Dr. Olivia? He’s the man you told me about at my apartment. The creator of the Watchers.”

Vane nodded. “Yep, the one and only, and if it wasn’t for him deciding to search out others to join in hunting the Rogues, I guess I wouldn’t be here having a wonderful conversation with a beautiful woman.”

Rosa smiled shyly. Yes, he indeed knew how to sweet-talk the ladies. Secretly she hoped he was being sincere and not using one of his pick-up lines.

After finishing their coffee and dessert, Vane decided to take Rosa for a short walk by the river. They had talked for hours, enjoying each other’s company. He had never spent so much time *talking* to a woman and found it very pleasant, realizing the act had been something he had missed out on all this time. Whenever he was with a woman, their mouths were too busy doing other things to do much talking.

They walked along the River Walk, watching the flowing dark water of the Ohio River with the image of the bright yellow moon reflecting off the small ripples. Vane wanted to pull Rosa into his arms and kiss her, but he didn’t want to move too fast. She was obviously enjoying their date as much as he was, and he didn’t want to do anything to ruin it.

After a while, they turned and headed to where Vane’s Mercedes was parked, holding hands like a couple of high schoolers. A dark alley loomed ahead, and the closer they got, the more unease he felt. Suddenly, Vane knew why.

“Rosa, I want you to go to the car. Now. Here are my keys, and don’t look back.”

Vane could see he was scaring her, but he had to get her out of here. He didn’t want Rosa to be caught in the middle of what was about to go down.

“Why? Tell me what’s wrong.”

Before he could answer and make her understand she needed to get the hell out of there, a man swaggered out of the dark shadows of the alley.

“Well, if it isn’t a Watcher.”

The Rogue emerged from the shadows showing his bloodstained fangs with a menacing sneer. He looked at Vane, then turned to Rosa. The thought of the filthy vampire setting his gaze upon Rosa, *his* Rosa, made Vane’s blood boil.

Vane saw a second Rogue cross the street and saunter behind Rosa. It wasn’t a surprise they would plan to use her to keep him off-balance.

Two more Rogues stepped out of the alley, each carrying knives, something the Watchers had noticed they started showing up with. Rogues were acquiring weapons from somewhere, and the consensus among the Watchers was it was from *someone*, but there was no idea as to who that was.

Vane’s mind reeled. This wasn’t going to be an easy fight, and his concern for Rosa intensified. He berated himself for putting her in danger. How stupid to believe because he was a Watcher they would be safe strolling around downtown alone at dark. He had let his guard down, and Rosa might pay the price for it.

He glanced at Rosa and saw her give him a slight nod. Searching her face, he knew her intentions. She was not going to let him fight alone. The Rogue at her back would not expect an attack from a female, and Vane knew this one would be in for a surprise.

At that moment, he yanked his daggers from the holster under his jacket and lunged forward, separating the Rogues who stood before him.

Rosa sensed a Rogue approach her from behind, and she tried desperately to think of what to do. She knew Vane was skilled taking out these killers, but she didn’t want to be a hindrance.

When Vane glanced at her, she saw the pain in his gaze. He was afraid for her. But was there also shame? Whatever it was, it was gone in a flash when his eyes turned a glowing red.

She gave him a slight nod, hoping he understood her intent. She would do what she could to deter the Rogue behind her while he faced the three from the alley. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she noticed this Rogue did not carry a weapon. At least, he wasn't holding one, and she prayed like hell he didn't have one hidden.

Rosa quickly stepped backward, slamming the heel of her stiletto on top of the Rogue's foot. Upon hearing the sickening crunch of bone, she spun around, instinctively ducking in case he struck out in an attempt to land blows to her upper region.

Seeing the Rogue had doubled over from the pain in his foot, she fisted her hands tight and swung them in an upward motion, making contact under his jaw. Never had she been more thankful for the self-defense classes she had taken when she first began singing at the club. It had been her father's idea. Right now, she was glad she had listened.

Another sickening crack was heard as the Rogue's face jerked from her blow to his jaw. He staggered backward, clutching his face, blood spewing from his mouth and nose where the impact had shoved his jawbone up into his cheekbones. Rosa quickly slipped off one of her heels and lunged forward, knocking the Rogue to the sidewalk.

She had put so much momentum in her effort to knock him to the ground, her own body followed, landing on top of him. With quick reflexes, she raised the stiletto and slammed it into his chest, piercing his heart with a nauseating pop.

Vane kept his gaze trained on the three Rogues stalking him, moving in a slow circle like animals. He tracked their body movements, waiting instinctively for the moment when one or all would attack. He didn't have to wait long.

The Rogues moved in unison. Their six hands with pointed claws reached for him, two of them clutching daggers in their boney fingers.

Using the strength in his legs, Vane leaped in the air and landed behind them. As they spun around, he grabbed the closest Rogue, pulled him backward, and speared him in the back with his knife, penetrating the heart.

Vane quickly dropped the dead Rogue and approached the other two. Unfortunately, they were the two brandishing knives.

Out of the corner of his eye, Vane saw Rosa go down on top of the Rogue who had approached her from behind, and his heart almost stopped. He wasn't sure if she had been hurt, or worse.

To his relief, Rosa quickly pulled herself up and did something totally amazing. Using the pointed heel of her shoe, she pierced the Rogue's heart. The howl the Rogue let out was horrifying, and Vane inwardly grimaced. Fighting Rogues was a gruesome ordeal, and not something Rosa should have ever had to witness.

Vane was suddenly filled with intense rage. The Rogues had interrupted the perfect night he had been sharing with Rosa, and had turned it into a nightmare he was sure she wouldn't forget. The thought shattered his control.

An animalistic growl escaped his throat. He swung around, his arms extended with a blade in each hand, and sliced through the necks of both Rogues, simultaneously severing their heads with brute force.

The adrenaline of the fight slowly rescinded, and it wasn't until the roaring in his head cleared he heard soft sobs. He turned and saw Rosa staring at him with wide, horrified eyes, before her legs gave way, and she sank to the sidewalk. Trembling hands covered her face as she cried.

Vane felt as though one of the Rogue's knives had pierced his own heart at that moment, seeing Rosa in such a state and knowing he had been the cause of her anguish.

Flinging his knives to the ground, he was by her side and knelt in front of her. Gently, he pulled her hands away from her face. Tears streamed down her lovely cheeks, and he wanted to kiss them away. He pulled her into his arms, silently praying she wouldn't resist. She didn't.

Suddenly, Rosa jerked herself away, stood and took off toward the alley. Vane thought she meant to run as far and as fast as her legs would take her, but after seeing her hand go over her mouth, he realized she was going to be sick. Quickly, he got to his feet and ran after her.

The sight of Rosa bent over with her hands bracing herself against the wall as she was sick over and over was heart wrenching. Guilt ate at him for involving her in this. The war against the Rogues was the responsibility of the Watchers, not civilian vampires.

Vane stepped closer and held her long golden hair as her stomach emptied onto the concrete. When her spasms and shudders eased, he slid his arm around her waist and walked her to the sidewalk, stopping for a moment to retrieve his knives, her purse and the shoe she had used to kill the Rogue.

He didn't know what to say. Many emotions were bombarding him, making clear thought impossible. He wanted to take back the entire scene and start their night over.

They had been having such an enjoyable time, only to have it end like this. Surely her opinion of him would be changed forever. He didn't stand a chance with her now. When they reached his Mercedes, he opened the door and carefully deposited Rosa inside, then drove in silence to her apartment. A few minutes later, he pulled up outside her building and escorted her to the door of her apartment.

Vane placed a finger under her chin, and turned her face to his. He noticed how pale it was, and her eyes were glistening with tears she was trying to hold back.

"Rosa. I am so sorry, *mi dulce*. You should have never been subjected to what happened. I should have been more aware. I should have sensed the danger and steered you away. I should have..."

Rosa shook her head slowly, and he closed his mouth.

"I'll be okay, Vane. I just need some time alone, all right?"

Vane searched her face and took her hands in his. They were trembling slightly. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to ease the grief squeezing his chest.

"Would you like me to stay with you tonight? I could sleep on the couch if you don't want to be alone."

"No, that's okay. I'll be fine."

Vane didn't believe her, but he stood motionless as she turned and unlocked her door, stepped inside and shut it quietly. He blew out a shaky breath and ran both hands through his hair.

Tonight with Rosa had started out so well, but had ended so badly and Vane didn't know how he was going to fix it. Resigned, he rode the elevator to the lobby, walked outside, then got back into his car. With a squeal of tires, he pulled away from the curb and sped off, not caring where he went.

Rosa closed the door and leaned against it with her eyes closed. She felt numb inside, which she thought was probably a good thing or she would lose her mind. Never in a million years had she ever thought she would be facing a Rogue, much less kill one. She could still smell the stench of blood and death. Her stomach heaved, but thank goodness it had already been emptied in the alley.

Slowly, she dragged herself into the bathroom. When she looked in the mirror, she couldn't believe the face staring back at her. Her skin was pale and clammy, eyes red-rimmed from crying and her make-up gone from her face.

Looking down at her clothes, Rosa saw bloodstains on her sweater and the front of her dress—the blood of the Rogue she had killed with the heel of her shoe.

“Oh God!” Rosa said in a sob as she practically ripped the clothes from her body, then ran into the kitchen and tossed them into the trash. Quickly, she steered herself to bathroom and stepped into the shower, letting the hot spray rain down upon her skin, washing the blood away.

Rosa crawled into bed after her shower and pulled the comforter up to her face. She tried desperately to sleep, but nightmares kept waking her into the early morning hours. Finally, exhaustion took over, sucking her into the abyss.

Chapter Three

Vane drove around the city, trying to shake off the anger at the night's turn of events. After awhile, he headed for one of the local bars, needing a strong drink.

He was sitting in a dark corner, sprawled in a chair and throwing back several shots of whiskey, when a rather beefy, badass-looking dude strode through the door. At first, he didn't recognize the man, as his vision was not quite clear from the drinks he had been downing. Mentally, however, he chose to believe the haze before his eyes was due to the smoke in the dimly lit bar.

The man turned in Vane's direction, as if sensing he was there, then strode to the table and looked down at him. Recognition finally made its way through the fog in Vane's mind. Standing before him with a "you look like shit" grin on his face was Mac, a Watcher from the Cell in Corydon, Indiana.

The warrior stood every bit of seven foot tall and carried a good three hundred pounds on his massive frame.

Mac's skin, even his shaved head, was darkly tanned. His blue jeans were about as tight as the T-shirt he wore. Vane wondered what kept the shirt from ripping at the seams when he moved, especially at his biceps. His appearance screamed *biker*, all the way down to his shit-kicker leather boots.

"Vane, my man. What has you in here drowning your sorrows?"

Mac's voice was more of a bellow, and Vane winced.

When the man plopped his big frame down in the seat across from his, Vane waited to hear the cracking of wood as the chair gave way, but it didn't happen. *Damn*, he thought, disgusted with his rotten luck. He could have used something to laugh at.

Shaking his head, he lifted his shot of whiskey, tipped his head back and downed it in one large gulp. He slammed the shot glass down on the table, a little harder than necessary, and scowled.

“Mac, what brings you to Louisville? Headquarters send you here for the fireworks festival?”

“Yep, that they did. That...they...did.”

Mac said the last part with a long breath. Vane didn't miss the tone in the man's voice. It was one that implied the warrior wasn't pleased at being away from his home area.

Vane couldn't blame him. He wasn't too thrilled himself being smack dab in the middle of hundreds of thousands of humans, not to mention a few hundred vampires. Partying on the riverfront amid blinding lights, deafening booms and choking smoke from the fireworks was not going to be all fun and games.

Vane saw Mac eye the nearly empty bottle of whiskey on the table.

“Rogues. Those damned Rogues. That's what's up.”

Mac flung his head back and hooted with laughter, then slapped one big hand down on the table. His eyes were sparkling with amusement, but Vane didn't find anything about tonight funny.

“Okay, okay,” Mac said with his hands up. “What about the Rogues has you drinking with the devil?”

“I was out on a date, having a wonderful time with the most beautiful woman you have ever seen. We were coming back from the River Walk, and were jumped by four of the bloodsuckers.”

Mac's face lost its smile. “What happened? Did they hurt the girl?”

Vane ignored the question. He was far from finished with his rant, so he continued.

“She killed the one who tried to jump her, and watched as I sliced the other three into pieces.”

Needing to numb the pain he felt eating at his insides, he shot back another drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “It should never have happened. She should

have never had to see that. Christ! She should have never had to kill one of those bastards either.”

Gritting his teeth until his jaws ached, Vane bit back the urge to hurl the glass at the wall. He was angry with himself, both from his inadequacy to protect Rosa, and his inability to keep his control.

Mac scrubbed his face with his hands and blew out a deep breath. “Vane, was the woman hurt?”

Vane shook his head. Rosa had not been hurt, at least not physically, he thought grimly.

“Is she human or vamp?”

“Vamp. She knows about Rogues and even knew how to kill one. She stuck the point of her three-inch heel right into his heart. Dusted him.” Vane’s voice was sardonic and his speech slightly slurred from the amount of whiskey he had drunk.

“Vamp, huh. Well, I think she’ll be okay. Now, if you had said *human*, I would have said you were SOL.” Mac’s sigh was long. “So, I take it you took her home and she’s okay?”

Vane grimaced. “Yeah... I took her home, but I don’t think *anything* is going to be okay. This girl is one of kind, Mac. I doubt if she will ever speak to me again.”

Why Mac smiled at what he had just said was beyond Vane’s comprehension, but it didn’t help his already sour mood.

“What’s so damn funny?” Vane growled between gritted teeth.

“I just can’t believe I’m hearing this right. You care about this girl. You *actually* care about her. I didn’t think you really cared about any of them. You’ve never been known to keep one around for very long before hopping on to the next one....pardon the pun.”

Vane rolled his eyes with disgust and sat back heavily in the chair. The bottle was empty and he was considering calling the bartender for another when Mac shook his head.

“No, Vane, my man. I think you’ve had enough, and I’m certainly not letting you drive in this shape. Give me your keys, and I’ll take you to your Cell.”

Vane knew Mac was right. He didn't want to put anyone else in danger by driving the streets totally shit-faced drunk. He leaned over, pulled the keys to his Mercedes out of his pocket and slapped them into Mac's large, outstretched hand.

While he attempted to stand—it took several tries—Mac yelled to the bartender to have someone watch his bike, telling the man he would be back for it in an hour or more.

Vane let himself be poured into the passenger seat of his car, and his seatbelt buckled. Neither said a word as Mac drove him back to his Cell, then planted his ass in bed.

Vane's head felt like someone had put it in a vise and was turning the lever, squeezing it mercilessly. He cursed and vowed never to drink again. Rolling out of bed took effort, but he knew a hot shower would be worth the trouble. He was partially right. The hot water on his skin did help, but only physically.

After slipping into comfortable clothes, he headed for the kitchen. The place was quiet. Actually, he was thankful for the silence—it would give his head time to quit pounding.

Vane poured himself a glass of orange juice. The thought of eating actually made him feel a little nauseated. *When had that ever happened?*

Slowly, he walked to the kitchen table, sat and placed his head in his hands. Not just because it ached, but because his heart was aching as well. He had a lot of thinking to do, and it was about Rosa. What did she think about him now?

Last night he had tried hard to show her Vane the man, not Vane the Watcher.

How could a date go so wrong? He still couldn't believe it. Of all times for Rogues to show themselves. Their presence downtown had been dwindling. It was just his luck they had picked that night and that precise location to show their ugly faces. Now, his only hope was Rosa would still want him and accept him for what he was—a trained killer.

Finally making up his mind, he walked into the living room and plopped down on the couch beside the phone.

Vane stared at the phone for several minutes, silently willing himself to pick it up and call her. He wanted to make sure she was okay, first of all. Second, he wanted to make sure she was okay *with him*. Pulling together his resolve, he picked up the phone and dialed the number to her apartment.

Rosa felt horrible the next evening when she awoke. With each movement, her muscles screamed from the fight with the Rogue. Deep down, she had hoped it had been a dream. That it had never happened.

Throwing an arm over her eyes, she grimaced. Even her stomach muscles hurt as a result of the violent spasms from when she had gotten sick in the alley.

With a groan, she slid her legs over the side of the bed and stood. Rosa knew she had to stop and think about what had happened last night. She had to process the information, find out what she truly thought about it, and then put it away. She would never get over the nightmares and the visions until she did.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, she headed for the kitchen. Her body and her mind needed coffee, so she pulled a bag of coffee beans from the freezer.

When the coffee was ready, Rosa sat at the kitchen table and began contemplating last night's events while sipping from her cup.

Vane had been attentive during their date. He had seemed so at ease she had totally forgotten he was a Watcher. Actually, they were having such a good time the thought of Rogues had never crossed her mind as they walked downtown. She had felt entirely safe with him, protected.

The Rogues had come out of nowhere, and it wasn't until Vane's demeanor had changed she had even been aware something was wrong. She would never forget the concerned look on his face when the Rogue had come out of the shadows.

He had been truly terrified for her and angry they had been threatened, but the feral noise he had emitted while he advanced on the two remaining Rogues still rang in her ears. She tried hard to understand both the Watcher and the man.

A soft knock caught her attention. A little apprehensive, Rosa walked to the door, thinking it might be Vane. She didn't know what to say to him. She hadn't gotten everything straight yet in her head. After turning the deadbolt, leaving the chain in place, she slowly opened the door. There was no one outside.

Rosa peered around the door as much as she could with the chain in place, but the hallway was empty. Frowning, she closed the door, slid back the chain, then opened it, ready to slam it shut at the first sign of an intruder. Ever since Jake's attack in Darla's apartment, she had been a little on edge, even though she had lived here for a couple of years.

Looking at the floor before stepping out the door, Rosa saw a single long-stemmed, red rose. It was just like the one she had received on the windshield of her SUV and the ones at the club. But, this was the first time her *anonymous giver* had decided to pay a visit at her home.

Puzzled, Rosa picked up the rose and checked the hallway once more.

Why was Vane being secretive? What did it mean?

Rosa sighed. She would have to wait until Vane fessed up and said something. She didn't want to ask and ruin whatever he was planning.

A smile touched her face as she put the rose to her nose and breathed in the sweet scent. Maybe this was all leading up to something. Something he was not quite ready to come out and say. She knew she had fallen in love with Vane and there was no stopping it. Did he feel the same but was unable to declare it just yet?

After Rosa stepped back inside her apartment, she closed and locked the door, then took the rose to the bedroom and placed it in a vase. Remembering her coffee, she returned to the kitchen.

Rosa sat for several minutes, just staring at her hands folded around the warm mug. The more she tried to figure things out, the more confused she felt. She berated herself for getting her hopes up. The phone rang, startling her.

"Hello?"

“Rosa, it’s Vane. I just wanted to check to see how you were...if you needed anything.”

Rosa was surprised and confused. He had been outside her door only minutes earlier and was now calling her on the phone. *Why did he knock on the door then disappear? Why hadn’t he stayed and talked?*

Two possibilities ran through her head. The rose could be an apology for how their date ended last night or a gentle goodbye.

“Oh hello, Vane. No, I’m okay. How about you? You weren’t hurt last night, were you?”

“No, I didn’t get hurt. Listen, the last thing on Earth I would ever want is for you to be in that kind of situation, and I’m sorry I put you there. They were after me, and you were caught in the middle. You should have never had to face something like that.”

Rosa listened intently and heard the grief in Vane’s voice, and she hated the fact he felt the Rogue attack was his fault.

“Vane, it wasn’t your fault. It’s okay. It’s over and done with. Please don’t worry about it anymore. I’m fine, really.”

Silence followed for a few moments, and Rosa frowned, wondering what was going through his head. She thought about the rose and braced herself for the brush-off.

“Rosa, I would understand if you said no, but I would like to see you again. I really enjoyed our date, until it ended so badly. Give me a chance to make it up to you. We’ll try and start over, wipe the slate clean.”

Rosa was stunned. She didn’t want to have their relationship, or whatever this was, end on such a bad note either. Starting over sounded like the perfect idea.

“I would like that too.”

She heard him let out a long breath as if he had been holding it until she answered.

“Great. Are you up to seeing a movie with me this evening?”

Rosa smiled. “Sure, a movie sounds great. What time should I expect you?”

Vane told her he would pick her up around eight o'clock. She had no idea what movies were playing since she had not been to the theater in a while, and Vane said he had no particular preference. They agreed to decide at the theater.

The theater wasn't crowded, which was probably due to the fact it was Monday night, Rosa thought as she and Vane looked over the movie choices. Their last date ending the way it did, they settled on a comedy.

Since neither cared much for sodas, and popcorn was hell on fangs, they bypassed the concession stand and made their way to the screen number printed on their tickets.

Glad to see the back row was free, Rosa smiled as she took Vane's hand in hers and led him up the lighted steps until they reached the top. She hated it when someone sat behind her and made a lot of noise or constantly kicked her seat. The last time it had happened, she had gotten so angry she had been on the verge of doing some serious fang flashing, which was certainly *not* the way to blend in among the humans.

Vane loved seeing Rosa laugh as she watched the movie. Several times, she covered her mouth to stifle the sound. She was full of life. He wanted to hold her close and cherish her forever. He reached over and took her hand in his, resting them on the armrests between their seats, and idly stroked the top of her hand with his thumb.

He couldn't get enough of the feel of her soft skin. All he could think about was bringing those long, lovely fingers to his mouth and slowly kissing each one, but he resisted the temptation. Rosa was enjoying the movie, and he wanted to make sure she had a good time. He owed her that much.

After the movie, he surprised Rosa by stopping at the ice cream shop. They shared a delicious waffle cone of chocolate-almond-coconut ice cream and laughed as they tried feeding each other without dripping ice cream all over the place.

Taking a chance, Vane decided to indulge himself with a kiss with the pretense of removing ice cream from her lips. Her warm mouth was a sharp contrast to the extreme

cold of the ice cream, sending a little shockwave through his senses. When he looked at Rosa's face, he could tell she had felt it too.

Vane walked Rosa to her apartment door, hating their date had come to an end.

"Thank you for being my date this evening. I hope you will grant me the opportunity of having your company again." Vane gave her a sexy smile as he took her hand and pressed a gentle kiss to the palm.

"I had a wonderful time, Vane, and I would love to get together again...anytime."

Her smile and the twinkle in her eyes told him she was telling the truth. She had enjoyed their date this evening, which meant he had a good shot at calling upon her again.

Having to wait to see Rosa again made him want to have something to keep in his thoughts until next time they were together. Gently, he pulled the hand he held until she came into his arms. Ever so slowly, he lowered his lips to hers, giving her time to refuse, but she didn't.

When his lips met hers, his mind went blank. Nothing else mattered but the taste of her lips, and when they parted, he swept his tongue across the bottom lip, then slid it inside her warm mouth. The slow, romantic kiss grew into one overflowing with passion.

Vane felt Rosa's body melt into his. She brought her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, then moaned softly. The sound bounced through his head and made his growing erection throb behind the zipper of his slacks. He knew she could feel the hard bulge because he was holding her tightly against him while their tongues danced and explored.

After releasing the kiss, Vane stared into Rosa's smoky gray eyes. They were clouded with desire, adding more fuel to his heated body.

Vane regained his control and reluctantly pulled back, lowering his arms. He cleared his throat to make sure his voice didn't sound strained when he spoke. "When may I call upon you again, *mi dulce*?"

The kiss had Rosa out of sorts and trying to catch her breath. When the fog in her head cleared, she was able to think about Vane's question.

"I am free all week actually. The club has given me the week off." She wasn't going to tell him she had been *forced* to take a week off due to her terrible performance at the lounge.

Vane smiled as he stared at her. Rosa could feel the heat resonating off his body. She wanted to feel that heat pressed against her body. When he moved forward again, she braced herself for another searing kiss. Instead, he took the keys from her hand and unlocked her door, then stepped back and ushered her inside.

After she stepped inside, she noticed Vane made no move to cross the threshold. She couldn't help the sense of disappointment he was not coming in, but pushed the thought aside and didn't let it show on her face. *All in good time*, were the words she repeated in her head. Surely, there was a good reason why he hadn't made a move on her.

They said their goodbyes for the evening, and Rosa slowly closed the door. She leaned against it with her eyes closed. The evening had been totally wonderful. *And that kiss!* Vane's kisses had made her toes curl. He had felt so good pressed up against her. She wanted to explore all those muscles and more, especially the one she felt against her belly.

Rosa fanned herself at the hot thoughts. She was still trying to get her breathing under control. The twinge of disappointment was still there. Vane had not asked to come inside. Although she wasn't the type of woman to jump the bones of any man, she would certainly not turn Vane down if he broached the subject.

With a heavy sigh, Rosa pushed herself away from the door and headed for the refrigerator for a soothing glass of wine. She didn't think she would get much sleep with a head full of thoughts of Vane...of Vane naked.

The next evening, Rosa waited until Vane picked her up, but he wouldn't tell her where they were going. In fact, he actually blindfolded her.

Thankfully, the ride didn't take long before the engine was turned off. She waited as she heard Vane get out of the car, then open her door a few moments later. He held onto her arm as they walked, then stood still for a few moments until she heard the sliding of doors. After moving forward again, they stopped. The next movement she felt told her she was in an elevator. *Where the hell am I?*

Once the elevator stopped, Vane's hold tightened slightly on her arm as he guided her forward, then stopped and removed her blindfold. Her heart leapt. Robyn was standing in front of her, smiling.

"Oh my God! Robyn! It's so good to see you." Rosa ran to Robyn and gave her a fierce hug. She had missed her best friend deeply and was glad the conversion had gone well.

Rosa stood back, taking in the sight of Robyn, immediately noticing she no longer wore a hat to cover the buzz cut Jake had given her. She reached and touched Robyn's blonde hair. It had grown several inches and was in a cute style, which framed her small face. She couldn't hold back the tears of relief and joy.

"It's so good to see you, too, Rosa. I'm okay and very happy."

Rosa allowed Robyn to pull her to a table where they sat and wiped their damp cheeks. They both turned to Vane and Trigg, and found the males watching them with amusement.

The four of them sat at the table. Robyn had coffee ready and had even made a delicious roast. Rosa noticed how Trigg constantly reached for Robyn, touching her arm, squeezing her hand or touching her hair as if he was afraid he would lose her. *He did almost lose her. We all almost lost her.*

The two of them glanced at each other often, and with each look their eyes glowed with passion and love. Rosa hated to envy anyone, but she envied what Robyn and Trigg shared.

"So, are you two going to stay here?" Rosa asked Robyn, shooting a glance at Trigg to include him in the question. Robyn nodded as she smiled at Trigg, and he gave her a warm smile in return.

Rosa didn't actually know where *here* was. Vane had blindfolded her before they left her building. She didn't know if the blindfold was a part of the surprise of bringing her to see Robyn, or to keep where they were a secret.

It was the latter, which kept nagging her. She tried to push aside the feelings of hurt and disappointment. Vane didn't trust her enough to keep their location a secret.

After they finished dinner, Vane and Trigg headed for the billiard table for a game of pool. Rosa helped Robyn clear the table and put away the leftovers. *Probably won't last long around Vane.* The sudden thought made Rosa chuckle to herself, earning a questioning look from Robyn.

"You're getting to know him quite well," Robyn said with a wink after Rosa revealed what had amused her.

Rosa didn't comment. She *thought* they were getting to know each other pretty well, but she felt Vane was holding back, and she couldn't figure out why. She wanted to confide in Robyn to get another woman's insight, especially since Robyn had known Vane before she had met him, but she decided against it. Besides, she might be imagining things.

"So, how's it going at the club?" Robyn asked as she rinsed the dishes and handed them to Rosa to place in the dishwasher.

"Uh...I'm taking a week off," Rosa answered without looking at Robyn. She didn't want to tell Robyn almost losing her best friend had nearly pushed her into a mental meltdown.

"Isn't this a good money-making week for the lounge? I can't believe they would let you off right before the weekend of the fireworks' festival. Seems they would want to capture all those incoming guests and make as much money as they could."

Rosa hesitated a moment before looking at Robyn. "My last performance didn't go over well. After everything that had happened..." She paused, turning to put another plate in the dishwasher. "I wasn't quite myself, so the manager told me to take a week off to get myself together."

Robyn laid down the bowl she was holding, walked over and hugged Rosa tightly. “Everything’s okay. Jake’s gone, I’m fine...”

Rosa sighed and nodded in agreement. Her friend was right, and it was time to move on.

After cleaning the kitchen, they watched Trigg and Vane play a couple rounds of pool. Rosa tried to stifle a yawn, but wasn’t successful. Vane had seen it and smiled. “Guess I had better get you home.”

After giving hugs and kisses to Robyn and Trigg, Rosa tried to keep the disappointment from showing on her face as Vane once again blindfolded her. What irritated her was he didn’t bother with an explanation or apology. She was supposed to accept it.

It didn’t take long until she was standing in front of the door to her apartment. Rosa felt miffed and hurt over the blindfolding, and she couldn’t keep those feelings out of their goodnight kiss. She gave him a small smile, whispered goodnight, then went inside her apartment, and shut the door quietly.

Vane stood in front of Rosa’s closed door, perplexed. Rosa’s kiss wasn’t as responsive as it had been last night. As he walked to the elevator, he wondered what had gone wrong. With a shrug, he vowed to bring the passion back tomorrow night.

Chapter Four

Rosa received another long-stemmed, red rose with an anonymous card at her door. This time, the card read:

Rosa,

It won't be long now. Maybe tonight. Maybe tomorrow night.

It will be worth the wait I have endured.

She carried the rose and the card to her bedroom, laid the card on the dresser next to the other gifts she had received and put the rose in the vase along with the others. At first, she had thought the notes, roses and trinkets that had shown up at the club had been from fans. This time, however, she felt certain they were coming from Vane. She had no doubt what this note meant. *Tonight's the night.*

Excited as a child on Christmas morning, she all but skipped to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner.

After the delicious dinner Robyn had cooked, Rosa decided she would show Vane her own culinary skills, so she put together a scrumptious meal of bacon-wrapped filet mignon, steamed vegetables and steakhouse potato salad. She also tossed a garden salad, made salad dressing from scratch and whipped up a lemon cheesecake for dessert, wanting to make everything perfect.

Rosa felt a little foolish at being jealous Robyn cooked for Vane. She couldn't help but feel the need to outdo her, just once. Vane loved food, and Rosa wanted to show how well she could cook. *The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.* She chuckled at the old saying. Hopefully, the saying was right and her efforts wouldn't be in vain.

Vane took his time getting ready for another date with Rosa. He heard a soft knock on the door and was surprised to find Robyn standing there when he opened it.

“Hey, *chiquita*. Can I help you with something? Is everything okay?”

Robyn’s hesitation made him concerned. She seemed anxious about whatever was on her mind.

“Uh...Vane? Could I speak with you about Rosa for a moment?”

Vane opened the door to let her inside. He kept the door open out of respect for Trigg. His Cell-mate wouldn’t be happy to find his mate in another man’s bedroom with the door closed. The mated warrior would strike first and ask questions later as the other man lay sprawled on the floor.

“Sure, *chiquita*. What’s on your mind?” Vane followed her into the room. Even though Robyn did not sit, he chose to sit in a chair to give her the ease to speak freely without feeling towered over.

“I am glad you and Rosa are going out. In fact, I think you make a great couple.”

“Do I hear a *but* in there, *chiquita*?” Vane tried to keep the humor out of his voice. Robyn was obviously distraught, but he couldn’t fathom why she would be concerned about him dating Rosa. He would never do anything to hurt Rosa.

Robyn turned to look at him, her hands clasped in front of her as she spoke. Vane noticed she was clutching them so hard her knuckles turned white.

“I know you’ve had a lot of women. I don’t know if you have any current involvements, and I know it’s none of my business. Rosa is such a sweet girl. I don’t want her to get hurt. I am hoping you are at least a *little* serious about this relationship, and it’s not another fling.”

Vane raised an eyebrow at Robyn’s statement, feeling a little offended at her impression of him and the lack of trust. Had he been that shallow in the eyes of others? *Yes*. Vane could see it in Robyn’s eyes.

“I know this is none of my business, but I just had to say it. I hope you understand. Rosa is my best friend, and...”

Vane didn't want to see his Cell-mate's beloved distraught, nor did he want to be the subject of ridicule any longer. He stood and walked toward Robyn, cutting off her stammering. He placed a hand on her shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

"Robyn. I assure you I have no intention of hurting Rosa. I, too, know she is a very sweet woman. She is a special person. During the past several days we've been together, I have had the time of my life. I haven't had this experience with anyone before. I guess I didn't take the time to get to know the other women I have been with. To be honest, I never cared to. But with Rosa, it's different."

Vane sighed and pulled away. He didn't know how to explain these feelings to himself, much less convince Robyn this relationship was unlike any he had ever experienced.

As he paced the room, Robyn approached and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I believe you, Vane, and I am happy you two are together. I hope it evolves into much more...if it's what you both want." She smiled and walked out the door.

Vane sat on the bed, his mind going in several directions at once. He thought about Robyn's comments. Was it what he wanted? He wasn't sure. He spent his evenings either fighting Rogues or partying with women. Both, it seemed, were something to keep him going. The thought of opening his heart to a woman and filling his life with her hadn't entered his mind. Until now.

The women he had acquainted himself with over the years were nothing like Rosa. They hadn't held his interest for long. In fact, they were forgotten when he left their company. So, why was the thought of how Rosa affected him both physically and mentally turning him inside out?

Scrubbing his hands over his face, he knew the answer. It was fear. Fear he wouldn't be able to live up to what others saw on the outside. The thought of loving Rosa was chipping away at his self-confidence. *Love? Was he falling in love?*

Vane chuckled. It seemed he *was* falling for Rosa. She had touched him where no other woman had. He thought of her all the time and couldn't wait until the next time he would be with her. Oh yeah, he had it bad.

Vane groaned, lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. Yeah, he had it bad.

Rosa had finished preparing the cheesecake and placed it in the freezer to set when there was a knock at the door. Her heart made a little flutter of anticipation as she thought about Vane. They were going to have a nice, romantic dinner alone, and then...

The knock sounded again, bringing her out of her thoughts. She hurried to open the door, where she found Vane standing on the other side holding a bottle of wine. Rosa thought about all the flowers and gifts he had been sending her the last several days, and she smiled. He was full of surprises.

Rosa accepted the bottle of wine as he walked through the door. He took a seat in the living room while she took the wine and set it in an ice filled wine bucket.

They sat and talked for a while, though Rosa excused herself several times to step into the kitchen and check on dinner. On her last trip, the dinner was done. She stepped back into the living room and beckoned Vane to the kitchen.

Rosa laid the dishes on the table, watching Vane's expression carefully as he eyed each one. She was pleased to see the look of delight on his face, though she hoped it would stay there after he tasted everything.

Finally, she sat, with Vane's gentlemanly assistance, and waited for him to begin filling his plate. She was surprised when he served her first, then placed food on his own plate.

Vane closed his eyes and inhaled the smell then opened them and cut a piece of the filet mignon. After he slid the meat into his mouth, he groaned.

Rosa had to stifle a laugh at Vane's display of approval of the meal she had prepared. She wondered if he was the type of guy to eat just about anything, or if he truly had a distinct taste for good food. By the way he carried himself, Rosa figured it was probably the latter.

They laughed and discussed several topics while enjoying the meal. Although she occasionally indulged in a glass or two of wine, she wasn't going to concern herself with how much she was drinking this evening. She wanted to stay relaxed and hoped this

would be the night Vane took her into his arms and loved her silly. Her silent smile inadvertently made its way to her face.

“What’s so funny?”

“Uh, nothing. I just thought about something.” Rosa tried to think fast to cover her sudden amusement. She didn’t want to tell blurt out how she wanted to get him into her bed.

“About...” Vane prodded.

“Oh, uh, I was just thinking about the first time Robyn and I went out to dinner together. I ordered a rare steak, and you should have seen the look on her face as I took a bite. It seems my fangs had made an appearance.” Rosa patted herself on the back for her quick thinking.

After they finished their meal, Rosa put the dishes in the sink and ushered Vane into the living room for coffee and dessert. They sat on the couch, and it grew uncomfortably quiet for a few moments.

Rosa poured their coffee, trying to keep her hand from trembling. When she turned to offer the cup to Vane, she froze upon seeing the expression on his face. His eyes were dark with desire.

He took the cup from her hand and set it on the coffee table without taking his gaze off her, then pulled her close and captured her mouth. The kiss screamed *need* in her mind.

Rosa melted into Vane’s kiss, savoring it. She let her tongue dance with his and swept it over his fangs. When they lengthened, she grew warm inside. Her heart sped up, and her breathing grew rapid. Her muscles tensed, and she longed to get his body closer to hers. She was on fire.

Finally, she pulled back and looked into his eyes. Vane’s expression didn’t change. He stared at her with so much passion her breath caught. Grasping his hand in hers, she led him to her bedroom.

Vane couldn't hold back his control and pounced on Rosa as soon as they entered her room. He picked her up, laid her on the bed and covered her body with his, kissing her fiercely, then softened the kiss as he held her face in the palms of his hands.

He nudged her thighs apart with his own before sliding down her legs to slip off one shoe and then the other. With soothing strokes, he rubbed the arches and heels of her feet, then moved his hands up to gently squeeze her calves. He slid them further and rested them on the front of her thighs.

Her skin was smooth, soft, and he could not get enough of its feel.

Vane hooked his thumbs under the hem of Rosa's dress and slowly slid his hand forward, bringing the fabric along as his fingers made their way up her body, pausing only to leave wet, warm kisses along her thighs and hip bones.

He splayed his hands over her belly and continued to slide her dress upward, trailing kisses over her navel, up her sternum and between her breasts. She wasn't wearing a bra, which delighted him as he had immediate access to her soft fullness.

Holding the weight of one breast in his hand, he used his thumb to circle the nipple, teasing it into a taut, puckered bud. When she arched her back in a silent invitation, he quickly accepted and placed it in his mouth.

Rosa lost all thought as the intensity of Vane's touch surrounded her. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once. His tongue flicked and suckled one breast and then the other. Each pull on them, each scrape of his teeth over their sensitive peaks, made her squirm with pleasure.

Her dress was around her shoulders. Vane released the slow torture he was performing on her breasts and pushed it over her head, then tossed it onto the floor.

She felt exposed, bared to his gaze though she was still wearing panties. She didn't move as he looked her over. After a few moments, he returned to her mouth again for another long, languishing kiss.

After releasing the kiss, Vane leaned over and inhaled her scent, then growled, the low rumble sending a shiver through her body as it vibrated through his chest and along her bare skin. His fangs grazed her neck, and her heart jumped in anticipation.

She couldn't help feel a slight disappointment when his fangs continued down her neck and along her collarbone instead of taking what she would have freely given, but she knew they were not close to becoming mates. He had never declared his feelings for her.

Vane knew he should slow down, but he was having a hard time reining himself in. What was wrong with him? He usually had so much control. He was acting like a sex-starved maniac.

Breathing heavily he stared at Rosa. "I'm sorry I am going fast, *mi dulce*. You drive me crazy. I've got control of myself now."

He gave her a very sexy smile before feathering kisses across her face and down her neck. He kissed around her jawbone, then behind the ear, taking time to suckle on her earlobe.

Rosa caught his earlobe in her teeth and breathed in his ear. "I don't mind if you lose control."

Vane's pulse jumped at her words. He slid his hand down her stomach, then traveled lower until he reached her panties, hooked his thumbs on either side of the waistband, pulled them off and tossed them over his shoulder.

Easing his way to the foot of the bed, he was greeted by a delicious sight. Rosa's mound was bare, devoid of anything blocking his view. His mouth watered, anxious to taste her.

Gently, he slid his palms to rest on her bottom, then pulled her forward slightly for better access to slide his tongue over the outside of her lips. She was wet and inviting, making him want to take her.

Vane lifted her higher, and delved deeper, using his tongue to pierce inside and plunder the creamy sweetness waiting for him.

She grasped his biceps tightly and arched into him, then began a slow rocking rhythm. Her breathing became louder, and he knew she was close to climaxing. *Not yet.*

He stopped teasing her with his tongue and chuckled at the sound Rosa made when he pulled away.

Standing slowly he unbuttoned his silk shirt, yanked it out of his waistband and tossed it onto the floor. His gaze never left hers as he used the heel of one foot to remove one shoe, then the other, unhooked his pants, and slowly pulled down the zipper.

The look on her face told him what he was doing to her, and he was going to make the best of it. His undressing act would be slow and tortuous, leaving her anxious and wanting until he was done.

With the same deliberation, he slid his pants down over his hips, shoving his briefs with them until they pooled on the floor. He stepped out of them, pulled off his socks and stood there for a moment, taking in the sight of her as she lay naked before him. Her skin was glowing with the flush of her arousal. Her beautiful mound, bare and glistening from where he had tasted her, was like a siren's call.

Rosa stared at Vane's beautiful, muscular body—all hard lines and curves. With each movement he had made as he undressed, his muscles had rippled and bunched. She wanted to run her tongue over every line, over every groove outlining them. He was hard, solid, especially where it mattered most at the moment. He was eye candy, and she wanted to taste very bit of him.

"Tu eres tan hermosa, mi dulce."

His voice was husky as he returned to her arms, his warm skin touching hers. He took her mouth, kissing her, devouring her once more as he settled himself between her legs.

Rosa felt the tip of his erection press against her opening, torturing her by entering slightly, then retreating, until he finally pushed inside slowly and continued forward, sliding over every nerve ending, releasing a moan of ecstasy from both of them.

He began a slow rhythm, stretching her fully, filling her. They were both coated with a sheen of sweat as his rhythm increased. She murmured and moaned her pleasure, locking her ankles behind him to shove him deeper inside, taking in all of him. Her body was a bundle of sensations.

“Oh, Vane, this feels wonderful.”

Rosa felt the heat of his body where they were joined. An intense need overcame her. She wanted more. She wanted him deeper inside of her, fast and hard. The friction between them as he ground into her pushed her pleasure higher and higher, until her body tingled.

Rosa had only three words in her once extensive vocabulary at that moment—Oh, God and Vane. That third burst from her lips with a cry of ecstasy.

The sensation rose from her toes and shot through her body, exploding into a million pieces, bringing Vane along for the ride as she called out his name.

Their co-mingled climax was as if a supernova had occurred in the room while they lay in each other arms struggling to catch their breath. Vane shifted to her side and pulled her close, planting kisses in her hair and stroking her back. They lay in each other’s arms for several minutes.

“Rosa,” he said softly, “you are amazing.”

Rosa smiled as she lay with her cheek on Vane’s chest, listening to the beat of his heart. “You’re not so bad yourself,” she teased.

He had made love to her thoroughly. She was totally content and sighed. His touch had made her feel like a goddess, with his attention solely on her enjoyment. She couldn’t wait to return the favor.

Vane heard Rosa’s sigh and smiled with male satisfaction. He had accomplished what he intended, which was to show Rosa she was the most beautiful and enchanting woman he had ever seen. His only problem, though, was he couldn’t stay the entire evening. He had not been making his rounds like he should have since they had begun

dating. He sincerely hoped she would understand and not take his leaving as a blow off or a quick roll in the sack. He shifted slightly.

Vane looked into her sleepy face and gave her a big smile. He spoke softly, running his fingers through her soft spirals.

“Rosa, it’s time for me to go. I need to patrol for a few hours before the sun rises. I have been neglecting my duties, and need to make sure the city is safe. The Rogues will be coming into town very soon, and the Watchers have to be ready.”

Disappointment showed in her eyes, but wasn’t mixed with anger or hurt at his leaving. He placed two fingers under her chin and lifted her face. Bending down, he kissed her softly.

After tasting her lips, he wanted to stay and take her once more. Being inside her had felt right. Her slick heat had held him like a glove. Vane had to close his eyes. He was hard and ready for another sensual ride.

“I understand. It’s okay.”

Vane watched Rosa’s small, round butt sway as she walked to the bathroom. He groaned inwardly because he didn’t want to leave, but knew he must. He would rather stay and make love to Rosa all night and well into the morning, before the deep sleep overtook them both. Then he would wake up the next evening with her in his arms, only to do it all over again.

As he slid off the bed to retrieve his clothes, he noticed a vase of roses on the dresser. Curious, he walked over, picked up a card, and read it.

Rosa,

It won’t be long now. Maybe tonight. Maybe tomorrow night.

It will be worth the wait we have shared.

Vane tried to control himself as thoughts flashed through his head. Was Rosa seeing another man? Even though they hadn’t talked about their relationship or declared their

true feelings for one another, he still felt outrage boiling inside. He refused to think of her with another man and tried to control his anger. Beside the vase lay another card.

Rosa,

A beautiful rose for a beautiful woman. Until then...

Vane dropped the card onto the dresser. There were other trinkets scattered about, but no additional cards. Maybe these are from an admirer at the club, he reasoned, but it didn't ease his jealousy.

Jealousy?

Vane ran a hand through his hair. He had never felt jealous of another man a day in his life. Why was he feeling it now? It wasn't as if he and Rosa were mates. This had been their first night together, but he wanted more of these nights.

He blew out an exasperated sigh and dressed, then walked down the hall and into the living room where he sat and pulled on his socks and shoes. He was still trying to control his emotions when Rosa stepped into the room.

Rosa cinched the sash on her short bathrobe and sat next to Vane, watching him stuff his feet into his loafers. She noticed he was rather tense and wondered what was wrong. He didn't speak until he finished, then stood and faced her.

He leaned down, kissed her softly on the lips and once on the forehead, murmured he would see her soon and left.

Rosa stared at the door as it closed behind him. What had just happened? She mentally jogged through the night's events, trying to determine the reason for his sudden coolness, but she couldn't come up with anything. Maybe all Vane wanted was to get her into bed. Maybe all along he was just leading up to it. Now he'd had his taste, it was time to move on.

Her heart sank. She willed herself to believe it wasn't true, and something else was the reason for his change in demeanor.

Standing, Rosa blinked back tears and walked to her bedroom where she practically collapsed on the bed, feeling like an utter fool.

Burying her face in her pillow, she cried herself to sleep.

There wasn't much action downtown, which didn't sit right with Vane. There should be dozens of Rogues hanging out around the city with more following as the day of the fireworks' festival neared. In fact, there were only two more days before the show.

Vane patrolled the streets, flushing out a few Rogues here and there. It wasn't difficult to find their holes. Their stench gave them away. Too bad humans didn't come with a built-in Rogue detector, Vane thought to himself. He was in a foul mood, which wasn't improving.

When he had left Rosa's apartment to go on patrol, he left his Mercedes parked in front of her building since it was easier to locate Rogues while on foot.

Walking down the dark sidewalk toward his car, Vane couldn't turn his thoughts from the flowers and cards in Rosa's bedroom.

Rosa was a beautiful woman. Of course there would be men pursuing her. He was, wasn't he? Vane scowled at himself. Rosa was a well-known singer in the city and had fans who adored her.

He stopped walking for a moment and leaned against the wall of a building. His head and his heart were driving him insane.

Vane slammed his hand against the wall. "Well, Vane, my friend, you will have to make sure you are at the front of the line." He was going to fight for her. If there was indeed someone else, the other guy didn't stand a chance. He was coming to realize he cared deeply for Rosa, and he wanted her in his life, forever.

As he walked down the deserted street, Vane walked past the parking lot designated for Rosa's apartment building's residents, where he saw her SUV.

It wasn't hard to spot Rosa's vehicle. The butterfly motif on the back window was certainly her style. Not to mention the SUV was gold, the color of her silken, curly hair.

Vane continued walking, then stopped when he noticed a piece of paper secured underneath the windshield wiper of her SUV, flapping in the night breeze. Frowning, he turned and walked over to investigate.

A red rose had been drawn on the front of the paper. Carefully, he removed it from under the wiper blade and read what was written inside.

Rosa,

I've been waiting patiently, but will wait no longer. You have been spending far too much time with that Watcher. This does not please me and is very unwise. Did you not appreciate my gifts? I can offer you the finest of everything. Anything you could ever imagine. I will see you soon, very soon, Rosa Bella, my beautiful rose.

Fighting the urge to roar his anger, Vane crumpled the piece of paper in his fist. Someone was stalking Rosa, and what did this person mean about his gifts? Was that where the flowers and cards were coming from?

Vane looked around, checking the streets for a sign of who might be lurking in the area. He would find this lunatic and put a stop to his harassment. The thought of someone threatening or attempting to hurt Rosa made him growl through clenched teeth.

He looked up at Rosa's bedroom window. No lights were on. Perhaps she had returned to bed. There was no reason to worry or cause her any concern. He wouldn't say anything to her about the note. Instead, he would keep a close eye on her.

Vane grimaced. He had been a real ass when he had left her apartment abruptly. Caught up in the thought of her being pursued by another man, he had acted poorly. There was no telling what was going through her head.

Tomorrow evening he would make it up to her. He would take her to a fancy restaurant and treat her like the special woman she was. He would tell her his feelings for her and pray she felt the same.

One last look convinced Vane whoever had left the note was no longer close by. Checking the paper for the writer's scent, he found it was very faint, which surprised him. How could someone mask their scent so well? *Vampire*.

Vane shoved the note in his pocket. He would take it back to the Cell and send it out to the lab to see what information they can find.

Chapter Five

Rosa woke slowly the next evening. She smiled remembering how good her body had felt last night with Vane. Her smile faded and a pang of awareness hit her when she remembered how he had acted before leaving.

She pulled the pillow over her face and groaned. How could she have been so stupid? She should have known there was no conceivable reason he would be interested in her. She wasn't the flamboyant, outgoing type. She didn't care about partying or hanging out on the town—things Vane enjoyed.

"It's hopeless."

After brushing her teeth and flossing her fangs, Rosa dressed in lounging clothes. She was still on vacation, and it was going to be a long, boring night. Although her heart was hoping Vane would call, she wouldn't hold her breath.

Settling down to the newspaper and a cup of coffee, the telephone rang.

"Hello?"

"Rosa? It's Vane."

Rosa almost dropped the phone as her heart leaped into her throat.

"Rosa? Are you there?"

"Um, yeah. Sorry. So, what are you up to this evening? Got a lot of patrolling to do?" Rosa fought to keep anxiety out of her voice.

"Yeah, maybe later. I was wondering...would you like to go to dinner with me tonight? I know a great restaurant I think you would enjoy."

Rosa was stunned. She didn't know what to say. Just when she had herself almost convinced this relationship was hopeless and Vane didn't feel anything for her, he called and asked her out to dinner.

A part of her was screaming *No, you idiot. Give it up already*. Another part of her was dancing for joy. The joy won. “Sure. Sounds good. What time should I be ready?”

“I made a reservation for nine. Is that too late for you? If it is, I can try to get an earlier table.”

Rosa laughed. Vane was obviously trying to smooth things over after last night. “No, nine is fine. So, I guess I’ll see you by eight-thirty, then?”

“Yes, I’ll see you then.”

Rosa stood in front of her mirror, agonizing over the right dress to wear. *Why does this have to be so hard?* She stomped back to the closet, took off the dress she had on and pulled on another one, then returned to the mirror.

After putting on every dress she owned—twice—she gave up and kept the floral dress she had on and tossed a lacy, white shawl over her shoulders. She pulled her hair up off her shoulders and fastened it with a beautiful, silver clip, but left out several thin strands to feather down the nape of her neck.

She slid her feet into a pair of sandals, thankful she had taken the time to give herself a quick pedicure and paint her toenails. In anticipation, she paced the floor of her apartment.

A soft knock sounded at the door, and Rosa all but ran to open it. When she did her anxiety melted away with one look at Vane’s charming smile and his sparkling, emerald eyes. The thoughts and doubts from last night vanished as she leaned in for a soft, romantic kiss.

Vane held his breath until Rosa opened the door. He knew he had acted poorly last night, but the smile Rosa gave him when she opened the door stole his heart. She looked like an angel standing in the doorway.

Her floral patterned dress flowed lightly around her beautiful curves, and the sight of tendrils of golden hair playing about her smooth caramel colored neck made him want to taste her all over again.

Before he let his fantasies get out of hand, he stepped forward and kissed her.

“You smell wonderful, as always, *mi amor*,” Vane crooned as he gently broke their kiss, and then stepped back to take in the sight of her once more.

“I’m ready if you are.”

Vane raised an eyebrow at Rosa’s statement. Her sudden blush revealed her realization of the double-entendre. He laughed and whispered “always” in her ear, then turned toward the door. “Yes, let’s go. I think you will like this restaurant.”

Vane pulled the Mercedes into a parking lot in front of what resembled a tall office building.

“Is the restaurant in this building?” Rosa asked as Vane helped her out of the car.

“Yes. It’s on the top floor. They have the most delicious steak I have ever sunk my teeth into, and their service is impeccable.”

He led Rosa inside the building and into the elevator. Once he announced their reservation to the hostess, they were seated by a window overlooking the city.

Their waiter, who introduced himself as Paul, filled their water glasses and handed them both a menu. As Rosa perused the menu, she heard the waiter ask if they would like a bottle of wine or a drink from the bar. Vane ordered a glass of wine and asked her if she would like the same. Rosa shook her head and requested coffee.

The waiter excused himself to fetch their drink orders. Vane reached across the table and placed his hands over Rosa’s. “You look beautiful this evening, Rosa.”

After a few minutes their waiter returned and placed a glass of wine in front of Vane, then sat a French Press on the table, placed a coffee cup and saucer in front of Rosa, and poured her coffee.

The enticing aroma from the coffee filled the air around them. Vane couldn’t take his gaze off Rosa as she inhaled deeply, savoring it. Her serene face seemed to glow, and he was pleased she was enjoying their date so far. He hoped he could make amends for being such an ass last night.

Vane placed their orders, and when the waiter left the table, he stood and held out his hand. “Why don’t we step out onto the balcony? It’s a beautiful night.”

Taking Rosa’s hand in his, he escorted her through the sliding glass doors to the iron railing.

Vane watched Rosa gaze over the city, then turn her face toward the night sky. He could see the moon’s reflection in her eyes, making her look surreal and mysterious. A *goddess*, he thought to himself. Rosa’s beauty and personality surrounded him, enchanted him and held him captive until he could think only of her.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw their waiter approach with a long-stemmed, red rose. He had requested the flower when he made the reservation. He was pulling out all the romantic cards he knew to play.

Quietly, he edged to the door to take the rose from the waiter, then turned and stared at Rosa’s silhouette as she seemed to marvel at the beauty of the night sky. Vane took a mental picture of the sight of her standing there. When she finally turned to look at him, she smiled.

Rosa couldn’t tear her gaze away from the night sky. Not until she felt Vane’s gaze upon her. She turned to find him staring, his emerald eyes gleaming and a beautiful red rose in his hand. She was flattered at his romantic gesture.

“Oh, Vane, it’s beautiful.” She accepted the rose with a long, searing kiss. Her heart was filled with joy. The night seemed to be meant for her, and doubts about Vane’s intent had been washed away.

When the kiss ended, Rosa stepped back and brought the rose to her nose. “My, you must own stock in a florist company,” she said grinning at him. “You’ve given me so many roses since we met at Darla’s apartment, I am running out of places to put them.”

“So many roses? This is the first one.”

Rosa frowned at the raised eyebrow and questioning look on Vane’s face, and her heart began to pound. She had been so sure the notes, flowers and gifts she had been receiving lately had come from Vane.

“So, you haven’t been sending me flowers and leaving me notes and gifts?” Rosa tried to keep the tremble out of her voice as her heart sank. She had been basing the progression of their relationship partly on tokens of affection she had thought were from Vane.

Her stomach churned, and she felt her face heat with embarrassment.

“Are you referring to the flowers in your bedroom? I admit I was curious when I saw them, and even more curious about the anonymous cards. I wish I could take the credit, but they weren’t from me.”

Rosa was so distraught she thought she was going to be ill. Vane must have noticed because he cupped her cheek with his hand and looked into her eyes.

“Perhaps you have a secret admirer. You have the voice of an angel and the beauty to match. I’m sure there are many adoring fans.”

Rosa needed to change the subject. She needed time to compose herself and throw off her disappointment. She shrugged a shoulder. “I am glad you brought me to this wonderful restaurant and the view...” Rosa turned to look out over the city in an attempt to hide her face as she struggled to paste on a smile for Vane. “The view is amazing.”

She felt Vane’s hand on her arm and allowed him to turn her from the railing, then pull her close to his body and place his mouth over hers. The kiss helped to squelch the embarrassment of mistakenly believing Vane to be her secret admirer.

The voice of Paul, their waiter, broke into the moment, and they quickly stepped away from one another. Their meal had arrived at their table, and it was time to leave the privacy of the balcony and the warmth of his lips.

Vane attempted light conversation as they enjoyed their meal. Rosa was doing her best to keep focused on the conversation and make it through the date with her head held high. She wanted to smack herself for fretting. It was just a misunderstanding. What was the big deal? Vane was here with her as he had been all week. Didn’t that count for something?

Rosa's head was spinning, and a huge headache was forming behind her eyes. She excused herself to go to the restroom. She hoped a splash of water on her face would make her feel better.

She walked into the restroom, and glanced at herself in the mirror. It was going to take more than a splash or two of water to wipe away the myriad of emotions covering her face. Rosa wished she could pull herself together. Her evening was going downhill fast, and it was no one's fault but her own. Sighing, she turned, and entered the nearest stall.

While taking the moment of privacy behind the closed door to gather herself, she heard the restroom door open, followed by the *clip clop* of heels on the tile floor. Two women entered the restroom, talking excitedly.

"Hey, Carol. Did you see who is here?" One woman asked in a voice too chipper for Rosa's mood.

"Who?"

"You mean you didn't see him sitting over by the window?"

"Who? Tell me."

"You remember Vane, right?"

Rosa's ears perked up at the mention of Vane's name. What could these women have to do with him? She made no sound and hoped they would finish their conversation before leaving. She knew she was eavesdropping, but she wanted to know what, if any, association Vane had had with these two women.

"Yeah, he was a regular at the bar. He used to take Marie out on the town, or should I say for a spin or two." The two women laughed at the double entendre.

"You know, before that I heard he was spending some quality time with Renee, one of those shadow box dancers downtown at the Blue Velvet Club."

"Hey, didn't we see him there the other night?"

"Yeah. He sure does get around, doesn't he?"

"Hmm...I wonder who the lucky gal is tonight."

"You didn't recognize her? Oh, you must not have gotten a good look. He's with Rosa Bella, the singer at the Black Panther Lounge."

“Ah, I see. He must be looking to improve his resume, going from bartenders, waitresses, and shadow box dancers to a classy singer at a night club.” They both chuckled.

“I wonder who he will have his eyes on next.”

“That’s a good question. Well, let’s see, probably someone well known or famous. Oh, I know. What about the college girls running for festival queen? From what I’ve heard, he’d be able to take them all on at once.”

“I tell you what, I wouldn’t mind having a piece of that pie myself.”

“You and me both.”

They laughed hysterically at the last comment. “Oh, stop, you’re ruining my make-up. Now I’ve got to fix it.”

Rosa heard one of the women enter a stall, and she sat quietly, her knuckles stuffed into her mouth to keep from screaming. She felt an utter fool. Everything was as she had thought. She’d had it all figured out yesterday after he left her apartment. Left her feeling used. But it had only taken one look at him tonight to make her forget everything. Vane was indeed a smooth talking ladies’ man.

After the clicking of heels indicated the two women had left the restroom, and she was once again alone, Rosa took her cell phone out of her purse. With a shaky hand she dialed Robyn’s number and wiped at her tears.

“Hello?”

“Robyn?” Rosa’s voice held a teary tremble she could not suppress.

“Rosa? Rosa, honey, what’s wrong? Why are you crying? Are you okay?”

“Oh, Robyn, I have been so stupid. I feel like an utter fool.” Rosa sobbed.

“Rosa, where are you?”

“I’m in the bathroom of a restaurant, crying my eyeballs out like an utter idiot.”

“Why, what happened?”

“Vane brought me to this wonderful restaurant. While I was in the bathroom two women came in and were talking about him. Oh, how could I have been so stupid? Vane

will never change. He's got so many girlfriends it isn't funny. Why did I think it would be any different with me? I'm just another one to add to the mix."

Rosa couldn't hold back the tears and cried harder.

"Rosa, honey, I'm sorry. Where are you? I'll come and pick you up..."

Rosa cut her off. "No, that's okay. Listen, I've got to go. I just needed someone to talk to. I'll call you later."

Rosa disconnected the call and dried her eyes with tissue paper, then took a deep breath. She left the stall and stood in front of the mirror, staring at a fool with red-rimmed eyes and a blotchy face. She was utterly devastated. She had really fallen for Vane. How gullible was that?

After washing her hands, she splashed water on her face to erase the tear stains. She couldn't face Vane. She couldn't go out there and play his game, pretending to be none the wiser. She couldn't watch him sit there and act as though she was something special and meant something to him.

Shaking her head, Rosa dried her hands and tossed the paper towels into the trash. She hitched her purse on her shoulder and left the restroom.

Their table was far away from the door and around the corner. Vane would not see her when she left. She walked out of the restaurant and left the building.

Rosa had no clue where she was going, but it was going to be far away from here, and far away from Vane.

"Rosa?" Robyn called desperately into the phone, but only heard the click and then the dial tone. Rosa had hung up. She dialed Rosa's phone number, but her voicemail immediately picked up the call. Rosa had turned off her cell phone.

Robyn felt anger boil up inside. Vane was scum. Rosa said he had played her like all of his other ladies. She had so hoped he had changed—had finally grown up and was ready to settle down. She had hoped he would see what a wonderful woman Rosa was and maybe they would become mates. They made the perfect couple, but she had obviously been wrong on all points.

Hissing through her fangs, which had extended from her anger, Robyn flung the phone at the wall. It hit with a hard crash before shattering into several pieces.

Trigg had been sitting in the office pecking away at the keys on the computer, searching the Internet for information on black wolves and possible wolf sanctuaries in Indiana for Rayne, one of his Cell-mates. After the crash of the phone reverberated through the living room, Robyn saw him poke his head out of the office doorway.

She stood in the middle of the living room, her fists clenched as she seethed in rage. Immediately, her mate was by her side.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

Trigg raised her hands and gently prodded them open. He brought each palm up to his mouth and ran his tongue over the cuts her nails had made where she had unconsciously dug them into her skin.

Robyn closed her eyes. Even through her anger, Trigg could make her body melt with a kiss or even the sound of his voice. Slowly, she opened her eyes and took a deep breath.

“That was Rosa on the phone. She was sitting in the bathroom of a restaurant crying her eyes out. Seems she overheard some women talking about Vane’s recent escapades.”

Trigg gathered Robyn into his arms, and she let herself go willingly. Warm lips kissed the top of her head, then she felt his cheek resting on the same spot. Trigg knew how much she cared about Rosa.

Robyn calmed in Trigg’s strong arms. She didn’t know what to do. Rosa had refused when she offered to pick her up and take her home. She was afraid Rosa was so upset she would leave the restaurant alone. In despair, she pulled back and looked up at Trigg, silently asking for some idea of what to do.

“Robyn, Vane and Rosa are going to have to work this out for themselves. It really isn’t our place even though Rosa is your friend.”

Trigg’s voice was soft and she knew he was trying to convince her of what her head already knew, but her heart didn’t want to go along with.

“Yes, I know. But it’s hard to sit back and watch something good fall apart because someone is acting stupid.”

She felt like stomping her foot like an angry child, but it wouldn’t solve anything.

Trigg gave her a light kiss and returned to his research in the office. Robyn fetched the trashcan and picked up the pieces of the broken telephone. With each piece she tossed inside, she couldn’t tamp down the growing worry in her gut. She wished Rosa would call again so she knew her friend was safe.

Vane looked over his shoulder in the direction of the restrooms. He had seen two women walk out, but there had been no sign of Rosa. He checked his watch. She had been gone almost twenty minutes.

Concerned and fearing Rosa may be ill, Vane flagged down a female waitress and asked her to check the restroom. The waitress went inside, then came out shaking her head.

“The restroom is empty. There is no one in there.”

Now, Vane was really concerned. Where had Rosa gone? He returned to his table, called for his waiter and paid the bill for their dinner, grabbed Rosa’s shawl, then checked the balcony, searching the entire floor. Nothing.

Vane ran a hand through his hair. He had no clue where Rosa could be. Finally, he walked to the hostess stand to inquire if anyone had seen her.

“Yes, sir. She left about fifteen minutes ago.”

Vane didn’t hesitate. He turned and took the stairs to the bottom floor, and ran outside, but didn’t see Rosa anywhere.

Rosa walked down the street, cursing herself and repeatedly wiping tears from her eyes, which would not stop flowing. She walked briskly, having no idea where she was going, but it didn’t matter. She planned to walk until she could go no further. Hopefully she would walk Vane right out of her head and her heart.

It wasn't long before she reached the edge of a park. She was getting a little tired and decided to sit on a bench for a while and think. Lowering herself to the stone bench, she laid her face in her hands.

Rosa thought about her life. She was twenty-one, single and spent her nights singing at a club. The only friend she had had was Darla. Although she now had Robyn, the list was still rather small.

Her parents lived out of town, and she had no brothers or sisters she could visit or call on the phone and chat. She slept most of the day and didn't have a chance to meet many people.

Rosa liked to visit Darla, Phillip and Abigail, but those visits tended to cause regret—regret she had not found someone to settle down with and raise children. Abigail was such an angel. She envied Darla and Phillip.

Rosa sighed heavily.

The scent of a rose caught her attention. Dropping her hands, she looked up to find a red rose held out in front of her. *Vane*.

Her heart jumped. At first she felt elated, but quickly chastised herself. Getting him out of her heart was not going to be easy. One look at him, and she would probably go right to his arms.

Shaking her head in disgust, Rosa took the rose and slowly turned around. The man standing behind her was not Vane.

“Ah, Rosa, my beautiful rose. Finally, I have you alone,” the man drawled.

Rosa could tell immediately the man was a vampire. He wore a pair of well-fitted gray slacks and a white silk, button-down shirt.

The man's face was handsome, but slightly pale. Maybe it was because of his short, light blond, curly hair, she wondered, then told herself to remain focused.

His eyes were dark blue, beautiful, but elusive when it came to showing his true character. She had the feeling his gaze was boring through her, which was unsettling.

Rosa shifted away slightly. “Who are you?”

She tried to sound calm although she felt far from it. Something about this man made her uneasy. She wasn't sure where he had come from and didn't like the idea she was sitting in a dark park alone with him.

The man gave her a slow, cocky smile. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said as he gave a short bow. "I am Evan Batowsky."

Rosa's heart was beating faster, and warning bells clanged inside her head screaming the man wasn't here for a simple introduction and would then leave. Slowly, she edged her way to the end of the bench to stand, getting ready to run.

His smile faded to a frown, which Rosa took as a bad sign.

"Now, Rosa. You aren't planning to leave me after I have waited patiently all this time. I even allowed you a short tryst with that *Watcher*. Now, it is time for you to come home."

Ignoring his statement about it being time for her to come home, Rosa's mind had stuck on how he had said the word *Watcher* with total disdain.

Rosa held up her hands. "Mr. Batowsky," she began slowly. "I'm sorry, but I don't think we have ever met. You must have me confused with someone else. If you will excuse me, my ride will be here any moment."

He laughed, but the laugh contained no humor. Its sardonic tone alarmed her even more. In the blink of an eye, he brandished a syringe and jabbed the needle into her arm.

Rosa jumped away from him and stood for a moment in confusion and shock, then grabbed the syringe stuck in her arm. She pulled it out, but it was too late. The drug he had injected into her began to take effect, and she felt herself falling before someone grabbed her. Then everything went black.

Vane drove his Mercedes around the area several times, but could not find Rosa. He checked local restaurants and even gas stations, but no one had seen her. When a park came into view, he pulled the car to the curb.

He scanned the area for Rosa or signs she had been there. As he neared a bench, he noticed a red rose lying in the grass. Picking it up, his eye caught the sight of Rosa's purse lying on the bench.

Something was seriously wrong. The rose he had given Rosa had been left on the table at the restaurant. So, where had this rose come from, and why would Rosa leave her purse?

A sick feeling rolled through his stomach.

Vane took a step back and frantically scanned the park once more. Hearing a crunch, he stopped and lifted his foot. Crouching to get a better look, his breath caught in his throat. He had stepped on a syringe.

Vane's heart began to pound. *Did the vampire who had left the note on her SUV take her?*

He stood quickly and swiveled around, checking the park again while pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. With a shaky hand, he punched the numbers.

The telephone in the kitchen rang several times before Trigg reached it. "We are going to have to replace the phone in the living room. It seems to be in pieces," he muttered as he pressed the TALK button.

"This is Trigg."

"Trigg!"

"Vane. Boy, you're in deep shit with Robyn—"

Vane broke in, cutting him off. "Rosa is gone, and I don't think she went willingly."

"What do you mean? What happened?"

"She walked out of the restaurant for some reason while I was waiting for her to return from the restroom. I have been driving around looking for her for the past hour. I found her purse, but I also found a syringe. I believe someone drugged her and took her."

Trigg heard the note of panic in Vane's voice. "Okay, man, where are you exactly?"

Vane told Trigg the location of the park.

“Vane, did you see any vehicles leaving the area when you arrived? Can you sense anything else to help us find out who took her or where they might have gone?”

Trigg could tell Vane was losing focus.

“No, there isn’t anything. I don’t know what to do.”

Trigg blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. “Come back to the Cell. We’ll figure it out.”

After Trigg hung up the phone, he realized he would have to tell Robyn something had happened to Rosa, and his heart ached. He knew she would be beside herself, and he wanted nothing more than her happiness, always. But this could not be avoided. She would find out when Vane returned to the Cell. It would be better if he talked to her first.

Vane jumped back into his Mercedes and slammed the door. He punched the accelerator and sped toward downtown.

Lifting the rose to his nose, Vane inhaled Rosa’s scent, confirming she had held the rose as some point. He also caught the same faint scent as the one on the note. Though he didn’t want to believe it, the proof was there. Rosa had been taken by the stalker. Someone not human, which meant he may not be easy to find.

When Rosa believed the roses and gifts had been from him, he had tried to convince her they were from fans, but he had known otherwise.

Vane mentally kicked himself for not telling Rosa about the note. He hadn’t wanted to frighten her, but he may have put her in more danger. If she had been aware of the situation, she would probably have been more careful and attentive to who was around her.

The stalker had Rosa. Vane knew Rosa was in danger, and he wanted to roar in anger and in fear of her safety.

Chapter Six

Rosa felt as though she was floating on a cloud. She could hear the murmuring of voices, but could not make out what they were saying. There was more than one voice. That much she could discern through the haze.

Her eyes felt heavy. She could not open them. Nor could she move a single muscle, her entire body felt like lead.

The slow rocking of the car seemed soothing as she lay in darkness. She assumed she was in a car because of the slight hum.

A finger brushed against her cheek and pulled back a strand of hair. *Vane*, she thought. She wanted to cry out to him, but couldn't make her mouth work. What was happening to her?

Her memory began to come back in pieces. Most of it wasn't clear, but she definitely remembered a man and a rose. She had felt frightened of this man, then recalled his name—*Evan*. *Oh God*, she thought. Evan had taken her, but why? She had never met the man before. What did he want with her?

Growing weary, Rosa tried to focus and not lose herself to the darkness, but it was a losing battle.

Vane parked his Mercedes in the Cell's garage and bounded up the stairs. He was pacing the living room, feeling as if he would explode, when Trigg walked in.

"Did you find out anything else on your way back?"

Vane showed Trigg the rose. "I did catch another scent off the rose besides Rosa's. There is a faint scent matching the one from a note stuck under the windshield of her SUV yesterday."

Trigg raised an eyebrow. "A note? What did it say?"

Vane relayed the contents of the note.

“This isn’t good. I’ve contacted Tank and Rayne.”

Vane looked up quickly. He didn’t know what to expect from their reply to the situation. Were they too busy to help? Could a missing civilian vampire matter to them in the current scheme of things?

“Tomorrow is the fireworks festival and both Tank and Rayne will be there. Headquarters stated at the last meeting there will be a few hundred Watchers in the area. We’ll spread the word to the other Watchers about the situation and to keep an eye out for Rosa. Right now, I think it’s the best we can do until something comes up.”

Trigg walked over to Vane and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Vane, I’m sure something will come up and we’ll find her. There will be a lot of eyes and ears out there tomorrow night. Hang in there, brother. As soon as the others get back, we’ll put our heads together. We’ll get Rayne on the trail. You know he’s the best tracker there is.”

Vane’s heart was in turmoil. He would wait until he spoke with Tank and Rayne before sending the note out to the lab.

Lowering his head, he nodded. He knew Trigg was right. Waiting was going to kill him, but it was necessary. Tank was his CO, and he had to wait for orders of their next course of action. His heart screamed for him to be out there looking for her. *But, where?*

Evan’s limousine drove across the Kennedy Bridge into Indiana, took the winding road down Utica Pike and slowed when it reached his mansion, then pulled into the driveway.

Charles, Evan’s driver, opened the door of the limousine, stepped aside while Evan got out, then leaned back into the limo. He pulled Rosa off the floor and lifted her into his arms.

Evan walked ahead of Charles up the steps and to the opened front door of the mansion, where his butler awaited.

The main hallway of the mansion was immaculate. A large chandelier illuminated the foyer. Marble floors sparkled, and the intricate woodwork gleamed. At the end of the

hallway, a large staircase, covered with an elaborate carpet in deep burgundy, rose to the second floor.

“Place her in the room next to my chambers.” Evan glanced at his butler with a raised eyebrow. “I presume it has been readied for our guest?”

“Yes, sir. Just as you ordered, sir.” The butler gave a slight bow to Evan as he replied.

Evan nodded to Charles for him to proceed, and watched as his driver climbed the stairs and disappeared down the hall. He let out a sigh of accomplishment while walking to his study for a glass of wine.

First, he needed to get an update from Rico, his right hand...what? He thought. Right hand vampire sounded absurd. Evan shrugged, picked up the phone and dialed Rico’s cell phone, leaving a message to be called back immediately.

Rico had been an employee of Jake Carter, a drug runner from Texas. Jake had had an unfortunate run-in with a Watcher and wound up dead.

A so-called *anonymous tip* had led police to a large storage building owned by Mr. Carter. Jake’s building had been housing a shipment of drugs slated for various points throughout the city.

Evan shook his head, thinking of how stupid and sloppy the human had been in allowing himself and his operation to be compromised. *He* would never make that mistake.

His thoughts returned to Rico as he waited for his phone to ring. The man had escaped the police raid and crossed the bridge to Indiana, where he had been caught attempting to steal a boat from the docks on Utica Pike. Unfortunately, the boat belonged to Evan Batowsky.

Evan picked up a glass and poured himself some wine while he smiled at the memory. He had intended to have Rico for dinner, literally, but he was intrigued by the man. Rico was almost as cold hearted and ruthless as he was. So instead, he had turned Rico and assigned him the task of gathering Rogues for an undertaking he had planned for Louisville’s fireworks festival.

Sniffing the wine in his glass, Evan sighed audibly. “Only the best,” he muttered to himself, then leaned back in his expensive leather chair and rested his feet on the huge, oak desk while thinking of more than the wine. He thought of Rosa, of savoring every minute of her company. *His Rosa. His beautiful rose.*

Evan’s good humor didn’t last long when his phone rang and the news Rico conveyed wasn’t good.

“The Rogues waiting transport from Cincinnati were discovered and wiped out by the Watchers.”

“How the hell did they find out about the Rogues? I thought you told me the place was secure?”

Evan removed his boots from the desk and sat up straight in his chair.

“It was, sir. I’m not sure how the Watchers were informed of the holding site in Cincinnati. The barge came in as expected, but the Watchers were waiting. It was detained, and I have been told they are breathing down the neck of every barge company to find out who was responsible.”

Evan grit his teeth. “Doesn’t matter. They have nothing on me. I’m a businessman, nothing more. Okay, what about the operations in Indiana?”

The second bit of bad information Rico relayed was the rendezvous point outside of the Charlestown State Park had also been raided by the Watchers.

“What doesn’t make sense is the news a black wolf has systematically taken out most of the Rogues each time I dropped them off. The Watchers raided the gathering site and only a handful of Rogues from the barge escaped. Those who managed to get back to the houseboat were taken to the waterfront and told to lay low until their next orders came in.”

“Get the Rogues back in line, do you hear me? This is turning out to be a disaster, but let me make one thing perfectly clear, Rico. I. Will. Not. Fail. You got that? You better have more promising news for me the next time we talk.”

With that, Evan slammed down the phone and let out a fierce growl, making everything shake and rattle. “Damned Watchers are screwing up everything!” He stood

and paced the room. There had to be enough Rogues on the waterfront tomorrow night to complete his plans.

Evan had many people in town he despised, and this was the perfect opportunity to rid himself of them. His list of intended victims was long, but he was confident he would succeed. Even after this setback.

Picturing the room at the hotel on the waterfront where he would stand on the balcony tomorrow night with Rosa at his side and watch his Rogues take down his enemies calmed him.

He reached for his glass of wine, gulped it down, then refilled the glass. He would refocus, and then call Rico back with another plan of action. "Always have a Plan B."

Rosa awoke slowly. Her head was fuzzy, and the room swayed a little. She fought back the nausea, thankful she had taken only a few bites of dinner before she had excused herself at the restaurant and gone to the restroom.

She blinked open her eyes, then looked around, trying to take in her surroundings. She was lying on a huge bed in a large bedroom, decorated in an old world style with tapestries and elaborate rugs. A lamp glowed beside the bed, softly illuminating the room.

A high-backed, formal chair sat in the corner next to a damask covered settee. At the end of the room was a door, which was slightly ajar, and by the light shining behind it, she could see there was a small bathroom.

Easing herself up into a sitting position proved to be rather laborious, but she had to find out where she was. Rosa swung her legs off the bed, testing them to make sure she could stand without falling flat on her face.

Her legs seemed to be functioning, so she slowly walked to the door and turned the knob. She should have known. It was locked. She banged on the door several times. "Open this door!"

After a few moments, Rosa heard the sound of footsteps. When they stopped outside the door, she stepped back, trying to get a handle on her fear. She had no idea what was going on or why she was here. She watched the knob turn, and the door slowly open.

In the doorway stood an extremely tall, slender man with big hands resting on the door, ensuring her way out of the room was blocked. The man's face was leathered from age and held no emotion. His gaze was dark and cold as he stared at her, not looking the least bit friendly.

Rosa quickly guessed the man wasn't going to help. She was being held captive by some vampire named Evan, but for what reason she didn't know.

The man reached in and grabbed Rosa by the arm. She tried hitting him in an effort to make him release her. Instead of doing so, he grabbed her other arm and held both firmly behind her back.

Rosa let out a cry of pain at his tight grasp. "Watch it, Lurch!" she spat, knowing her arms would be badly bruised when this was over. She hoped this wasn't an indication of what was to come.

Evan sat by the fireplace in a tall chair against the far corner of the great room. Two female vampires groveled at his feet, rubbing their bodies against his legs, begging for his attention. He looked up as Charles brought Rosa to stand before him, then gave her a smile.

"Ah, my Rosa. You're awake. Welcome to my home." Evan made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "I see you have already met Charles, my driver."

Rosa glanced over her shoulder at the man holding her arms. His grasp didn't ease. "Charmed, I'm sure," Rosa said rather sarcastically to Charles, but he didn't make a move or show the slightest emotion.

Evan chuckled. "Bring Rosa a chair," he ordered the little man she noticed standing inside the doorway.

Rosa watched the short, chubby old man, hurry off, then return, carrying a wooden chair. Charles yanked her over to the chair and forcefully pushed her down to sit.

Rosa bit back a curse. She was getting tired of being manhandled by this giant freak.

Evan *tsked* at Charles and wagged his finger. "Now, Charles. Is that any way to treat our guest?" He turned to Rosa and smiled. "My apologies, Rosa."

She glared at Charles, then turned to face Evan. Her arms were hurting from Charles's brutal grip. She pushed back the pain and tried to focus. She wanted answers and gathered her courage to speak.

"Why am I here? Who are you?"

"I've already told you who I am. I'm Evan Batowsky, and, as to why you are here, well, my dear, you're where you're supposed to be. Right here with me, *my Rosa*."

Rosa was at a loss, and she didn't know what to do or how to handle the situation. This man was a loon. He kept calling her *his Rosa* as if she belonged to him.

"I don't understand...uh...Mr. Batowsky."

"Oh, Rosa, let's not play games." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "I have been watching you for a very long time. You are such a beautiful creature, and your singing is astounding. But, I grew tired of waiting in the shadows. Now, you will be my companion and will sing for me when I please."

Oh boy. I've landed in the twilight zone. Rosa sat quietly for a moment, staring at Evan in disbelief. The man was whacked. She watched him look at the two female vampires groveling at his feet, who were running their hands up and down his legs seductively.

Evan lifted his wrist and sliced open a vein. When he lowered it to the two women, they immediately latched on like starving children.

Evan didn't glance at the two female vamps greedily feeding from him. "They were once human, you know," he said coolly, then gave Rosa a one-sided grin. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

Rosa didn't answer. She couldn't believe what was happening. This was something straight out of a horrible "B" movie. The grunting, moaning and slurping noises coming from the two girls was sickening.

"It's too bad they bore me," Evan said coldly before he snapped, "Enough!" Yanking his wrist away, he closed the wound.

This guy is totally unstable, she told herself. She would have to watch her step until she could find a way to get out, and it was best to keep quiet until she was told to speak. This was not the time to make demands.

The two female vampires cowered in submission after Evan had halted their feeding.

Evan rose from his chair and strode toward her. Charles continued to hold her firmly in the chair with her arms locked behind her back, and she thought her arms would pull out of their sockets if he didn't let up soon.

"Since I'm bored, I decided it was time for a new companion."

Evan stood directly in front of her. He reached out with his nail and slowly ran it down her neck, leaving a thin line of blood in its wake, and she winced.

When he bent and slowly licked his way up the cut he had made, she bit back the urge to scream.

"You know, my Rosa, vampire blood is *so* much more exquisite than human blood. In fact, it's rather...shall we say...addicting." Evan breathed out the word *addicting* for emphasis.

Rosa teetered between being afraid of this man and angry at what he was implying. "You can't *force* someone to be your companion."

Evan walked back to his chair and sat, then smiled at her in amusement. "Ah, my dear Rosa, but I can. I have my ways."

He became serious and looked at Charles. "Take her back to her room and get her cleaned up, then bring her down for dinner. I don't want to smell that wretched Watcher on her anymore."

Charles pulled Rosa from the chair and practically dragged her out of the room. Rosa protested his rough handling, but to no avail.

The two female vampires followed behind like wildcats, stalking their prey. She didn't think Evan would allow them to hurt her, but the thought did little to calm her fears.

Rosa wished she had stayed at the restaurant with Vane. She wished she had been brave enough to walk back to their table and confront him with what she had heard in the restroom.

Thinking of Vane brought her some comfort as Charles opened the door to the room she had been in earlier and shoved her inside.

When the two female vampires entered the room behind her, looking like cats who found a mouse with its tail caught in the mouse trap, she quickly put some distance between them. Although Rosa was a vampire, she knew these women were no ordinary ones. They were Rogues.

She backed against the wall beside the bathroom door as the two sauntered around the room, sneering and emitting low, menacing growls. One of them slowly walked toward her, and the look in her eyes was feral.

Rosa scooted sideways toward the bathroom door. When she reached it, she ducked inside, then slammed the door. Although she locked it, she knew a locked door meant nothing.

Leaning her head against the door, she wished she could wake from this terrible nightmare.

She heard the female Rogues' laughter as they left the bedroom, but just as she released a long breath, a loud bang on the door made her jump.

"Wash, then dress," a voice growled outside the door. Charles had not left the bedroom. "I will return for you in thirty minutes."

Rosa tried to slow her erratically beating heart. She was shaking so fiercely she had to sit on the toilet lid to gather herself. Finally, after several minutes, she stood and looked around the small bathroom.

The room was windowless and contained only a shower stall, a toilet and a pedestal sink with a mirror. Clean towels were on the side of the sink with a bottle of shampoo and liquid body wash. There wasn't anything she could use as a weapon.

With a despairing sigh, she removed her clothes, turned on the water and stepped into the shower. Charles would be back for her in thirty minutes, whether she was ready or not, and she planned on being dressed when that time came.

After her shower, Rosa slowly opened the bathroom door, making sure she was alone in her room. Finding she was, relief flooded her, but it didn't last long. A black dress was draped across the chair. Picking it up, her chest tightened—it left nothing to the imagination.

Just as she lifted the dress over her head, she heard the door unlock. Rosa struggled to pull the dress on quickly while Charles stepped inside the room. She turned her back to him, and adjusted the dress.

Rosa looked around the area beside the chair where she had found the dress, then scanned the room. No clean panties had been left for her.

Reaching for the ones she'd had on earlier, she gasped in shock when Charles snatched them up and took the remainder of her clothes.

“What are you doing? Give me back my clothes!”

When he didn't answer, she narrowed her eyes. “What am I supposed to do, walk about with nothing on under this dress?” Again, no answer.

Charles led her downstairs and into the dining hall. He didn't lock her arms behind her back as he had done earlier, only held on to one of her arms, though just as rough as he had been with her before.

Rosa was ushered to a seat to the right of the head of the table, where Evan sat watching her. When Charles forced her to sit, she tried desperately to sit modestly, but in the short dress it was useless.

The dress rose even higher as she sat, ending an inch from showing her panties. *If I was wearing any*, she thought disgustingly. It humiliated her to walk around like this. She felt like a prostitute in this outfit. She *would not* be someone's toy.

“So, I guess you don't like my taste in fashion?”

Rosa wanted to knock him out of his chair and permanently wipe the grin from his face. She could tell Evan enjoyed his game. She was the pawn, and he was moving all the pieces.

Rosa gave him a cold, disdainful look, but offered no comment. If he thought she was going to be his companion, he was in for a surprise. She wasn't going to participate in this game willingly. She decided to sit quietly and ignore him, hoping he would grow tired of her company.

The back doors opened, and several people hustled into the room. A covered tray was set before her. She was almost afraid of what was underneath. In unison, the kitchen staff removed the lids from the trays, sending up a waft of steam as they did so.

Rosa was surprised to find the dish actually contained a somewhat appetizing meal. There were sautéed summer vegetables, brown rice with peppers and a couple of seasoned beef patties. Her stomach growled as she smelled the plate in front of her, remembering having barely touched her plate at the restaurant with Vane.

As the kitchen staff left the room, Charles returned ushering in a young human male, who looked glassy-eyed and pale. Rosa noticed he had a tube sticking out of the bend of his arm.

"Oh God," she murmured. *They are draining him for food.*

Rosa's stomach knotted. He was going to die a long, slow death as the blood was drained from his body.

Charles sat the man in the chair on the other side of Evan, and Rosa saw he wasn't bound. Since he did not seem to have his wits, she figured they were not concerned he would attempt escape.

Rosa's heart thudded in her ears, and her chest constricted. She felt sorry for the man. He did not deserve to be treated like this. Humans were not fodder. They were *people*.

She watched in horror as Evan lifted the tube attached to the man's arm, and released the pressure of the clamp. Red fluid flowed down the transparent tube and into Evan's glass. *Blood.*

After Evan retightened the clamp to stop the flow of blood from the tube, he lifted the glass to his nostrils, twirled the liquid around the glass a few times and sniffed as if he was getting ready to sample a fine wine.

“Ah. There is nothing better than fresh O positive on tap.” Evan smiled, then downed his drink.

Rosa closed her eyes, praying to wake from this nightmare. *This is not happening.* When she opened her eyes, Charles had set a glass in front of her.

Rosa looked at the young man. His eyes were cloudy, and his face expressionless. She turned her glance to Evan who was looking at her expectantly.

“Go ahead, my Rosa. You’ll find there’s nothing like it. Rare meat cannot compare to fresh, sweet blood.” Evan licked his lips to emphasize his point.

Rosa moved the glass of blood aside. She would not drink. She had been raised properly and never had to suffer the bloodlust. The thought of ingesting human blood actually turned her stomach. It was wrong.

She didn’t look at the glass of blood again. Instead, she picked up her fork and began to eat the meal in front of her, praying she did not find any other surprises.

As Evan chuckled beside her, she tried to block him out, but found she couldn’t take it anymore when she noticed him fill a gravy bowl with blood. He tipped the bowl and coated his beef patties as if it was gravy. She swallowed hard in an effort to keep her food down.

The two female Rogues approached the entryway of the dining hall and received permission from Evan to join them for dinner. They weren’t pleased to be replaced at the head of the table by Evan’s new *guest*.

A man strode into the dining room, and Rosa turned her gaze to him, wondering who else had joined Evan’s little party. He removed his cowboy hat and held it in his hands as he took long strides toward Evan.

The man wore faded blue jeans, snakeskin boots and a button-down, denim western shirt. His face was rough, showing his need for a shave, and his wavy brown hair, which

hung to his shoulders, flowed as he walked. He had an air of menace about him. His gaze settled on her when he neared the table, sending a cold chill down her spine.

The man reached Evan's side, but continued to stare at her. When a corner of his mouth lifted in both amusement and savage interest, Rosa returned her attention to her plate, pretending to ignore him. Under lowered lashes, she watched as he stood for several moments, awaiting Evan's acknowledgement of his presence.

"Rico, I hope you have better news for me," Evan said dryly.

Rico cleared his throat before he spoke. His voice was low, and she heard no emotion in its dark tone.

"As we discussed over the phone, several of your men have been taken to the waterfront until further notice. A few came from Devil's Backbone in Indiana and are stationed at your boat dock to await orders. It seems they were the last to escape the Watchers. I don't expect any more to show up from that area."

The room was silent. No one moved or seemed to breathe while Evan sat glaring at the blood he swirled around the glass. The air in the room grew thick as if something dreadful was about to happen, but thankfully, nothing did.

"Put them aboard one of my boats and have them settle in for the night. Instruct a couple of my minions to take the boat out at first light and dock it at the slip I've reserved on the waterfront. They are to remain on the boat and out of sight until the strike. You have the list, assign them as appropriate."

The man's nod was only a quick jerk of his head. As he turned to leave, Rosa heard Evan speak again, and this time he looked straight at the man.

"Get them a couple of snacks from the cellar. I don't want any of them wandering the boat dock, picking off humans. We are close to finishing this, and Rico, I don't want any more screw-ups. Do I make myself clear?"

From the look on Evan's face as he stared at the man, Rosa knew Evan meant business and any further bad news would have severe repercussions. Silently, she hoped the Watchers found the Rogues and wiped them all out before the festival. If Evan's plans

failed, there was a strong possibility he would make a mistake and the Watchers would find him.

The man nodded once more, placed his cowboy hat back on his head and strode through the dining hall to leave. Rosa saw him glance at her once more. This time, his black gaze revealed a hunger so intense her heart stopped. She was afraid of Evan, but this man frightened her even more.

Rosa's head swam. For an instant, when she had looked at Evan, she remembered the man she had seen outside the window of the coffee shop. She recalled the roses and trinkets, and a slight sheen of sweat formed between her breasts. Everything was now coming together.

Vane had said he had not been the one sending her gifts and flowers. It had been Evan all along, not an admirer. The thought of Evan being outside her apartment door made her stomach churn. He had been close all along, following her.

As the meal progressed, Rosa could do nothing but witness the slow draining of the young man's blood. Evan and his two she-devils were downing glass after glass.

His lips had a blue tint, and he no longer sat upright. Charles had restrained him so he didn't fall onto the floor.

Rosa couldn't take any more but knew there was nothing she could do. Quietly, she uttered, "Evan, may I be excused to my room? I am rather tired. It has been a long evening."

She glanced at Evan, being careful not to show any emotion on her face.

He sighed, and she prayed he would not refuse.

"Yes, my dear," he drawled. "I guess it has been a rather taxing evening for you. Tomorrow will be better, I assure you. We will have a front row seat tomorrow night at the festival. You will be by my side as those who stand in my way are removed amidst the chaos of the fireworks festivities."

He gave her a full smile, showing the tips of his fangs, stained with blood from his glass.

“My own people will take up key positions within the city. Then the city will be mine with no one the wiser. I’ve been watching Louisville for some time, you know.” Evan looked at his glass reflectively. “I started making plans while in Cincinnati, but Louisville had more to offer. There are many things in store for this city’s future, and it’s going to prove to be very profitable for me.

“I’ve got plans, and you, my dear Rosa, are one of them.” He turned to Charles and nodded, indicating she had been dismissed.

Rosa wished she had a way to warn Vane and the other Watchers. This madman had to be stopped. She would not sleep tonight. Instead, she would wrack her brain to come up with a way to escape or get a message out.

Even though the windows were darkened to keep out the sun’s rays during the day, she knew the house wasn’t isolated. With her keen vampire hearing, she could tell she was close to the river. She could hear boats on the water. Vehicles passing indicated the house was not far from a road.

Relieved she had been allowed to leave the dining hall, Rosa mentally tried to prepare herself for Charles’s brutal hold on her arm once again. Just as she expected, he jerked her up from the chair by her arm and ushered her from the room.

“Ow!” she cried as they reached the stairs. “Can you lay off with the death grip a little?”

Charles stopped abruptly and spun her around to face him. She found herself staring into a pair of soulless, cold, black eyes. They held only hatred and anger. Chills raced up and down her body. This man could pass for the devil himself, she thought.

Rosa got the point. Charles was not a man to mess with.

She was so busy trying not to trip on anything as Charles dragged her toward her room, she didn’t notice him pull a syringe from his jacket pocket. He pushed open the door and shoved her ahead of him, still not loosening the grip on her arm.

As Rosa started to turn, she caught sight of the syringe just as Charles plunged it into her arm. She had no time to react, it was too late. Whatever Charles had injected into her body burned through her veins like fire before her vision began to waiver.

Charles released her arm. She swayed on her feet, and stumbled to the bed, feeling as though everything was moving in slow motion. The room spun slightly, before everything went black.

Vane had a hard time sleeping, but finally fell asleep sometime during mid-day. When he woke and his mind cleared, a wave of anguish over Rosa's abduction claimed him. His only relief was Tank and Rayne would be here within the next couple of hours.

The hum of planes flying overhead as part of the festival's air show reminded him today was the big day. He flipped on the television to watch a few minutes of the live coverage and listen for any changes in the festival's schedule. When the reporter stated over eight hundred thousand people were expected, he groaned. It was going to be a long night.

A sound caught his attention, and he hit the MUTE button. He recognized the sound of Rayne's Jeep as it pulled into the garage and idled for several minutes before the engine was shut off.

Robyn straightened from checking the food in the oven and wiped her hands on a dishtowel. When she turned, she saw Rayne standing in the doorway. She hadn't seen him since the day he and Vane had helped her move into her apartment—the building where Jake had found and shot her.

"You're back. I'll have dinner ready in a couple of minutes." Robyn couldn't wait to hear all about his mission in Indiana. She gave him a tight hug, which he warmly returned.

"You look wonderful, Robyn. It's a blessing everything worked out for you and Trigg. He needs you, you know."

Robyn smiled, and couldn't stop her fidgeting as she wiped her hands on the dishtowel once again. She knew Rayne was right, but she also knew she needed Trigg as well.

"I hear you two are mated. Congratulations, and welcome to the family."

Several moments of silence passed between them before Rayne excused himself and made his way upstairs to his room.

Before she could return to her cooking, the door to the lower level opened, and she saw Tank step inside. He stopped, raised his nose in the air, closed his eyes and inhaled. The sight made her laugh. The man was huge and seemed to have more muscles than Trigg and the other two Watchers put together, but on the inside he was a real sweetheart, or at least he was to her. She had briefly met him at the Watchers' headquarters in Texas. Trigg's CO had stood by his side during a meeting with the Council where Trigg had to answer for the act of turning her into a vampire, even though it had been to save her life.

Robyn recalled how his silver eyes had smiled at her when she had shaken his hand, and his funny comment was something she would always remember.

Nice to meet you, Robyn, and congratulations to both of you. I am so glad Trigg found his other half. Maybe you can keep him in line. Hell knows I haven't been able to.

Trigg suddenly stepped into the kitchen. Tank lifted his arm and grasped Trigg's shoulder, then looked around.

"Where's Vane? I saw his Mercedes when I pulled in."

Trigg looked up toward Vane's bedroom. "He's in his room. He'll probably be down in a few for dinner. You know he never misses a meal."

Robyn knew Trigg was trying to lighten the current situation with a little humor.

Not only were they worried sick about Rosa, they were also concerned about Vane. The warrior's emotional state was fragile. Some clue had to surface. Something had to break before Vane did.

Tank nodded and Robyn could tell by the sadness in his silver eyes Tank was thinking the same thing.

"We'll discuss the situation at dinner and try to help Vane any way we can. I'm going to put this stuff upstairs. I guess Rayne is back. I saw his Jeep downstairs too."

"Yeah. He came in a few minutes ago. He's in his room unpacking."

Tank turned and went up the stairs.

Chapter Seven

Vane took a shower and dressed. He felt like he was walking in circles. His mind was so unfocused, he kept catching himself standing still doing nothing but thinking of Rosa. If he didn't find her soon, it was going to kill him.

He headed downstairs, following the aroma of Robyn's delicious cooking. Tank, Rayne and Trigg were already seated as Robyn set the last dish on the table. Vane almost smiled at the thought their *family* had outgrown the little kitchen table. It had been a long, long time since the dining room table had been used. Seeing everyone together made his heart ache more. Rosa should be here and she should be seated by his side.

Vane closed his eyes. His chest was so tight for fear of Rosa's safety it was threatening to suffocate him.

"Vane."

Robyn's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Dinner's ready. Come have a seat."

Vane looked at the group, gave them all a curt nod and sat at the table. He immediately wanted to pull Rayne aside and get his brother's help in finding Rosa, but he had to wait a little longer.

As the dishes were passed, Tank took the opportunity to bring everyone up to date on the latest events with the Rogues and the Watchers' orders for the night.

"I'm sure each of you is aware of the operation on Cincinnati's riverfront in which I was involved. We took out a substantial group of Rogues hiding out in a warehouse. The Cell assigned to the area will continue to remain close by to eliminate any more who may show up waiting for transportation to Louisville. Headquarters is still working on ferreting out whoever is behind the operation. I've been advised there is one name which has popped up several times—Evan Batowsky. Have any of you heard of this man?"

Everyone shook their head, and Tank leaned back in his chair. “Headquarters discovered a few aliases used by this man. We’re counting on one or more of those aliases to show up in this area. Hopefully, this will get us closer to who and where this guy is,” he continued.

“It has to be someone from this area,” Rayne said. “While investigating the wolf sighting in the Charlestown State Park, I discovered Rogues were being unloaded from barges and onto boats which brought them to a place called the Devil’s Backbone. I watched a houseboat drop them off at a dock. I contacted headquarters who arranged for area Watchers to meet me at the park, and we took them out. A couple of Rogues escaped, but I’m sure they’ll be found soon enough.”

Rayne took another bite from his plate and continued with his report on the Rogues at the state park. Robyn’s gut clinched when he mentioned the Rogues were being armed. Something was going down, and it sounded very dangerous. She glanced at Trigg, worried for his safety.

“One interesting thing was an eighteen-foot Viper following the houseboat at all times. It was being driven by a vampire wearing a cowboy hat, and he seemed to be calling the shots.”

Tank raised his eyebrows in surprise. “A vampire? Did you get the identification numbers off the boats?”

Rayne nodded. “Yes. After I returned here, I planned on doing some searching on the Net to find out who owns the boats.”

“If they belong to Evan Batowsky, it would help bring us closer to finding this guy. At this point, we are not really sure if he’s human, vampire or Rogue. It’s hard to say. One thing’s sure, it would take someone pretty powerful to gather Rogues together without getting killed. It’s not like they would simply sit down to a cup of coffee, or a dinner meeting for that matter.”

When Vane blew out a breath, everyone’s gaze turned to him. Robyn knew being a Watcher was not only a job, it was who they were, and Watcher business took precedence. She had no doubt Vane knew this as well. Throughout the meal, he had been

quiet and barely touched his food, though everyone knew he was anxious to discuss the other pressing situation—Rosa’s kidnapping.

The Latino loverboy’s easy going persona had changed, she noted. He no longer carried the look of a confident, suave man. Stress lines etched his face, and the sparkle was gone from his eyes.

“Vane, let’s discuss Rosa’s disappearance,” Tank said. “Trigg relayed the details, and I’m sure you have already thought about sending the items to the lab. I will sign the request and order a rush put on it. The only other thing I can offer is to spread the word among the other Watchers to keep an eye out for her. Hopefully, she’s still within the city and will be spotted soon.”

Rayne leaned forward in his chair, looked Vane in the eye and offered his support. “I may be of some help. If you would allow me to examine the rose Trigg said you found at the park, I may be able to detect something. I’m not discounting your skills, my brother, just offering you my tracking abilities. I could also stop by the park to take a look around.”

Robyn wasn’t surprised by Rayne’s offer. The Watchers were more than Cell-mates. There were brothers who would give up their lives for one another.

Vane nodded at Rayne. “Yes. I would appreciate that, Rayne. Thank you.”

Rayne clasped a hand over Vane’s shoulder in an obvious gesture of solidarity.

Vane paced the living room, not quite knowing what to do though his mind screamed for him to do something. He could hear Rayne pecking away at the keys on the computer, searching for information on the two boats.

Tank’s body filled the doorway and after a few moments, he heard his CO speak.

“What did you find?”

“Looks like our man Evan owns some boats.”

At that moment, the fax machine’s line rang.

“Headquarters says a barge came through the evening after our raid in Cincinnati and docked. The name of the barge company was E.B. Barge Lines, owned by Evan Batowsky.”

“I wouldn’t doubt Mr. Batowsky is shipping more than just cargo and Rogues. It wouldn’t be difficult to smuggle drugs or arms too,” Rayne said.

“That may be the case. When the Watchers checked the cargo, they found crates of knives on board. However, it was all legit and there was a bill of sale where they’d been purchased upriver by Mr. Batowsky. So it was valid cargo.”

Trigg had come up behind Tank and was listening to the conversation between Tank and Rayne. Vane stood behind Trigg, who laid out the facts.

“So far, we have Evan’s boats at the scene of a Rogue rendezvous point in southern Indiana, his ownership of a barge company which just happened to be docked at the raid site in Cincinnati and a cargo of knives, but we have no strong evidence to connect him with anything going down this evening at the fireworks festival.”

“Yep, that’s the case as it stands right now. Headquarters has given us his address, which is located along the riverfront with a boat dock in southern Indiana. Get suited up, brothers. We’re going to make a little house call,” Tank said with a grin, then lay a hand on Rayne’s shoulder. “Rayne, after we check out Evan’s house, scout out the park where Rosa was abducted to see if you can come up with any more clues as to who has her.”

Rayne nodded then turned to Vane, and though he had been listening to the entire discussion, his mind had not been totally on it. His thoughts had strayed to Rosa and what could be happening to her.

“Vane, may I have the rose and syringe you found at the park? I’d like to check the scents on them before I head out.”

Rayne’s voice centered him and brought him back to the conversation at hand. He acknowledge Rayne’s request and headed for his room, then quickly returned and handed over the rose and the bag containing the syringe. He stood patiently as Rayne closed his eyes and lifted the rose to his nose.

“Yes, there are two scents on the stem of the rose. One is more feminine, which is probably Rosa. The other is definitely male. It’s a dark scent, mingled with the scent of blood.”

Vane’s heart skipped a beat. The fear must have shown in his eyes because Rayne spoke up quickly.

“The blood isn’t Rosa’s. It is the scent of a vampire who feeds off human blood. But it’s not the scent of a Rogue either. Their scent is much stronger, more pungent.”

“Not to mention foul,” scowled Trigg.

Rayne pulled the syringe out of the bag, his brows furrowing as he concentrated.

“The same scents are on the syringe as well.”

Tank cleared his throat and everyone turned their attention to him.

“Okay, brothers, let’s get this show on the road.”

Vane knew the scent was that of a vampire, but who would do such a thing? Rayne’s determination the vampire was not a Rogue offered some comfort, though he feared for her safety.

His shoulders sagged as he returned the items to his room, but he refused to give up. He would search for Rosa until his last breath.

Rosa was groggy when she came out of the heavy effects of the drug Charles had injected into her arm after dinner last evening. She focused on the clock beside the bed. Her vision swam slightly, blurring the glowing red numbers.

She groaned. Her head felt like it had been stuffed full of cotton and she wasn’t feeling quite like herself. She felt heavy, as if control over her limbs was difficult. She also found she was having trouble concentrating.

Looking around the room, she realized she was not at home in her own bedroom. Confusion set in quickly, with a pang of panic. She tried desperately to remember where she was and why, but her head was pounding at the effort. “Where am I?” she muttered hoarsely.

Rosa closed her eyes until the throbbing in her head eased. When she opened them again, her vision had improved a little, but the fog in her head hadn't lifted. She felt numb inside, as if her thoughts were jumbled and forced, and her mouth and throat were extremely dry.

She sat up slowly, having to will herself to do so. She needed to get to the bathroom for a drink of water. Pulling back the covers, Rosa found she was wearing a nightgown.

Her memory came back to her in pictures, showing images of dinner the evening before and the short black dress, but she could not recall what happened after Charles had returned her to the room. The thought alarmed her even more. Someone had removed her dress and put her in the nightgown, but what else had happened?

Gingerly, Rosa slid her legs over the side of the bed and placed them on the floor. The rug was warm and plush on her feet. It felt good, she thought. Suddenly, she heard the click of the door unlocking and used the bedpost to pull herself into a standing position.

She held herself still as Evan strode through the door, then stopped, his gaze raking her over from top to bottom.

"For months I have watched and longed for you, ever since seeing you one evening at the Black Panther Lounge. That was when I vowed to have you all to myself."

He stepped closer and her heart sped up.

"Ah, my beautiful rose. You look good enough to eat, my dear."

When he smiled seductively and slid a finger along the line of her jaw, she held her breath.

Evan pushed her down so she sat on the bed, then sat beside her. Even though his hands were gentle, she could not find the strength to resist.

"I am trying my best to be patient to make you my mate, Rosa. But, tonight, my dear... Tonight will be the night I will wait no longer."

She tried to make her mind focus on what he was saying, and slowly found herself understanding he was telling her they were to be mated, and soon. Part of her was

screaming *No!* and part of her felt detached, uncaring. There was urgency inside her to flee, but she couldn't find the will to do so.

"Wha...what did you do to me?" As she spoke, her words sounded slurred in her ears, which added to her confusion.

He chuckled, and the sound bounced in her head.

"Oh, I just gave you a little something to help you relax. You seemed a little tense last night at dinner."

He smiled and lay back on the bed pulling her along as he did so. Again, she couldn't stop herself from following his lead.

"I bet you are parched, my dear."

She looked down as Evan sliced open the vein in his wrist and held it close to her mouth.

"Drink, my dear. You know you want it."

The smell of Evan's blood invaded her nostrils, and she suddenly felt very thirsty, but didn't know why. She had never had the craving for warm, fresh blood from either humans or vampires.

Deep inside she knew it was a mistake, but she found herself wanting to reach out and take from his vein.

Unable to refuse, she leaned forward, closed her eyes and latched onto Evan's wrist, letting the warm blood flow into her mouth. It tasted coppery on her tongue, but seemed to immediately sate the thirst which had suddenly come upon her. Her head swam, and she felt she was drifting. Her mind tried to warn her it was his blood making her react this way. Something within the thick red fluid seemed to call to her, like a drug.

Evan struggled to hold himself still as Rosa drank from the vein at his wrist and started to moan and rock slightly against his thigh. His erection throbbed behind his zipper, and all he could think about was plunging deep inside her as she drank from him.

With each pull, the heat inside his groin rose. It was too soon. Rosa was not fully his, but she would be. The more tainted blood she took from him, the more she would crave him.

He couldn't stop his low moan of pleasure and sank his free hand in the silken spirals of her golden hair. Rosa's luscious mouth was slowly bringing him to climax.

Evan felt his release shatter through him, and he gasped, grasping her hair tightly in his fist. He shook a few times as the final waves of pleasure disseminated, while Rosa lay sprawled across his chest.

After Evan's heartbeat began to slow, he pulled his wrist away from Rosa's mouth and sealed the wound. She opened her eyes, the gray irises cloudy and unfocused.

"Ah, my sweet rose," he crooned as he brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. She had been sated by his tainted blood and would always want more. She would crave what only he could give her, what he had gained quite by accident.

He recalled how he had been approached by a vampire scientist who had secretly discovered a way to heighten the sensory reaction to vampire blood, sort of like *Viagra* for vampires. Once the user ingested the required amount of the drug, it would render his or her blood highly intoxicating when ingested by another vampire. If the vampire feeding on the tainted blood ingested enough, they became addicted to the intense euphoria and ecstasy.

After Evan tried this product himself, using his two female vampire slaves as guinea pigs, he knew it would be highly profitable once it hit the streets. Vampires would be eager to shell out big money for this drug.

The scientist had been eager to accept Evan's offer of partnership and was like a kid in a candy store when he was given access to the new lab. Once the data for the formula had been set up and the first batch produced, Evan eliminated the scientist and put his own staff on the production line. All he had needed was the formula and the process in which to produce the drug, making the scientist no longer a necessity.

Evan leaned forward and settled his mouth on Rosa's, slowly kissing away his blood coating her lips. Rosa wasn't responsive to his kiss as he would have liked, but he knew she would be in time. Future feedings would see to that.

Rosa's head was reeling. What had she done and why couldn't she have stopped herself? She'd taken Evan's blood greedily, and it had aroused her. As Evan kissed her, the image of Vane crept into her mind, and she felt ill. She felt dirty about what she had done. It had been wrong. So wrong she wanted to cry out and shove Evan away from her.

When Evan broke the kiss, leaned back and smiled at her, she could only stare in shock, feeling the horror of her actions.

"Until tonight, my dear Rosa."

Evan stood, walked to the wardrobe and pulled out another dress. This one was crimson with a high neck scooped out in the middle to reveal substantial cleavage.

"You'll wear this tonight, my rose. Tonight my plans will be put into action. I'll soon be a very, very rich man and you will be by my side. You see, Kentucky has been turning a blind eye to a perfect opportunity, but no longer. Horse racing and the lottery have been the only aspects of gambling allowed in the state. The fools have been fighting against a huge money making endeavor, but I intend to capitalize on their loss of this opportunity."

She tried following with both her mind and her eyes as he paced and continued talking.

"I'm going to bring casino gambling to this state, beginning with Louisville, and eliminate my competition while doing so. My Rogues will be out in full force tonight, taking out those who stand against me and holding those I'll use for my purposes, beginning with the leaders at the horse track. They'll work for me and me alone. Then I will branch out into other areas of power, all culminating to my goal—building a riverboat casino docked on the riverfront. People will flock into the area. It will be so grand the other casinos will pale in comparison. Their profits will plummet as my pockets grow fat."

The fog in her head was slowly lifting, and she was able to think and comprehend now, more than she had been able to a few moments ago.

She watched as Evan laid the crimson colored dress on the bed, turned and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him. The click of the lock told her there was no escape.

Rosa showered and brushed her teeth, trying in vain to wipe away the touch and taste of him. Her movements were sluggish, but she knew she had to get dressed, having no doubt if she didn't put on the dress, either Charles or Evan's *banshees* would do it for her. The act would be far from a pleasant experience.

When she finished dressing, she walked back into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her lips were still a little flushed, and her eyes were glassy.

"What is wrong with me?" Rosa asked her reflection.

She left the bathroom, sank on the chair and waited for Evan, or Charles with his bruising hands, to come for her. The things Evan had said he had in store tonight, including what he planned for her, made her sick to her stomach.

Rosa put her face in her hands and cried.

Chapter Eight

Vane stared out the window of Tank's Cadillac SRX Crossover as they drove across the Kennedy Bridge into Southern Indiana, noticing the words *Get R Done* someone had painted on the first beam of the bridge. It would have been funny under other circumstances since the city of Louisville had been working on having the bridge repainted for the past eight years.

Tank took the first exit off the highway and headed for Utica Pike, an area that boasted many large, beautiful houses and a great view of the Ohio River.

If Evan Batowsky was in residence, they would need to devise a way to distract him while one of them searched the premises. They needed to find information to tie him to the shipment of Rogues and his reasons for bringing them to the Louisville area.

Rosa had no idea how long she had been sitting motionless in the chair, her face pressed into the palms of her hands as she sobbed. She heard the click of the lock and waited to see who was coming for her, and wasn't surprised to see the hardened face and cold black eyes of Charles as he stood in the doorway. She mentally grimaced, knowing it was going to be another painful escort to wherever he was taking her.

Charles held Rosa tightly by the arm as he walked her downstairs to Evan's office. Evan was on his cell phone.

"Make sure everyone's in place when the firework show begins," Evan barked into his phone. "I want the heads of the race track taken to the address I gave you, as well as the mayor and Chief of Police. I want all of those on the top part of the list eliminated. Tell the Rogues if they come across any Watchers, take them out immediately."

He listened to something being said by the person on the other end of the line before he continued. "Have the scouts been given the description of the Watcher Vane? Um-

hmm. Yes. He better be dead before the night is over. Rico, you better make damn sure those witless bloodsuckers follow the plans and do this right! Do I make myself clear? Okay. I'm leaving for the hotel."

Evan snapped the phone shut, then turned to look at Rosa and Charles. He gave her an approving smile as he looked her over.

"Are you ready, my dear? We have a little party to attend at the fireworks festival."

Charles released Rosa when Evan stepped forward. Evan grabbed her elbow as Charles quickly gave her another injection. She looked at her arm, her eyes wide, then turned back to Evan.

"What did you give me?" Rosa's voice was high pitched in panic.

Evan's smile never wavered as he spoke calmly. "It's just a little precaution, my dear. Don't worry, you'll be somewhat alert. We don't want you taking off anywhere, now do we? I wouldn't want you to miss the celebration."

Rosa suddenly felt light as a feather, floating on the fog filling her mind. She shook her head to try and clear it, but it was no use. It seemed as if she was looking through a tunnel, and Evan and Charles's voices were distant. Before all coherent thoughts became difficult, her last thought was of what Evan had said about Vane.

Rosa let go and rode through the waves as Evan led her outside and down the steps to his waiting limousine.

Tank passed Evan's house slowly. On the other side of the street, they saw the boat dock. Vane turned from the widow when Rayne pointed out the houseboat and the Viper.

Vane's CO continued to drive a down the road before turning into a driveway and pulling back onto the street, then drove toward the boat dock and turned into its entrance.

While entering the dock's parking lot, they saw the Viper with several passengers onboard leave the dock and head down river in the direction of the Louisville waterfront.

"We'll park here and walk over. Rayne, check out the houseboat. See if there are any Rogues in the vicinity. Notify me if Evan is on board," Tank said.

After Rayne headed for the houseboat, Vane, Tank and Trigg made their way across the street to the mansion.

Vane was amazed at the size of the three story, brick home with steps on both sides joining a set of steps that led to huge double doors.

The doors contained ornate stained glass. As Tank and Trigg headed for the front door and pressed the doorbell, Vane slowly made his way around the side of the house.

No lights were on anywhere inside the house as far as he could tell. He couldn't see through the darkened windows. Vane figured they were especially made to keep out sunlight since Evan was a vampire. Keeping low, so as not to be seen if anyone was inside, he listened for voices or movement.

The back door clicked open and Vane tensed, then eased himself deep within the shadows of the house. He heard heavy breathing and the sound of something being dumped into a trash bin.

After the lid slammed shut, the person went back into the house and closed the door. *Must have been a servant*, he thought. Vane relayed through their communicators at least one servant was inside.

"Copy that," Tank replied.

As soon as Vane ended transmission, he heard the front door open and the voice of an elderly man.

"How many I help you, sir?"

The man's voice was croaky and reminded Vane of Froggy from the *Little Rascals*.

"Hello. I am looking for Mr. Evan Batowsky. Is he in?"

Vane almost smiled when he heard Tank speak. His CO's voice was so pleasant it was sickening.

"No, sir. The master is not in at the moment. Shall I tell him you called when he returns?"

"When do you expect him to return?"

"Not until tomorrow evening, sir."

“No. That won’t be necessary. He wasn’t expecting us anyway. I’ll give him a call tomorrow evening. Thank you for your help.”

Vane listened as the door shut, then heard Tank and Trigg’s footsteps leaving the property.

Continuing to circle the house for an entrance, Vane noticed a window standing about a foot high from the ground. Not detecting any electrical impulses from a security system, he proceeded forced it open and slipped inside.

The window was high above the floor of what appeared to be the basement. Vance slid inside feet first, landing silently, and brushed his hands on his pants as he looked around.

Though the room was pitch black, Vane had no trouble seeing with his vampire eyes. Walking slowly, he scanned the basement. Boxes were strewn about and pieces of old furniture stacked in a corner. As he moved forward, he noticed bottles sitting on a table alongside several smaller boxes.

Vane walked over to the bottles, picked one up and removed the top. He found a powdery substance inside. He sniffed the powder carefully, but could not pick up anything specific from its contents. Gingerly, he dipped his pinky finger in the bottle, then lightly licked the white powder from the tip of his finger. The powder had a slight tang to it, but was otherwise unremarkable.

Vane decided to pocket a bottle for headquarters to test.

A slight moan broke the silence and Vane stilled, his senses going on full alert as he waited for additional sounds. When the moan came again, he looked in the direction it had originated.

At one corner of the room were two doors with small glass windows. Vane placed his ear against one door and then the other to listen for voices. Finally, he heard a few muffled noises he couldn’t quite make out.

Vane lifted his head to look through the window. The room wasn’t very big. A mat lay on the floor and a small toilet was situated in the corner. The narrow window

hindered his view of the entire contents of the room. He did see a partial view of a pair of legs, female legs, on the floor. They moved slightly. Whoever she was, she was alive.

Slowly, he turned the knob and pulled the door open. The smell of blood permeated the air in the small room, mixing with the scent of death. When he turned his head toward the direction of the legs he had seen through the window, he froze. What he saw sickened him.

Two female vampires crouched over the body of a human female. Bite marks marred her arms, legs, torso and neck.

Vane soon realized the movement of the legs he had seen through the door's window was not what it had seemed. The pull from one of the vampires as it sucked the woman's blood from a wound in her thigh was causing the movement.

When the female vampires noticed his presence, their faces contorted as they peeled back their lips, showing fangs and hissing in rage. Before they could attack, Vane slammed the door and locked it. Their howls and shrieks were muffled by the heavy door.

"Tank, I found a human female in the basement, but she's not alive. Two female vamps were using her as a local Seven Eleven. They're locked inside the room with her."

"Copy that, Vane. Continue the search of the house."

"Roger that."

Vane climbed the stairs to the basement door. It wasn't locked, but he waited and listened before opening the door. Hearing nothing, he opened the door painstakingly slowly so if anyone was close by, they would not notice.

The basement door opened into a hallway outside of the kitchen area. A small light was on in the kitchen, but the room was empty.

Vane stepped out and gently closed the door behind him. Sniffing the air, he caught a faint scent which seemed familiar, but he could not place it.

Peering around the corner of the hallway into the main hall, he listened once again for the location of the butler Tank had warned him about. Footsteps sounded above him on the next floor.

Vane slowly made his way down the main hall knowing he needed to pick up the pace. It was getting close to the time when all Watchers needed to be at the riverfront.

A few steps down the hall, Vane saw a set of double doors. When he heard no sounds from the other side, he slowly opened it, finding he had come upon Evan's office.

Vane stepped inside, and silently closed the door behind him. Immediately, the scent caught him. *Rosa's scent!*

He closed his eyes, wanting to be sure he was right and not his mind playing tricks. Yes, it was Rosa's scent. She had been there, in this room, and the scent was strong telling him it had been recently.

Vane left the office in a rush, his head reeling, and his heart pounding. *Rosa is here!* At the moment, he didn't care who discovered he was inside the house. His only thought was to find Rosa.

He bounded up the stairs, following her scent and stopped at a door. Hastily, he flung it open and halted.

An old man, whom Vane assumed was Evan's butler, jumped at the sudden intrusion, and whirled around to face him. His eyes were wide in surprise and shock, and his hands flew up in a defensive gesture.

"Where is she?" Vane bellowed at the old man.

"Are you referring to the mistress?"

Vane looked around the room. Rosa's scent was so strong, it made his blood hum. Anger rose inside, breaking his control. Evan had obviously been the one who had taken Rosa, and if she had been harmed in any way, he was going to make the vampire pay.

In two strides he was across the floor and holding the butler by the throat, resisting the urge to squeeze brutally. He lessened his hold so the man could speak.

"Where is Rosa?" Vane hissed through clenched teeth.

The butler's face paled, and he began to shake. "She...she left with the master. She isn't here."

"Where did he take her?" Vane was losing patience with the old man. He wanted to find Rosa and kill Evan for taking her.

“The master has gone to his suite at the hotel by the river to view the fireworks festivities.”

The old man’s face began to change from fear to defiance. Vane saw the flash in the butler’s eyes when the man had perceived the threat to his master, and he felt it when the butler resolved to protect Evan at all cost.

From behind his back, the butler grabbed the crystal vase which held long-stemmed, red roses and hurled it, toward Vane’s head.

Vane saw the vase, quick reflexes allowing him to duck and raise his arm to deflect the blow, but the blow to his arm broke his hold on the old man’s throat.

The butler bolted out the door. Vane had no doubt the man was headed for the telephone to contact Evan.

Vane caught up with the butler at the top of the stairs and leaped on him, sending them both tumbling down the stairs, landing on the marble floor in a tangle of arms and legs. The butler struggled to escape, flipping over onto his stomach and trying to crawl out of Vane’s grasp. Vane shifted his weight down on the old man while he grabbed his arms and pulled them behind his back, pinning him to the floor.

“Tank, Rosa was here. Evan has her now, according to the butler who I’ve got subdued at the moment.”

“Roger that, Vane. We’re coming in.”

The front door swung open, and from the feral looks Vane noticed on both Tank and Trigg’s faces, they were not pleased to hear Evan had been the one to take Rosa.

Vane slid off the butler’s back, hauled him up by his arms until he was standing, then shoved the man forward and into a chair.

“What do we do with him?” Vane asked coldly, sliding a glance to Tank. He knew what he *wanted* to do with the butler, but his sense of honor and duty demanded he waited for Tank’s instruction.

“Tank, the houseboat’s secured,” Rayne broke in over their communicators. “I dusted three Rogues hanging out in the cabin. Seems like they were waiting for someone.

One of them had something I think you should take a look at, Vane. The scent on the rose you found is Evan. I picked up his scent inside the boat, and they match.”

“Copy that, Rayne. We’re in the house,” Tank answered as he turned to Vane, and Vane saw it in his CO’s eyes—they were out of time here.

“We don’t have time to force much information out of him,” Tank said calmly.

Rayne strode through the door, then handed Tank a piece of paper. Vane saw Rayne’s brow furrow in confusion as the Watcher looked at the old man, and then him.

“Who’s the old man?” Rayne asked, hooking a thumb in the direction of the man who sat red-faced in the chair.

“He’s Evan’s butler,” Vane answered in a low growl. “He said Evan took Rosa with him to a hotel on the riverfront for the fireworks festival.”

Rayne looked at the butler once again and cocked an eyebrow. “But why? Why would Evan Batowsky want to kidnap Rosa?”

Vane glared at the butler, and if looks could kill, he’d have the old man laid out cold. “That’s what I am about to find out.”

At that declaration, the butler snapped himself upright and looked at him, his face defiant. “She is the master’s mistress. That’s why.”

Vane felt his fangs explode into his mouth as he hissed, outraged Evan or his butler would think such a thing. “She is not his mistress!”

As Vane lurched toward the butler, seething in anger, Trigg came up from behind and pulled him back.

“We have to get downtown. It’s time for the Watchers to get in place and begin patrolling the crowds. Trigg, take the butler to the basement, and see if there’s another cell to lock him in.”

Tank’s command spoken in his deep voice reigned in Vane’s loss of control, and he backed away from the old man.

“We’ll check out the hotel. Don’t worry, brother, we’ll find her.”

Vane took a deep breath and nodded. Tank was right. They had a job to do no matter how desperate he was to find Rosa. At least they had something to go on, he told himself.

Vane sat in the back seat of Tank's Crossover next to Trigg. His insides were knotted up so tight, he wanted to jump out of the window and run to the waterfront. Instead, he decided to focus on another issue at hand. "What's on the paper Rayne found on the boat?" As he leaned forward Tank handed him the paper, and Trigg read over his shoulder.

"It's a list of names," Tank said as he pulled the Crossover out of the parking lot and onto Utica Pike, heading for Louisville.

"Looks like a hit list." Vane didn't know what to make of what he was reading. "What would Evan Batowsky, or Rogues for that matter, want with these people? I see a couple of politicians, the mayor and the Chief of Police. There are even a few names of the big wigs from the race track here."

Tank nodded. "Yeah, and the list is divided into two sections."

"Hey, wait a minute. There's an address under the second list," Trigg pointed out.

"You think maybe one's a hit list? But, what's with the other list and the address below the names?" Vane's mind worked, trying to come up with possible scenarios for this new piece of information. He looked up and met Tank's gaze in the rearview mirror.

"I'm not sure, but I am going to notify headquarters to send out a mass message to all the other Cell leaders to be on alert. I'll have them locate everyone on the list and have them watched. Headquarters will have to send a team to stake out the address under the second set of names."

Tank blew out a long breath and scratched his head. "That's going to leave us short a lot of Watchers tonight, but we can't ignore this list."

As the others murmured their agreement, Vane's gut clenched. Less Watchers on the waterfront meant less eyes on the lookout for Rosa.

Charles pulled the limousine up to the front door of the hotel's entrance. He got out of the driver's seat, then walked around to the rear of the car and opened the door for

Evan. He bowed slightly as Evan exited the limousine, then stepped aside as Evan reached in and pulled Rosa out of the limo, holding her hand in his.

Rosa looked around, feeling dazed and unable to comprehend where she was. A tug on her hand brought her attention to the set of doors ahead of her as Evan ushered her into the hotel.

The inside was bustling with people. A woman was seated at the piano in the corner of the lobby, swaying with the music as her fingers danced over the keys.

Rosa felt the music envelope her, soothe her. She wanted to go over and get a closer look at the woman, but Evan's grasp on her hand held firm.

She sighed, but could not take her eyes off the pianist, who seemed to flow with her music, her head bent over the keys as she played. There was a slight smile at the curve of the woman's lips as if she, too, felt the power her music was projecting.

Rosa only half listened to the hushed tones in which Evan spoke to the hotel clerk behind the counter. After the clerk handed him the card key to the suite, she felt another tug on her hand and allowed herself to be led like an obedient dog.

Two glass elevators rose and descended, almost in a dance, as people entered and exited at various floors. They were beautiful, Rosa thought, and for some reason, the sight made her think of floating bubbles. Feeling as though she were drunk, she pressed her hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle.

"What do you find funny, my beautiful rose?" Evan crooned into her ear.

An odd shiver ran down her spine at the sound of Evan's voice close to her, breathing across her skin. Actually, it felt more like an eerie, cold chill. Through the haze in her mind, she was acutely aware of the unease she felt with this man who was holding on to her hand possessively.

The glass elevator lowered to the lobby, and the doors opened. Rosa followed Evan inside and watched the lobby fade away as the elevator car glided upward.

Rosa stared out the glass as she floated further and further away from the people milling about the lobby, but the music from the pianist continued to float through the air, even filling the elevator.

A sudden *ding* caught her attention. She turned to face the elevator doors as they opened. Evan escorted her down the plush carpeted hallway. She gazed at the beige halls with closed doors on each side, wondering where she was.

Evan slid the card key through the card reader, and she heard the click of the door as it unlocked.

Evan's hand rested on the small of her back as he nudged her past the threshold of the room and a memory skittered across her mind, one warm and pleasant. Someone else had laid their hand on the small of her back. Someone she cared for deeply. Someone she loved.

Before Rosa could finish the thought, Evan walked past her and gazed out a set of French doors.

Rosa took in the suite. The seating area where she stood was decorated in tones of cream and brown. An overstuffed leather couch, flanked by two large chairs sat along the wall.

A glass table, which was also a hexagon-shaped fish tank, stood before the couch. Beautiful fish in shades of white, red, orange and black swam lazily throughout the tank, their fins resembling little fans with strips of silk attached to the tips.

She turned in the direction Evan was standing with his back to her. She noticed the seating area and the dining area were separated by a wall. The wall was solid at the bottom, but had spindles placed at intervals on the top section to allow a view to the dining area.

Rosa looked around the expansive suite, trying to take it all in. She felt confused, disoriented and was not quite sure where she was, or why. Flashes of light caught her attention, and she slowly walked to the doors where Evan was standing.

Evan caught her arm and turned her to face him.

"My sweet rose, I have something for you, which I know you will enjoy."

She looked down as he slit his wrist, just as she remembered him doing once before, and lifted it to her mouth.

Rosa watched blood ooze from Evan's wrist, the scent enveloping her senses. She was drawn to it somehow and unable to control the impulse.

Without thought, she leaned forward and her mouth found the wound, drawing the blood into her mouth in slow, steady pulls. At once she was flying, and she closed her eyes. She was weightless, uninhibited and free. She felt intoxicated and craved more, but the contact was broken, leaving her trembling with need.

Evan pulled his wrist away from Rosa. He would only give her a *taste* to keep her wanting, slowly drawing her into an addiction of the drug in his system. Rosa would always want him, need him. The thought brought a smile to his face, and he grew hard thinking about Rosa in his bed, crying out for his blood as he took her over and over.

The boom and crackle of fireworks brought Evan out of his erotic thoughts. The show had started, and the cheers from the crowd outside could be heard.

"Let the games begin," he said, then opened the doors to the balcony, and escorted Rosa out into the night.

Chapter Nine

Tank pulled his SUV into the riverfront hotel's parking garage and pointed to a black limousine. As he drove past the vehicle, they noticed the license plate matched the information given from headquarters—it belonged to Evan Batowsky.

A tall, slender man stood in front of the limousine, pulling lazily on a cigarette. Two scantily clad women walked by, catching the man's attention. He stood there, motionless, stalking them with his gaze as he took one last pull on his cigarette, flicked it to the ground, then turned and headed out of the garage toward the hotel.

"Do you want us to go into the hotel as backup?" Trigg asked Tank.

Vane's fists clenched tight at his sides. He was ready to rip the door off the hinges, grab hold of Evan's limo driver and demand to know where Rosa was being held.

"No. You and Rayne go to your posts as planned. I don't think there will be any Rogues with Evan. They aren't stable enough to be in public. Their impulse to kill would be far too great, and being inside a closed-in area such as the hotel, would be like a cat chasing mice inside a cage—easy prey. He's controlling them somehow, but I doubt he has *that* much control."

Vane bolted out of the car, but was quickly grabbed by a strong hand. He glanced over his shoulder to see Tank shaking his head. He knew it was a silent order to get control of himself and rein in his emotions.

Vane and Tank watched Evan's driver walk into the hotel. As soon as the man cleared the doors, Vane was behind him with Tank not far behind.

Taking a quick glance over his shoulder, Vane saw Tank stop in his tracks, his face turned to the lounge area. Following his CO's gaze, he saw a woman playing a beautiful medley on the lounge's piano.

It took several *psst* sounds to get Tank's attention. Finally, Tank blinked and seemed to come back to his senses when the woman lifted her head, and her fingers stopped moving about the keys.

Vane could see the woman stare directly at Tank, or at least he thought she was. She wore dark sunglasses which hid her eyes.

The woman lowered her head and seemed to pick up the melody exactly where she had left off. Tank turned and came up beside him, his face blank as if nothing had just happened.

Now was not the time for questions, Vane thought as he stood a few feet behind Evan's driver, who was waiting for the elevator. When the doors opened, the man entered, and so did they.

Both Vane and Tank kept themselves cloaked and went unnoticed by the driver. After he punched in his floor number, Tank sent a compulsion for the woman standing in front of him to press the button one floor below it.

When the doors opened, Vane exited among several humans, followed by Tank. They made their way to the stairs and up to the next floor, where Vane prayed Evan had Rosa in one of the suites.

Slowly, Vane pushed open the door at the top of the stairwell and peered out. He saw the driver walk to the end of the hall, then slow his pace as he reached the last door.

Rico stood in a dark corner of the hotel's parking garage, watching quietly as two Watchers followed Charles into the hotel. He smiled as he pulled a drag from his cigarette. "This could get interesting."

He had never liked Evan and despised taking the man's barking orders. He was done taking orders from anyone. He had never cared a bit about Evan's stupid plans to overtake the city and push casino gambling into the state of Kentucky. The only thing that interested him was getting his hands on the drug Evan had acquired and ridding himself of the asshole. He had always been a drug runner. It was in his blood.

Rico knew he could not kill Evan. A fledgling could not kill his sire unless he was very, very strong. So he would let the Watchers do it for him. Then he would take care of Vane and have Rosa to himself. He wanted to go back to Jake's ranch in Texas. With Jake dead, the ranch belonged to him, and he planned to take Rosa with him.

Rosa stood in the cool night breeze gazing out over the dark water of the river. Colors burst in the sky. She felt the grip on her arm release. From the corner of her eye she saw Evan stride through the French doors and into the suite. Deep within her mind, she felt relieved he was gone, leaving her alone, at least for the moment.

The booms and crackles of the fireworks were exciting, and her heart raced. She watched a trail of light shoot into the sky, then explode into a million colored sparks, forming circles, hearts, stars, sunbursts and flowers. They seemed so close she could almost reach out and touch them. The thought made her smile, and she raised her hand, stretching out her fingers. She wanted to let the colors sift through her fingertips like a handful of stars.

"Charles, have you seen any of the Rogues?" Evan asked when his driver entered the suite.

Charles nodded. "Yes, sir. I saw a group of about six or seven pass through the lower level of the parking garage and head toward the waterfront as I parked the limousine."

Evan smiled brightly in anticipation of the success of his plans. "Good. I've put a lot of time and money into this operation and it best not fail. The most important, and necessary, individuals should be arriving at the address I specified in a couple of hours. It is going to be my pleasure to watch them fall at my feet, and those who aren't needed in this grand plan, will be eliminated, one by one."

Evan clapped his hands in his revelry, but his joy was short lived. The door to the suite crashed open, sending splinters of wood flying in every direction.

Vane could wait no longer. He was close to Rosa. He could feel it. Taking a step back, he braced himself, then ran full force at the door, sending pieces of wood inward in all directions.

“Where is she?” Vane sneered at Evan, his fists clenched at his sides so tightly he felt his nails bite into his palms. Once he knew where Rosa was, he would show Evan no mercy.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Vane, the Watcher.”

Evan’s sardonic chuckle had Vane gritting his teeth.

“You must mean my mate, Rosa.”

Vane flinched at Evan’s words. He had called her his mate. Had he found Rosa too late? Vane prayed it wasn’t true. He prayed he hadn’t failed to get to her in time.

“She will *never* be your mate,” Vane hissed through his fangs.

Evan laughed again. “Are you so sure about that, Watcher? As you can see,” Evan looked over his shoulder to the balcony, “she isn’t bound in any way, yet she does not leave.”

Not wanting to hear any more of Evan’s lies, Vane lunged at him, ready to take the bastard apart piece by piece, starting with ripping the man’s tongue from his mouth.

Vane and Evan struggled with one another, using their arms and upper body strength to deflect the other’s blows. Vane managed to force Evan backward, sending them through a wall divider separating the sitting area from the dining room.

The room sounded like a WWE match as Vane fought Evan while Tank battled it out with Charles.

Vane found himself face-to-face, or actually nose to nose, with Evan as they glared at each other, locked in a fierce hold neither seemed able to break. Tangled in one another’s legs, they crashed through the divided wall, sending spindles raining down on them.

The sudden shattering of glass momentarily stole Evan’s attention, and Vane saw the opportunity he had been waiting for.

Seizing one of the broken spindles, he plunged it into Evan's heart. Even in the throes of death, Evan was not deterred. He reached for Vane's throat, but his strength quickly faded as his life's blood flowed from the wound in his chest, and his heart ceased to beat.

Vane rolled over, separating himself from Evan's body. As he lay on the floor, breathing heavily, the cry of a hawk pierced the night air. He started at the sound, knowing it was unusual. It was several hours into nightfall and hawks were not nocturnal creatures.

"Vane," Tank yelled, pointing to the balcony.

Vane surged to his feet and raced onto the balcony. He found Rosa deeply engrossed in the display of the fireworks lighting up the sky, not aware of the battle that had just taken place in the suite, nor that he had come for her. She was standing on the edge of the balcony, arms outstretched, fingers extended and leaning out over the iron railing.

Rosa looked as though she was trying to touch the beautiful lights, stretching further and further as if to grasp them in her hands. When a large golden hawk screeched and came out of nowhere, flying straight toward her, she stopped and stared with wide eyes.

It sailed past her outstretched arms, and Vane saw a wing lightly smack her hands. The action startled her, and she stepped back from the railing. Vane blew out a breath, relieved to see Rosa was no longer leaning over the railing.

Vane stared in disbelief as the hawk forced Rosa further away from the balcony railing. She stood still, watching the bird intently with her head slightly cocked to the side, as if she was listening.

A joyful smile spread across her face as the hawk circled her one last time, then disappeared into the night sky.

Vane waited only a heartbeat before he went to Rosa and pulled her into a loving embrace, immensely relieved she was safe and back in his arms.

The soft sigh from Rosa's lips was music to his ears. Vane saw recognition in her eyes, although they were glassy. She had been drugged. He fought the anger heating his insides. She was safe.

Easing from the embrace, he looked her over to reassure himself she was not injured. She swayed on her feet with a dazed smile as she looked at him.

“Hi. Do you have something for me too?” Rosa said with a giggle.

Vane’s eyebrow rose at her question. Before he could answer, Rosa grabbed his wrist and in one quick motion, raised it to her mouth. Her mouth opened wide, and her fangs extended, ready to sink into his flesh. Vane jerked his wrist out of her grasp and glared at her.

“Did you feed from him, Rosa?”

Vane couldn’t keep the angry growl from his voice. When her eyes grew wide and her lips began to tremble, he pulled her back into his arms and held her tightly, reminding himself whatever had happened was not her fault. She had obviously been drugged, and he hoped once she recovered, he would learn more of what Evan had done.

“Vane, how is she? Is she okay?”

Tank had walked out onto the balcony. Vane hadn’t sensed his presence until his CO had spoken. Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked at his commander. “She’s going to be okay. They’ve drugged her with something, but we’ll get through it.” Vane struggled to keep his voice steady as he spoke.

Tank nodded. “I’m going to get the SUV. I’ll pull it up outside the hotel doors. We’ll take her with us.” He took a step forward and laid a hand on Vane’s shoulder, gave a tight squeeze, then left.

Vane straightened, lowered one arm to circle her waist and walked her back inside the suite. The room was in shambles with furniture upended and broken, and glass scattered on the floor from the shattered aquarium.

Vane felt Rosa hesitate on their way out of the hotel suite. Following her gaze, he determined the source of her distress. She was staring at the floor where several brightly colored goldfish wiggled and flopped on the wet carpet, their mouths opening and closing, gasping for air. Scanning the room, he found a bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter.

Gently, he released Rosa and held her gaze. “Stay right here,” he said before turning and heading to the kitchen. He dumped the fruit out of the bowl, filled it with water, then brought it back to the sitting area. He was surprised when Rosa bent and silently helped him gather the fish, placing them in the bowl.

Vane watched her to make sure her beautiful little fingers did not come into contact with any broken glass.

Rosa seemed to be relieved and more at ease. Vane wrapped his arm around her waist, then led her out of the suite and to the elevators. He had left the bowl of goldfish on the kitchen counter, figuring one of the hotel staff would take care of them.

Rosa kept herself tucked in tight to Vane’s side as he walked her out into the night, his body warming her inside and out. She glanced at the SUV to see Trigg standing beside it as well as another man she had never seen before. The tall stranger was as dark as the night itself, and even though the man was bigger than both Vane and Trigg put together, she wasn’t afraid. He was watchful, but the look on his face was that of concern. She also knew Vane would keep her safe.

Vane sat her beside him in the back seat as Trigg and the other man climbed into the front.

When the stranger turned to speak to Vane, Rosa got a close-up view of his eyes. They were an amazing silver color.

“Rayne will be heading back a little later.”

Rosa suddenly had the giggles and couldn’t help herself. She turned to Vane and said, “Oh, did you see the pretty birdie?” Then tried to lower her voice to a whisper. She didn’t want Trigg and Tank to hear, but didn’t notice she wasn’t being successful. “It talked to me, you know. It told me something about you...but I’m not *teelliing*!”

Trigg’s bark of laughter resounded through the SUV until Tank cuffed him on the back of the head.

“What?” Trigg said, looking at Tank in confusion while he rubbed the back of his head.

Tank rolled his eyes.

The sight reminded Rosa of a *My Three Stooges* scene and she snorted, then covered her mouth.

Rosa took in everything. Her attention bounced from what was happening outside her window, to the expressions on Vane's face when he looked at her, to what Trigg and the dark man were talking about from the front seat.

Trigg reached up and pressed a button on the ceiling inside the SUV. The Crossover's moon roof slowly slid backwards, opening wide. Millions of stars shimmered in the midnight sky over her head. She heard the soft click of the radio a moment before a song she hadn't heard for many years filled the interior of the car.

Nazareth's *Hair of the Dog* streamed through the expansive sound system, enveloping her in the rhythm of the hard rock song.

Vane reached over Rosa and grasped hold of her seat belt, but before he could pull it across her lap, she shot out of her seat. Rosa stood in the Crossover, hanging out of the moon roof, her arms waving in the air, singing at the top of her lungs.

When Trigg let out another snort, Tank raised his hand to cuff him on the back of the head again, but Trigg glared and pointed his finger. "Don't even think about it. Even my mate doesn't smack me on the back of the head."

Tank sighed and continued to drive.

"Well, I just never would have thought Rosa knew *Hair of the Dog*," Trigg muttered, looking out the window.

Vane ignored the comedy routine taking place in the front seat. Placing his hands on her hips, he gently tried to persuade her to sit in the seat. He knew she was under the influence of a drug, and he didn't want her to do anything which would cause her to feel embarrassed later.

"Whooooo!" she cried out in the night.

Then Rosa turned and looked down at him, her glazed smoky eyes staring as if he were Superman. “You sure kicked his ass, didn’t you?” She laughed, snorted, then laughed again.

To Vane’s relief, she finally plopped down on the seat. It wasn’t very graceful, but he knew she was beyond caring about anything.

Rosa burst out, “My hero!” then placed a loud smacking kiss on his cheek and batted her eyelashes.

“Rosa.” Vane moved closer to her face so he could speak to her softly. When he did, her glassy eyes fixed on his mouth for several moments, before sliding back up to his eyes. His jaw clenched at her silent invitation, knowing he would have to refuse. It was not the time, nor the place.

Before he could dissuade where her thoughts were obviously leading, Rosa placed her hand behind his head and pulled him down to her mouth.

His heart was beating fast as he warred with himself. Rosa’s kiss was stealing his breath and making him burn for her. He knew her actions were solely the product of the drugs she had been given. He told himself to break the kiss, but found it excruciatingly hard to do.

When Rosa eased away from his lips, he hoped she was coming to her senses, but he quickly found he was wrong. She had released his lips, but kept her hand clasped behind his head as she slid her tongue down his jawline, then down his neck before she sank in her fangs.

Vane jerked. The quick prick on his neck was immediately replaced by something so erotic, so sensual, he had to clamp his mouth shut before he cried out in ecstasy.

He had never had anyone drink from him before. He had certainly drunk from both human and vampire females in the past, but nothing could compare to what Rosa was doing to him.

A part of him soared at such intimacy. He had dreamed of this, craved this for so long. But for Rosa, the desire to feed from him might not be the same. She might be following a compulsion driven by her drug-induced state.

Tank heard an erotic moan and looked into the rearview mirror at the occupants in the back seat. He had to bite his cheek to keep from smiling.

Vane lay back against the seat with a tight hold on Rosa's arms, as if he was using all his strength to keep her seated while she drank from his neck.

Rosa looked as though she was ready to climb on top of Vane and begin ripping his clothes off so she could ravage him right there.

Tank wasn't certain if this behavior was totally drug related or something else. He also wasn't sure if Vane had even attempted to stop Rosa from taking from his neck. It sure didn't look as though he minded it a whole hell of a lot. Whatever the reasons for what was happening, Vane was doing his damndest to uphold her dignity. That, at least, was clear.

When they reached the Cell, he parked the Crossover, opened the back door, then stood aside while Vane helped Rosa out of the back seat and to the stairs.

Tank walked behind the two, Vane holding onto Rosa by the waist as she staggered with every step.

Robyn ran out to greet them, then stopped short. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed, then put her hand up to her mouth and almost sobbed. "What's happened to her?"

"She's been drugged," Vane answered wearily.

Suddenly, Rosa snorted, then broke into a laugh. "Ooooh, Robyn. You should have seen him!" Rosa cooed as she patted Vane on the chest.

"He *totally* kicked Evan's ass. I heard them fighting, but the pretty little birdie came for me."

Trigg snickered. Robyn glared at him then cuffed him on the back of the head.

"Ow!" Trigg cried, bringing a hand up to the back of his head.

Tank stood in the doorway, this time not holding back his smile, recalling what Trigg said in the SUV. He didn't believe for a minute Robyn didn't keep the warrior in line when it was necessary.

“I’m going to take her upstairs and get her to sleep off whatever Evan gave her.” Vane turned and started to walk Rosa toward the stairs, then stopped. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small bottle.

“Tank, I found this in Evan’s basement. There were several boxes of this stuff there. I don’t know what it is, but it could be what he used on Rosa.”

Tank took the bottle. “I’ll get it over to one of the labs right away so they can examine it. If it was used on Rosa, we’ll find out its effects and how long they will last. Hopefully, it isn’t highly addictive. If it is, she’s going to have a rocky road ahead.”

Tank hated to play the devil’s advocate, but Vane needed to stay focused and prepare for the worst.

Vane lifted Rosa in his arms, carried her to his room and closed the door behind him with a kick of his boot. Tank walked to the office to contact headquarters before having a courier pick up the bottle and take it to Lexington, their closest lab and hospital. He hoped the drug’s effects would wear off soon and not cause Rosa any harm. Vane was strung as tight as a warrior who was about to lose their mate.

The thought made Tank pause, and he smiled, but his joy at realizing Vane had indeed found his match was fleeting. Losing that perfect match would tear the man apart.

Chapter Ten

Vane carried Rosa to his bed. She seemed to be winding down, going limp in his arms and fading into sleep. He pulled back the comforter and covers, then gently laid her on the bed.

Staring at her, his heart ached when he thought he might have never seen her again. Evan's words about her being his mate rang through his head. Though his mind refused to even entertain the thought, he wouldn't know the truth until she recovered from the drugs in her system.

He sat on the edge of the bed, then raised her to a sitting position, leaning her against his chest. Wanting her to be as comfortable as possible, he kissed the top of her head, then turned her and lowered the zipper of her dress.

Rosa's bare chest had him closing his eyes and stifling a groan. He should have been prepared since the dress had such low neckline. The sight of her soft breasts and their puckered tips had his hands itching to caress and massage them. He wanted to take the fullness into his mouth and...

Vane ran both hands through his hair, cursing himself. Rosa was drugged and had been through a horrifying ordeal, and all he could think about was making love to her.

Finally getting hold of his senses, Vane lay Rosa back on the bed and pulled the dress down her stomach and off her hips. An angry growl rumbled in his throat. Rosa was not wearing panties. *If Evan has touched her...*

Evan was dead. What could he do? He could not seek revenge.

After removing the dress fully, Vane covered her and stood.

His emotional state was teetering on the edge, and he paced the room for several minutes before heading into the bathroom to splash cool water on his face. He could use a shower, but he didn't want to leave Rosa alone. Instead, he pulled a chair beside the bed,

and settled down to wait for the unknown. There was no telling if she would go through withdrawals from the drugs, but he was going to be ready to do whatever was necessary to see her through it.

Rosa's quiet slumber lasted only a few hours. Vane had drifted off to sleep, but was awakened by her moans. When he opened his eyes, Rosa was clutching the covers and moving her head from side-to-side.

Vane left the chair and sat on the bed beside her, stroked her hair, and spoke in a soft, calming voice. "I'm here, *mi dulce*." Shifting her closer, he began to sing her a lullaby he had learned from his mother in Cuba.

After a few verses, Rosa's eyes fluttered, then opened. When they focused on him, he could see the hungry look was once again in her smoky, gray eyes. Vane knew what she wanted and was not about to deny her. He lifted her into his lap, and cradled her head against his neck while leaning against the headboard. It only took a moment for Rosa to take his offer and sink in her teeth.

He groaned aloud from the intimate contact and shifted slightly as her fangs pierced his skin. This was going to be the death of him.

Gritting his teeth, he held himself still as Rosa wriggled against the hard bulge of his erection. He could see Rosa's nipples grow taut as she arched, begging for them to be touched.

"Vane," she whispered against his neck. "Take me, Vane."

"Shhh, *mi dulce*. You are not yourself right now. Your body is reacting to the drugs in your blood and maybe clean blood will fight it. Take what you need from me, Rosa."

Vane closed his eyes. Rosa was not responsible for her actions, but he was definitely responsible for his, and he would not use her current state of mind to take advantage of her and sate his own raging desires. He had too much love and respect for her.

Love? Yes, he did love Rosa. For many, many years, he had basked in the attention of women and never had to venture far to find someone to warm his bed. It was purely entertainment. Each time he looked for something different—different women, different places, different situations. He had vowed never to fall in love and be tied to *one* woman.

But the years passed, one by one, and he had found it harder and harder to ignore the emptiness, the loneliness he felt inside. No matter how many women he had met, and no matter how pleasurable the sex was, he could not find the *right* woman. The one who touched more than his body, but touched his heart and soul the way Rosa did.

He cradled her tighter, giving up himself to her. He would give her whatever she needed. He would give her all of him. His Rosa. His *amor*. His love.

The hours dragged on and into the morning. After each feeding, Rosa fell into a deep sleep, only to awake again wanting more. Finally, she seemed sated and hadn't awakened for a couple of hours.

Vane was exhausted and weak. Rosa had fed from him several times, and his blood was greatly depleted. If he didn't get help soon, he was afraid he would fall into a deep, and possibly fatal, sleep.

He shifted Rosa off his lap and laid her back onto the bed. When he turned to leave the bed, his vision swam and the room spun, causing him to grab hold of the headboard to steady himself.

Eyeing the intercom on the wall, Vane let out a deep breath, thankful he would not have to struggle to get to the door and call out for help. He pressed the intercom button, paging every room in the building, hoping *someone* had not fallen asleep just yet. After a few moments, and several presses of the page button, Tank answered, his voice groggy.

"Vane, what do you need?"

"Blood," he said faintly, not having the strength to speak above a whisper.

"I'm coming, brother. Just hang in there."

Vane's vision darkened and he felt himself falling. He hit the floor and lay there, unable to get his limbs to work.

The door to the room opened, and he heard Tank's deep voice.

"Vane!"

Tank was immediately beside him, lifting him off the floor and back onto the bed.

As he settled against the soft covers, his CO's silver gaze raked over his neck and wrists. There was no question by the look on Tank's face his appearance was not so good at the moment.

"Damn!"

The expletive was definite confirmation.

Tank opened the vein on his thick wrist and held it to Vane's lips. Vane felt the energy of Tank's blood flow into him, bringing back his strength. After he had taken what he needed, he released Tank's wrist and offered his thanks.

"How long has she been out?" Tank asked after sealing the wound.

Vane looked at Rosa, sleeping soundly by his side, her golden spirals splayed across the pillow.

"She last fed about two hours ago. I think it's over. Vampire self-preservation instincts must have been compelling her to drink to dilute the drug."

Tank watched him for a moment, and Vane knew his CO was making certain he was okay before leaving the room.

Overcome by exhaustion and feeling the remnants of Rosa's multiple feedings, Vane closed his eyes, and drifted to sleep.

Rosa awoke slowly, feeling as though she was walking through a misty fog. The first thing which occurred to her was the taste on her tongue. She licked her lips, then furrowed her brows. She tasted blood, but not animal blood as if she had eaten a rare steak. The taste was much sweeter, and she savored it on her tongue for a moment before opening her eyes.

It took several moments to discern where she was. Suddenly aware of a warm body curled up to hers and a heavy weight around her waist, she looked down to find a man's arm draped across her stomach.

Rosa studied the arm for a moment, blinked and wondered if she was still asleep and dreaming. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again, but the arm was still there.

Slowly, she turned her head and peered over her shoulder. Vane's beautiful face filled her view. His eyes were closed, and his sensual mouth was slightly parted. His breathing was steady, but quiet. She smiled as she moved her head closer. Inhaling the scent of him turned her on and threatened to make her lose her senses.

Rosa stared at Vane for several minutes. She wanted to touch him, run her hands through his luxurious dark hair. To start at the scalp and sift her fingers all the way through, down to the wavy ends.

As if on its own accord, her hand was now caressing his firm, hair stubbled jawline. He had obviously not shaven in a while. She let her hand move up, and do what she'd wanted to do earlier, run her fingers through his hair.

Vane's eyes opened and she froze. They stared at each other for several heartbeats before he spoke.

"How are you feeling, *mi dulce*?"

Rosa smiled at the endearment he used so often to address her.

"A little groggy, but otherwise, I'm fine." Rosa tried to hide her embarrassment at being caught touching him while he slept, but she felt her cheeks heating nonetheless.

"How did you find me?"

She saw pain and anger flash through Vane's eyes, but then it was gone.

"It's a long story, but first, can you tell me anything about Evan and the kidnapping?"

Visions and emotions from the last two days hit her. She closed her eyes and let out a sob.

Vane pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. "Shhh, *mi dulce*. It's okay. It's all over, and you're safe. Just tell me what you can, okay?"

Rosa nodded as Vane wiped the tears from her cheeks. She told him about the park, and Evan injecting a drug into her arm that left her out of it.

She remembered Evan's house and the horrible evening where he and the two female Rogues had drained a young human male at dinner. Although it took her awhile, she talked it out.

Rosa relayed what she knew about Evan's plans and his involvement with the Rogues.

"Evan wanted to bring casino gambling into Kentucky, but many politicians and other people were against it. He was going to use the Rogues to kill those who stood in his way and turn those he needed to get what he wanted. The heads of the race track were to be converted because they were heavy opponents to extended gambling in the state. He said they complained it would be competition, resulting in lost profits for the track."

"I bet he intended to place slot machines at the track too. All the gambling profits within the state would go to him."

Rosa nodded. Vane's thoughts were right on track with Evan's boasts. "Yes. He even wanted the mayor on his side. Then he could push through the building of a riverboat casino to dock on the riverfront."

Suddenly, Rosa's eyes went wide as the implications of Evan's plans slammed into her mind "What about all those people? Did the Rogues get to them?"

Vane's eyebrows furrowed. "I really don't know. I brought you straight to my room when we got here, so I haven't heard the reports from headquarters. You were drugged, and I needed to get you into bed. We weren't certain what reactions you would have or if there would be any withdrawal symptoms."

It was then Rosa saw the marks on his neck. She reached over and clasped his jaw, and turned his head sideways, noticing more marks and bruising on the other. *Bite marks.*

"Vane, did I do that to you?"

Her chest tightening, she reached and grabbed both his wrists. They, too, had several bite marks on them. Slowly she released his hands and raised her gaze to his.

"What did I do? Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry. I've *never* fed from anyone before. Really!"

Images of last night in the back seat of an SUV and snippets of what happened in Vane's bed played through her head. She saw herself naked, her body all over him as she fed from his veins.

Rosa felt utterly mortified, knowing she had thrown herself at him with wanton abandonment. *Can this get any worse?*

“Rosa. You didn’t do anything to be ashamed of. The intense emotions you were feeling was a result of the drug. Your body needed the blood, driving you to feed. I only sat back and let you take from me. There was nothing more than that.”

Vane’s words eased her mind a little, but her shame remained.

Suddenly Vane’s face turned somber and she was afraid of what he was going to tell her. What other terrible things had she done?

“Rosa, Evan said you and he were mated. Is that true?”

Rosa looked at him and blinked, surprised and confused by the question. She thought through last night’s events and searched her heart. She didn’t feel anything, except her extreme attraction to the man beside her. The entire time Evan had held her captive, all she could think about was Vane.

“No. He never touched me, but I am sure he would have if you hadn’t gotten there in time. He threatened when the Rogues were finished carrying out his plans, he was going to celebrate by making me his mate.”

Rosa lowered her eyes and shuddered at the thought of Evan touching her. He was foul, evil, and she had no doubt if Vane had not found her, she would have lost herself. She would have become a monster just like Evan.

Evan’s blood had drugged her, and it hadn’t taken long for her to become addicted. She had never taken someone else’s blood. Not from a human and not from another vampire.

Rosa’s heart ached, and she wanted to cry. She had come perilously close to losing everything she held dear—her friends, herself and Vane.

So much had occurred within the last forty-eight hours, and she deeply wished she could turn back time. The dates with Vane had been lovely. If she hadn’t been foolish and walked out on him at the restaurant, none of this would have happened.

“Vane,” Rosa said softly, not daring to look at his face.

Vane placed a finger under her chin, then raised it so their gazes met.

“Yes, *mi dulce*? Why do you look troubled?”

“I’m sorry. This has been all my fault. If I hadn’t walked out of the restaurant...”

Vane pressed a finger to her lips. “Shh. None of this was your fault. I don’t know why you left. I don’t know what I did, but whatever it was, I am truly sorry.”

Rosa shook her head and clutched her hands in her lap. “No, I was being stupid. Some women in the bathroom were talking about you and your...” She searched for the proper phrasing. “Uh...liaisons.”

Vane cocked an eyebrow and leaned back a little. “My liaisons?”

“Well, they were talking about the different women you have been with at some of your favorite hangouts.”

She felt utterly foolish in having let her jealousy get the best of her. “Look. I’m sorry. It was wrong of me to get upset. It was juvenile. I feel utterly ridiculous about it. I guess I just haven’t quite been myself after the incident with Robyn and Jake. I mean, even the club made me take a week off to get myself together.”

Rosa was grasping at anything now, trying to come up with excuses for her behavior. Vane was a Watcher, a vampire warrior. He didn’t need some unstable female in his life.

She sighed, then before Vane could comment on what had troubled her at the restaurant, she said, “I should get dressed and get back to my apartment.”

Rosa shifted slightly and started to get out of the bed, but Vane grabbed her arm. His grasp was not painful, but firm. A low growl rumbled from him, freezing her.

Slowly, she turned her head to look at him, afraid of what she would see. Afraid his beautiful eyes would be blazing at her in anger for meddling in his personal affairs and causing so much trouble. Instead, she didn’t see his eyes at all. Vane had them closed, his face tense.

She dared not move for several moments. Vane’s hold on her arm lessened, then released. Without looking back, she slid out of the bed, picked up her clothing from the end of the bed and padded into the bathroom.

When Rosa said she had wanted to leave, Vane's inner beast roared *No!* He had almost lost her once and could not bear to go through the pain again. He never wanted to let her out of his sight. He would chain her to his bed if he had to.

The growl he couldn't hold back had frightened her. He had sensed her fear and felt her tense when he grabbed her as she started to leave his side. He hadn't meant to sound like some wild dog guarding his dinner.

Vane rubbed his hands over his face. In the past week, Rosa had been through much. She deserved better than this. She deserved a quiet, quaint life with a loving husband and beautiful children in a safe, healthy environment. His life was the life of a Watcher, and his duty was to hunt and eliminate Rogues at all cost. Death was his life.

Yes. She should go.

Vane scowled at his inner voice. He knew it was right, but he didn't want her to leave. He couldn't watch her leave.

Stepping out of the bedroom, he quietly closed the door behind him and went downstairs to the office, wanting to find out if any information had come back from the laboratory. Hopefully, they would have answers as to what the powder was in the bottle he had taken from Evan's basement.

Rosa stayed in the bathroom for a long time. Her emotions were all over the place. She knew she had to go back to her apartment, but was afraid to be alone. Her week off from work was over, and she was scheduled to perform tomorrow night. Singing was her life. It was all she had.

When she was up on stage, she felt alive. The music flowed from somewhere deep inside, and she gave it her heart and soul. It was her way of making people feel good. Besides she needed the job. She was an adult, single and on her own.

Finally, Rosa opened the door and stepped into Vane's bedroom, but he was gone. She was a little relieved not to face him, but a part of her was also disheartened he had left.

After one last, longing look around his bedroom, taking in the feel and scent of him, Rosa left the room.

The building was quiet. Rosa assumed everyone was asleep after the long, eventful night. The Watchers had worked very hard to battle the Rogues and thwart Evan's plans to take over the city.

Steeling herself, she tiptoed down the stairs and headed for the door to the lower level. Rosa hated to slip out like this, but she couldn't face anyone. She knew Robyn would be hurt, but she hoped her friend would understand. Maybe this evening she would feel up to calling her to explain and apologize for leaving without a word.

Vane heard Rosa leave, but made no move to stop her. *It's for the best*, he reasoned. Checking the fax machine, he found the report from headquarters.

He had never been a science major, but it didn't take a brainiac to understand the substance he had found in Evan's basement wasn't flour for cooking. *Cooking? How can I possibly be thinking about food at a time like this?*

Vane scowled as his stomach rumbled. It had been a while since he had last eaten, not to mention the amount of blood loss from Rosa's numerous feedings.

Just then there was a clanging of pots and pans from the kitchen. *Robyn. Food.*

Although he wasn't feeling very jovial, Vane did smile slightly. He remembered the many dinners Robyn had cooked for them since she'd arrived on a bus from Texas. The petite blonde was a perfect mate for Trigg.

The thought of mates made his stomach clench. He had lost Rosa. At least this time, he knew she was safe, and he vowed to keep an eye on her to ensure she stayed that way.

As he left the office he saw Tank standing in the entry to the kitchen, stretching his muscular arms above his head, obviously trying to work out the kinks of last night's battle with Charles.

"Hey, Tank. I was getting ready to start dinner. Are you guys planning to go out this evening?"

Robyn's declaration of dinner was music to Vane's ears as he approached Tank.

“Yeah. We need to return to Evan’s place and find out more about what the man was up to.”

When Tank turned to him, Vane handed him several pieces of paper he had retrieved from the fax machine in the office. While his CO looked them over, he gave Robyn a smile, but he knew it didn’t reach his eyes. He wasn’t that good an actor, and it showed by the look on her face she realized something was wrong.

“Vane, how’s Rosa? Is she still asleep?”

Vane knew Robyn was going to ask that question, and he had no idea what to say. “She...left.” He took a seat at the dining room table, ignoring the looks he saw Tank and Robyn exchange.

“What do you mean she left? I haven’t even gotten a chance to speak to her.”

Vane had figured Robyn would be upset, but there wasn’t anything he could have done differently. Rosa wanted to leave without having to see anyone. She had been through a lot the last couple of days and probably needed a little space to work through it all.

As he tried to explain his assessment of Rosa’s current state of mind and her reasons for leaving, his heart ached to see Robyn fight back tears. She had been distraught by the kidnapping of her best friend and had not had a chance to talk to Rosa since the disturbing phone call Rosa had made from the restaurant.

Trigg, obviously sensing his mate’s distress, bounded into the kitchen and was at her side in an instant. After she told him Rosa had left without a word, the warrior pulled her into his arms and spoke softly, assuring her everything would be okay.

Vane had to look away from the questioning look on Trigg’s face as his Cell-mate tried to soothe his mate’s emotional pain.

The door opened, and Rayne stepped across the threshold. Vane wasn’t the only one who turned and gave him the *Where in the hell have you been?* look. Rayne had not returned last night, and had been out during the daytime sleep.

“What?” Rayne asked, his eyebrows raised.

“Glad you could join us.”

Vane could hear the note of reprimand in Tank's tone. Not only had Rayne not returned last night, he had failed to report in.

Rayne gave a sheepish smile. "Sorry, my brothers. It wasn't my intention to cause anyone worry. I had cut the time too close and had to seek shelter. Before I knew it, I was out."

While Rayne strode into the dining room and took a seat at the table, Vane watched Robyn unfold herself from Trigg's arms and return to preparing dinner. Trigg took his place at the table.

"Was Rosa able to tell you anything about Evan's plans or the list we found?"

Vane turned his attention to Tank, knowing it was time to go back over last evening's nightmare. He hoped he was doing a good job at masking the emotions churning inside.

"Yes, she did, but it was information we pretty much had already gained from the list found on Evan's boat. The mayor, Police Chief and certain individuals were to be rounded up by Rogues and taken to the address written on Evan's hit list. Evan was going to convert those he needed for his plans to take over the city and get rid of those he had no use for. Seems it all boiled down to getting gambling into the state so he could reap the profits."

His CO nodded.

"I received a call this morning from one of the Cell leaders advising a unit of Watchers had been set up and waiting for them at the address. They took out the Rogues and altered the memory of the humans after each had been returned from where they had been abducted."

"Man, I bet it sure involved a lot of cleanup, having to deal with that many humans and trying to clear everyone's minds," Trigg said after blowing out a long breath.

Rayne snickered. "Yeah. Well, I guess we should be grateful the unit got them out of there before any had been converted, or else we really would have a *mayor for life!*"

They all chuckled, but Vane wasn't in the mood for jokes.

Tank continued with the information received from one of the other Cell leaders.

“No one on the *elimination* side of the list was killed. Watchers were assigned to each of them, taking out the Rogues before they could reach their targets.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the look on Tank’s face changed. Vane knew something hadn’t gone as planned, and whatever it was, it was serious.

“One of the Watchers, Kern, is MIA. He didn’t report in after the festival ended, and as far as I know, he has still not contacted his commander. Mac, who is out of the Corydon, Indiana Cell, advised me of the situation early this morning.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees. Vane felt his heart still in his chest. It had been many, many years since the loss of a Watcher. That warrior had been mortally wounded while saving a human. The Rogues had used the perfect bait—an innocent child.

Tank lifted the documents Vane had handed to him earlier. After clearing his throat, his CO began relaying reports phoned in by other Cell leaders whose Watchers had been assigned to various areas during the festival.

The reports mirrored the information already discussed. Rogues had been eliminated, hit list targets had been protected and one MIA Watcher was unaccounted for.

“According to the report from headquarters, there were human casualties, but very few. Three human females and two human males were attacked by Rogues and did not survive. There may be more not yet discovered.”

“Great.” Vane couldn’t hold back his frustration at the events of the past few days. “The news media will be broadcasting names of the missing humans from the festival and someone in the police force is going to feel the pressure and start poking around.”

“Well,” Tank commented, “there’s nothing we can do to change that. We have no control over what the media reports. That’s why we have to be very careful in this battle with the Rogues, lest it exposes us all.”

The second item for discussion was the laboratory report on the mystery powder substance. “According to the lab’s findings, the powder was indeed a type of drug and its properties classify it as highly addictive. The technicians feel its affects may last only a few hours, but with the addictive qualities, the user will immediately want another fix.”

Vane's mind jerked into action, focusing on everything Tank had to say about the drug probably used on Rosa. "So what's in the drug?" He prayed it was totally out of Rosa's system.

"When lab technicians broke down the structure of the powder revealing its ingredients, they were rather intrigued. According to notes listed here on the report, the ingredients used were not anything manmade, but were products of nature used by various cultures. Herbs and roots blended by a certain process make this drug a powerful and highly addictive aphrodisiac with intense euphoria...*in vampires.*"

"So I take it Evan intended this drug to be sold to vampires?" Vane asked.

Tank nodded. "Looks that way, and thank goodness. That's all we need is to have another drug out on the street."

Tank's attention returned to the paper in his hands, and he frowned. Vane held his breath for what else was in the report.

"It seems the most interesting thing uncovered about the drug is the user is not the only one affected. Anyone who feeds from the user is also affected as if they had taken the drug themselves."

Robyn spoke up as she placed dishes on the table. "Some unsuspecting vampire who never intended on using drugs can get caught up in this by feeding off someone who has?"

Tank nodded as he scooted a trivet closer to Robyn to place a hot dish on.

"Yes, creating two users from one, and so on. It will spread like the plague, but this drug creates a bigger problem. From what we have seen firsthand..." Vane saw Tank glance in his direction before continuing and he knew his CO was referring to Rosa, "...the high and arousal compels them to drink. Let's say the vamp is already high on the stuff and feeds from someone else who has the drug in their system, the high continues and the more they will want to drink. It's like a vicious cycle. Even if they aren't buying the stuff themselves, they'll seek people to drink from. If they don't find a user to continue the high, they'll keep going until they find someone who is. Bloodlust will

overtake them, turning them Rogue. We all know once a vampire turns Rogue, there is no going back.”

“This was what Evan used on Rosa,” Vane said, his jaw clenched. He had observed the hunger the drug instilled in its victim.

He leaned forward in his chair and rested his forearms on the table. “There is something else, a way to dilute the drug in their system and bring them out of its hold. Untainted blood will dilute the drug in their bloodstream. In Rosa’s case, she needed to feed many times, but eventually the cravings stopped and the drug seemed to be out of her system.”

Tank rubbed his jaw as if he were pondering the information. “We need to find where they were making this shit before it hits the streets.”

Rosa walked out of the Watchers’ building and took a moment to figure out where she was. She had only been at the Cell once, when Vane brought her to see Robyn, but she had been blindfolded at the time. The fact he had not trusted her still hurt.

She stepped to the corner and read the street sign. She was downtown on East Main Street, and knew which direction she needed to go.

When Rosa reached her apartment, she was exhausted. Luckily, Vane had found her purse on the bench in the park where Evan had abducted her. She reached inside, found her keys and unlocked the door.

Her apartment was dark and quiet. She stepped inside warily and quickly flipped on the lights. She knew she would be sleeping with every light on in the house for quite awhile. At least until she felt safe again, if that would ever happen.

Slowly Rosa made her way through the living room and down the hall to the kitchen, pausing to remove her shoes and her dress. She was going to burn these things. They didn’t belong to her, and even if they did, she would still burn them. Evan had made her wear them to the hotel.

Rosa stopped in the kitchen and gulped down two tall glasses of water. She had been thirsty since she woke in Vane's bedroom. She pushed the thought from her mind, refusing to think about him.

All Rosa wanted to do was sleep. She was going back to work at the club tomorrow night. She needed all the rest she could get. Hopefully, tomorrow her head would be clear.

Dreams invaded her sleep, one after another. Most were nightmares with images of what had happened over the past two days, such as the dinner at Evan's house where he had drained a young human male to satisfy his own appetite for warm blood.

In reality, the man had been too far gone to care, but in her dreams, he called out to her for help, and all she could do was sit and watch. Then the doors opened and in strode a man who seemed more heartless and sinister than Evan. His gaze bore into her as he walked into the dining room. He was pure darkness, and she had never been so afraid of anyone as she was of him.

Evan addressed the stranger as Rico. Although Evan barked orders at the man, anyone could see by his eyes no one ordered him. He had eyes like a snake, waiting patiently for the right time to strike.

The man turned to her.

Rosa felt frozen in place as he went around Evan and made his way to where she sat on the other side of the table. She wanted to scream, but could not form the sound in her throat. She wanted to jump from the chair and run away, but she couldn't move.

Rico was standing directly beside her, looking down at her with a sardonic smile. His cold black eyes were fixed on hers. He slid his gaze down the length of her, then back to her face. Rosa felt as though she was being mentally undressed.

His chilling smile never faltered as he raked his gaze over her body. He reached out and gripped her face in a strong hold. When he lowered his face within inches of hers, Rosa woke up immediately, gulping in air, her heart pounding mercilessly.

“It was just a dream. Just a stupid dream,” Rosa muttered to herself, trying to calm her nerves. Slowly she lay down, almost afraid to go back to sleep, but she did—eventually.

Rosa’s alarm clock went off at seven the next evening. She felt somewhat better after sleeping, even though most of it was filled with more disturbing dreams. Sliding out of bed, she headed for the shower.

The Black Panther Lounge was not very busy tonight, though Rosa noticed the usual crowd was here—the ones who needed to blow off eight hours of hell, also known as *Back to Work Monday*.

The fireworks festival was over, but other festivities would occur for the next two weeks, culminating with the famous race on the first Saturday in May. Horse racing was big in the state of Kentucky. *Guess that’s why Evan wanted a piece of the pie.*

Rosa groaned. She had to forget about what she had been through and get on with her life. She wanted to get back to the safe, sane...mundane, boring, lonely and unfulfilling life she’d had before meeting Vane.

Rosa mentally smacked herself. She was set to go on stage in fifteen minutes, and she hadn’t even begun to warm up. Heading into the back room, she went through some vocal warm-ups.

The night’s performance was much better than her last, the one which had led to her mandatory week off. Even Trenton told her he was pleased, but she couldn’t help notice he seemed to congratulate himself he had forced her to take a week off.

Although she tried not to, Rosa searched the crowd for Vane. He had not been here to see her perform on her first night back at the club. The fact he had not checked in to see how she was doing hurt, but she tried to push it aside. She told herself he was probably glad to return to his own structured life without having to keep rescuing her.

Midway through her last song, singing her rendition of Sade’s *Smooth Operator*, Rosa almost missed her queue for the next verse. She was scanning the crowd for Vane, still holding out hope, when she noticed a dark figure in the far corner of the club.

Rosa's eyes adjusted to the darkness thanks to her keen vampire sight, and she could not believe who she saw. Rico was watching her, dark eyes staring at her intently. She quickly looked away, not wanting to let him know she had seen him. When her set was over, she chanced another glance at the corner, but he was gone.

Rosa did not want to go home to her empty apartment, so she took a seat at the bar and ordered a glass of wine, then sipped leisurely since she was in no hurry to leave. She was just beginning to relax when a cold breeze wafted over her, causing a shiver to run down her spine and the hair on the back of her neck to stand on end. Rico was close.

Trying to control her trembling hands, Rosa latched on to her glass and continued to sip her wine, pretending she was unaware of anything out of the ordinary.

Rico watched Rosa perform her set on stage. Her voice was superb, almost angelic, as her sultry body swayed to the music. Bright lights illuminated her beautiful face and showed her every curve. He had longed to have her ever since he had first laid eyes on her at Evan's house.

When he had walked into Evan's dining room that night and saw her sitting at the table, he almost forgot why he was there and what he needed to report to his sire.

His sire. The thought made his teeth hurt. In his eyes, Evan had not only been rich and spoiled, he had also been a coward hiding behind his money and paying others to do his dirty work.

No, a *real man* was what Rosa needed, he thought to himself as the corner of his mouth drew up slightly. She was too much woman for the likes of Evan Batowsky, but just right for himself. "Just right," he murmured, fighting the urge to slip backstage and carry her off after her set. He knew the Watchers would be out there, keeping an eye on their little friend, but it didn't matter. He had learned a few tricks of his own since becoming a vampire.

"But, not yet." Rico sighed. He knew now was not the time. There was something else he needed to do first.

Rico planned on taking up where Evan had left off, but without the idiotic plans for casino gambling. Drugs were the big money makers in Rico's opinion. With his distribution expertise and Rosa by his side, he would definitely have himself a rather sweet spot on the *food chain* Jake had always bitched and moaned about.

After Rosa had finished her set and settled at the bar, he continued to watch her, warring with himself not to get too close or give himself away. He needed to leave the club and focus on his task of getting Evan's lab into full production.

He settled against the far, dark wall of the club, focusing on his new venture. The drug that would make him rich and famous in the vampire community needed a catchy name before hitting the street. He had thought long and hard before deciding on VIBE—Very Intense Blood-based Euphoria.

Soon he would make his move. He would be patient and not make any stupid mistakes as Evan had done. Being stupid had cost the asshole his life.

After one final, longing look at Rosa, Rico blended into the crowd and slipped from the club.

After dinner, the Watchers piled into Tank's SUV and headed across the bridge to Southern Indiana to search Evan's house once more.

The butler and the two female vampires were still locked in rooms in the basement. Tank wanted to question them all extensively to root out any further plans Evan may have had, as well as the location of the drug he was manufacturing.

When they arrived at the mansion, Tank searched Evan's office, finding invoices and documents on the barge company he owned. He was surprised to see how many times the barges had docked at places they knew were Rogue pick-up and drop off points. He had no doubt Evan had planned to use his barges in his new drug distribution venture.

Even though Evan was dead, his body wasn't going to surface anywhere to alert anyone to the fact. Headquarters needed to start the ball rolling to shut down these businesses. Since there was no proof of Evan's death, it was possible one of his minions could carry on with the vamp's plans, at least for a while, and only after paychecks failed

to be distributed to employees, unpaid bills went to collections and mounting taxes were owed, would anyone know there was a problem.

Vane entered the bedroom where Rosa had been kept. He could smell her there. Even the scent of her fear lingered.

Fists clenched at his side, he walked further into the room. If Evan wasn't already dead, he would kill him for taking Rosa. They were just getting started with a relationship. At least, in his mind it was a relationship, but he couldn't speak for Rosa.

So many things had happened during the short span of time they were together, enjoying each other's company—the attack of the Rogues, his past *exploits* coming back to haunt him and then Evan. If only he had made better decisions, he told himself. Maybe none of this would have occurred.

Rosa had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. It was as if he had been waiting his entire life for her. They just *fit*. If he could get her to see it. Get her to understand they were meant for each other.

Oh, stop kidding yourself, Vane's inner voice chided. You could never give her the type of life she needs, the type of life she deserves. All you've brought her is chaos, and you haven't even been around her that long.

Vane kicked the bed, sending a crack spreading up the footboard. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to regain his control. He had a job to do as a Watcher. A dangerous drug was being made in a laboratory out there, and they had to find it before it reached the streets.

Quickly he searched the bedroom, then Evan's room, doing his best to keep his personal feelings in check as he did so.

Rayne followed Trigg to the basement to search for clues. They destroyed the boxes of the powdered drug, but no other traces of the completed product or its ingredients were found.

Trigg wanted to step into the room which held the butler and begin the interrogation, but Rayne stopped him. He knew Trigg's idea of interrogation involved extreme physical violence if the first few times of asking calmly did not elicit any response. Instead he gave Trigg the job of dispensing with the female vampires knowing it was useless to try to get information out of Rogues.

Rayne unlocked the door to the small room where Trigg had placed the elderly butler over twenty-four hours ago. The man was seated in a corner with his head down, but he was alive.

Rayne stood in the doorway, blocking his escape, and proceeded to ask him questions.

"You do know your master is dead, don't you? I'm sure you sensed his death."

The butler nodded, but did not look up.

"So you have no reason to hold your tongue. Tell us what we need to know about the drug your master was manufacturing. It is very dangerous and must be stopped."

Still, not a word. Not even a slight movement.

Rayne changed his tone from passive to aggressive and threatening. "If that stuff hits the streets, many vamps will die because of it. Do you want their blood on your hands?"

Trigg entered the room, using a cloth to wipe the female vampires' blood from his dagger. Rayne knew he was doing it intentionally to intimidate the old man.

Unexpectedly, the butler lunged to his feet and shoved Rayne into Trigg, knocking the dagger from Trigg's hand. Before Rayne and Trigg could right themselves, the butler had ended his own life. He sank to the floor, the hilt of Trigg's dagger protruding from his chest and a smile on his face.

The old man died without ever having betrayed his master, Rayne thought, feeling a kind of respect for the butler.

"Damn," Trigg spat. "Guess he's not going to talk now!"

"Time to head out." Tank's deep voice sounded over their communicators. Rayne followed Trigg out of the small room, ignoring the crackles and pops of the butler's body as it disintegrated.

They met up with Tank and Vane in the hallway.

“Did the butler have anything to say?”

Rayne and Trigg shook their heads in answer to Tank’s question before Rayne elaborated on the way out the door.

“Nope. The old man dusted himself without ever saying a word.”

As they each piled into the SUV, Rayne noticed how Vane held himself in check, though the tension radiating off the warrior was thick and filled the Crossover. Coming back to the mansion was not easy for Vane, Rayne thought, and his heart went out for his brother. Something was going on between him and Rosa, and he prayed they resolved whatever it was soon.

Chapter Eleven

Rosa performed at the club every night that week and through the next, trying to make up lost wages. She needed the money to pay her bills just like everyone else. She had vowed long ago never to mooch off her parents.

When her parents had moved out of town, it was her decision to remain in Louisville, but she had to pay her own way. Sticking to her vow of never asking for money, she had worked hard and had always been proud of her accomplishments.

Rico had been spotted in the shadows of the club several times, which at first, made her nervous. He had never approached her, and she had not received any anonymous flowers or gifts. She was thankful because if it started back up she would certainly lose it. She could see herself running out of the city with her tail stuck between her legs.

Rosa had hoped Rico would get tired of whatever his game was, but he didn't. After two weeks of him showing up at the club and hiding within the shadows, she knew it was time to end this, but she was going to need help. She didn't dare approach Rico alone. She needed Vane.

Rosa cut that thought short as soon as it popped into her head. She wasn't going there. She *couldn't* go there.

Robyn.

Calling Robyn was going to be difficult, but she needed help from the Watchers. Her friend was most likely upset she had left without even talking to her first. Unfortunately, she hadn't got up the nerve to call her, and she hoped when she explained, Robyn would understand. Although lately she hadn't shown it, their friendship meant a lot to her, and she desperately wanted to hold on to it.

"Robyn?"

“Rosa! I’ve been so worried about you. Why did you leave like that? And you haven’t called. Did Vane say something to hurt you?”

“No, Robyn. He was very much the gentleman. It’s not his fault. It’s just...complicated.”

Rosa sighed. She didn’t know how to explain to Robyn how inadequate she felt.

“Robyn. Listen. I need your help. There’s this guy named Rico—”

Robyn froze. She had known a man named Rico. He had worked for Jake on his ranch in Texas. Could it be the same man?

“Rosa,” Robyn interrupted. “Tell me what this guy Rico looks like.”

Rosa described the man and told her about his involvement with Evan.

“Why didn’t you call us about this sooner? I mean, as soon as you saw him at the club you should have let us know, especially since he was involved with Evan.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and Robyn realized how she had sounded. She was berating her friend, who had been through enough, instead of being supportive, which was what Rosa needed.

“He didn’t approach me or make any threats, and it wasn’t as if he came to the club every day. With Evan gone, I figured he would move on. I guess I just chose to ignore him, hoping he’d go away.”

Robyn listened to Rosa’s explanation and understood. After going through the ordeal with Evan, Rosa didn’t want to acknowledge to herself she could still be in danger.

Choosing her words carefully, Robyn knew she had to open her friend’s eyes. Rosa was *not* safe and needed to know who Rico was and what he was capable of.

“Rosa, listen to me. That man is very, very dangerous. He was Jake’s right hand man in Texas. I don’t know what he is doing here, or how he got hooked up with Evan. He was a cold, heartless man when he was human, but you said he is a vampire, which makes him even more dangerous.”

“Wow, things just keep getting deeper and deeper. My life has been so messed up lately...” Robyn heard Rosa mutter.

“Rosa, come back here and stay with us. You’ll be safe here, and we can get things straightened out.” Robyn didn’t care if she had to get on her knees and beg. She was worried about Rosa’s safety.

“No, I can’t do that. That’s the one place I *really* can’t stay. It’s no use, Robyn. Vane and I just aren’t good for one another. We are two totally different people, and I would just stand in his way. He’s a Watcher. It’s too difficult to explain.”

Rosa’s sigh broke Robyn’s heart. The girl had been through so much and now was trying to deal with her feelings for Vane.

Robyn let out a long breath and said calmly, “Okay. I’m going to tell Trigg so they can find him. Since he did all the dirty work for Evan, he could quite possibly want to carry on with Evan’s plans.”

Robyn paused, a sudden thought hitting her. “Shit!”

“What?”

“Evan used a drug on you, right?”

“Uh...yeah...and?”

“Well, Trigg found cases of the drug in Evan’s basement. Tank sent it to a lab at headquarters. This stuff is bad news, Rosa. The user takes it, it gets in their blood stream and they’re addicted. They get stoned and hump anything in sight...”

Robyn immediately stopped talking, realizing what she had just said. Rosa had been subjected to the drug and what had happened upstairs between her and Vane, if anything, was most likely a touchy subject, not to mention how Rosa took off afterwards without saying a word to anyone.

“What I mean is, the drug is passed on to anyone who feeds from them. They also get addicted. There will be people all over the place hooked on this stuff.”

Robyn knew her voice was rising with each sentence as her mind began putting the pieces of the puzzle together, and saying it out aloud reaffirmed how dire the situation was. A major catastrophe was waiting like a ticking time bomb, and she knew who held the detonator.

“Rico and Jake were drug runners, Rosa. I’ve got a bad feeling Rico has taken up where Evan left off. He wouldn’t care much for gambling, but drugs would certainly pique his interest. If that stuff hits the streets, it’s going to be hell to get it under control.”

“So that’s what Evan used on me.” Rosa’s voice was almost a whisper on the other end of the line.

When Rosa didn’t say anything else, Robyn spoke again. “I’ll talk to Trigg so they can form a plan. Are you sure you won’t come here and stay? At least until they get him?”

“No, I can’t. Besides, if I disappear we may lose him. I need to keep to my normal routine so he doesn’t suspect the Watchers are on to him.”

Robyn didn’t like it, but she knew Rosa was right. As soon as she disconnected the call, she sought out Trigg.

The Watchers gathered to discuss options. Robyn listened as she chewed on a fingernail. Rico being in the area was bad news, and she was deeply afraid for Rosa.

Tank laid out the plan.

“We’ll stake out the Black Panther Lounge and take out Rico the next time he shows up to watch Rosa sing.”

“Dammit! I don’t like it. I don’t want to put Rosa in danger. She’s been through enough as it is.”

Robyn understood Vane’s not wanting to go along with the plan, even though she was sure he understood the only way to catch Rico was to use Rosa as bait. She was also sure Vane would protect Rosa with his last breath. Rico would never get within twenty feet of her.

Days went by without anyone catching sight of Rico entering or exiting the club. Rosa had seen him once in the crowd, but somehow he had eluded the Watchers. She was more afraid than ever, and didn’t believe for one minute he had moved on. He was out there somewhere, watching, waiting to make his move. She could feel it.

Rosa saw Vane a few times, but he made no effort to approach her. He kept his distance, and she understood. Although her heart was splitting in two, she knew a relationship between them would never have worked.

Vane sat quietly at the table when Tank called a meeting to discuss the upcoming charity bash. Tank laid out the background for Robyn's benefit. Vane knew what was coming and he felt he was about to explode.

"Two wealthy sisters put on the event each year the night before the horse race, and it's heavily attended by top celebrities, politicians and dignitaries. They choose local talent to entertain the guests during the early hours of the evening, and their entertainment coordinator contacted Rosa to perform a few songs."

Tank looked around the table at the group.

"This may be the break we've been waiting for. The media has been all over the story of a well-known, local singer performing at the event. With so much publicity, Rico would have to live under a rock not to hear about it, and there is no doubt in my mind he'll show up."

The other guys nodded, all except for Vane. He was silently stewing. The idea of continuing to use Rosa as bait was boiling through him like hot lava.

"Vane, each year a good number of Watchers are assigned to this party. Lord knows we wouldn't want a national celebrity turning up missing from a Rogue attack. Rosa will be well guarded the entire evening, and we will be there too. We've got to finish this, once and for all. We need to get our hands on Rico and find out where the lab is to stop this drug from hitting the streets."

Vane nodded. He knew Tank spoke the truth. Rosa would be well-guarded, but it didn't make him feel any better about the situation. He wanted Rosa safe. He wanted Rico dead. The man had caused too much pain in both Robyn and Rosa's lives.

As Tank went over the plans for the night, including the orders from headquarters, Vane noticed Rayne was silent, and he wondered what was on his brother's mind. He knew the troubles he, himself, was facing, but what had Rayne seemingly tied in knots?

Ever since the warrior had come back late from the fireworks festival last week, he seemed distant, caught up in his own troubles. As far as he knew, no one had been able to get Rayne to talk about whatever the problem might be.

Rico strode into the building Evan had purchased for his laboratory. Evan had hired a human scientist and several human technicians to reproduce the product the first scientist had made, then killed the man after obtaining the formula and processing information.

He may have despised Evan, but the man did know how to do business, he mused as his feet echoed on the wooden floors of the old building.

The building, which had once served as a hospital for sick and injured boatmen in the early 1800s, had been vacant since the late 1970s. Evan purchased it from the city, and recently conducted a major restoration to make the lab operational. Restoring only the inside of the building in order to keep its occupants secret had been a very good move on Evan's part, Rico conceded.

The sleeping and housing units were located on the third floor, the latest laboratory equipment and supplies filled the second floor, and the kitchen and seating areas were on the ground floor. The basement was used primarily for deliveries and storage.

Rico made his way up the staircase to the second floor where he found Dr. Pearson, the lead scientist, staring at a computer screen.

"Dr. Pearson," Rico spoke, getting the man's attention. He wanted an update on the progress of the drug's production, eager to get the product out on the street.

The sound of his name caught Dr. Pearson's attention, and he looked up from his computer to find Rico standing in the doorway, observing everything happening in the lab. He plastered on a smile to hide the loathing he felt inside. He knew what Rico was and why the drug they were making was being created.

Vampires. He hated vampires with a passion.

Several years ago, when he was working for a large corporation based out of Chicago, his wife had been attacked and killed by a vampire. She had just left her car in

the parking lot at his work and was walking toward the building, but had never made it. Her body had been found not far from the doorway, lying in a pool of blood, the flesh on her neck torn to shreds.

His wife's death had been blamed on an animal attack, most likely a mad dog, but he didn't believe it. He knew what had killed her no matter what the police report had said, and he had vowed to wipe out as many of the creatures as he could. The deep love for his wife and his determination to avenge her death would see him through until he could make his goal possible.

Rico made him uneasy. The vampire had already called and told him Evan was dead, along with the all too clear declaration of who was now in charge.

The news of Evan's death had come as a shock, but did not deter Dr. Pearson's personal plans. Although he was inwardly pleased at hearing of Evan's demise, in his eyes, Rico was just as evil a creature as Evan. If only, he thought, the same would befall Rico.

"Dr. Pearson. What is the status on the product?"

Rico stood only a few feet away from his desk.

"We received all the ingredients as indicated on the data Mr. Batowsky provided. My technicians have just started the first phase in the product's formulation."

He watched as Rico looked around the laboratory once again, eying the technicians fluttering about the lab performing their assigned tasks.

"How long do you think it will take?"

"For the finished product?"

Rico nodded.

"I believe we could have the finished product ready for testing in about a week."

When Rico's face hardened, Dr. Pearson took a step back, putting some distance between them in case he was attacked. He knew these creatures could not be trusted.

"You have three days. There will be several parties around town the night before the horse race. I want the product ready to go out then. We will have plenty of test subjects by that time."

Dr. Pearson tried to remain calm and unfazed by Rico's demand. He had hoped to stretch the production out longer, giving him more time to conduct tests of his own products. With this new timetable, he would have to spend all his time on Rico's product.

"Yes, sir," he answered with a curt nod. "I will see to it we have batches ready for distribution."

Seemingly satisfied with the answer, Rico turned on his heels and went down the stairs.

Dr. Pearson peered out one of the windows, waiting until Rico's truck pulled off the property before he let out a barrage of curses and slammed a book down on his desk. Rico was becoming a thorn in his side, and he knew it would only get worse. He needed a plan to have the bastard taken out of the picture. Evan had been killed by the Watchers, who were no doubt looking for Rico. The thought gave him an idea.

"Maybe I'll just have to point them in the right direction," he mused aloud. He knew the Watchers were also vampires, and in his mind, they were just as bad as the vampires they hunted. That was why he had no qualms about holding and experimenting on the Watcher he had in the cell, far below this building.

As the days slowly went by, Robyn silently watched Vane brood more and more. Although she had agreed with Trigg that Vane and Rosa needed to work things out on their own, the situation had seemed to go from bad to worse. She couldn't stand aside and watch two of her friends make such a stupid mistake. It was obvious they were both miserable.

Robyn didn't know what was at the root of Rosa and Trigg's reluctance to acknowledge their feelings for each other. It was obvious to everyone when the two of them were in the same room together. The glances they stole at each other hadn't gone unnoticed.

Vane was in the living room, idly knocking around some balls on the billiard table. Robyn finished putting the night's main dish together. She had been watching him for quite awhile, trying to gather the nerve to speak to him.

“Okay, *chiquita*. You’ve been boring holes through me for the past hour. What is it?”

Robyn sighed and tried not to smile at Vane’s use of the endearment. He had called her *chiquita* since the day they had first met.

She knew she had been caught. Wiping her hands on the dishtowel she held, she walked out of the kitchen, up to the billiard table and chose her words carefully, knowing she was jumping into choppy waters. The situation between Vane and Rosa really wasn’t any of her business, but she felt compelled to bring it up.

“Vane, anyone can see you are troubled by something, and I am pretty sure I know what that *something* is.”

Vane hesitated on his shot and glanced up at her before turning back to his game.

“I also know Rosa is having a difficult time too.” Robyn saw Vane tense at the declaration. Maybe, she thought, he hadn’t realized Rosa was suffering.

Vane walked around to the other side of the billiard table, and lined up his next shot. He spoke without looking up. “What are you getting at, *chiquita*?”

“Well,” she continued, unable to stop herself from wiping her hands anxiously on the dishtowel. “I think you two are making a terrible mistake. It isn’t easy to find the right person these days, and I think you two are perfect for each other. You’re both too thickheaded to see it.”

Vane looked up and raised an eyebrow at her assessment of their behavior.

“*Chiquita*.” Vane sighed and laid down the pool stick he was using. He ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. “Rosa is a very special woman. She is refined, classy. She needs someone who would be good for her. A man who has a nice job, can put her up in a nice place and build a family with her.”

“And you think you can’t?”

Vane looked her straight in the eyes, his face somber. “No. I can’t. I’m a Watcher—a vampire warrior. I hunt and kill Rogues. Hell, since I started dating her, I have brought her nothing but trouble.”

“Vane, how in the hell can you sit there and blame yourself? Did you cause the Rogues to attack? No! Did you send that psycho Evan to stalk and kidnap her so he could make her his? No! Did you send Rico after her? No! You’re being totally ridiculous.”

As Vane scowled at her, Robyn let out a slow breath. She hadn’t intended to blow up on Vane, but his little pity party was getting on her nerves.

“I’m sorry, Vane, but you should think about it. I certainly don’t think Rosa blames any of this on you. In fact, she feels it is all *her* fault. She feels her life is too messed up, and she doesn’t want to drag you into it. God, I shouldn’t be telling you all this, but I hate to see you two doing this to yourselves.”

She paced a little, unable to keep how deeply she felt about the happiness of her two best friends inside. “Look, I don’t mean to get all Dr. Phil on you, but have you two talked about what you feel for each other? I bet if you did, you would discover what I am saying is true. You two are meant for each other, I can feel it. Don’t let it slip away.”

Feeling she had said all she had to say and possibly much more than she should have, Robyn returned to the kitchen to finish the dinner preparations. She heard the door to the lower level close and knew Vane had left. Silently she prayed he would think about what she had said.

Vane left the Cell in his black Mercedes, Robyn’s words playing through his head. When she said Rosa was blaming herself for everything that had happened he was shocked. He couldn’t stomach the fact Rosa believed it. She had been through enough and didn’t need any more heartache or worries.

Groaning, he gripped the steering wheel hard and sped through the downtown streets, no destination in mind. Inside, his heart reached out for her. He knew he should be there for her now instead of keeping himself as far away from her as possible. She needed to feel safe, loved, and he hadn’t provided any of those things.

He should never have let her walk out the door. Even though Rosa had been acting out of drug induced blood craving and heightened arousal when she fed from him, he’d felt them connect somehow. His heart had been taken over by his feelings for Rosa, and

he wanted to hold her forever and give her everything she needed. Hell, even the thought of Evan touching her had made his insides boil. *Mine* had kept playing through his head over and over.

Vane had never felt like this before and he knew, deep down, what it was. He loved her and wanted her, only her, as his mate, and it was time Rosa knew how he felt. No longer would he hide behind excuses.

Vane hadn't been paying attention to where he was going and had taken a few wrong turns, heading in a totally opposite direction from where the party was being held. He bit out a few curse words and turned his Mercedes around.

As he drove by the old Military Hospital, he saw a couple of human males get into a van, then drive off the property, pulling onto the road in front of him. He actually had to slow down to avoid hitting them. A strange feeling settled in the pit of his stomach.

Glancing over his shoulder, Vane knew the old building had been vacant for over twenty years. There had not been any mention in the local paper of the sale or renovation of the old hospital.

Intuition is a funny thing, Vane thought. You never know if you are being led in the right direction unless you follow it. That's what he decided to do.

Vane kept his Mercedes back from the van, allowing several cars between them to conceal the tail.

The van made its way downtown, pulling up outside the crowds hanging out on Fourth Street. Vane pulled into a parking spot several cars ahead, and watched through his rearview mirror.

Across the street, two large vampire males exited a black SUV and waited while a man, whom Vane recognized immediately as Rico from the description given by both Robyn and Rosa, climb out of an expensive looking truck. The three strode across the street to the passenger side of the van.

Vane rolled down his window and concentrated on picking up their conversation.

"Do you have it?" Rico growled.

The man in the passenger seat nodded, then pulled out a case from behind his seat.

As Rico opened the case, the man spoke, and Vane noticed the anxious tone in his voice.

“There is more. One of my technicians is finishing up the bottling and packing. I didn’t want to run late, so I brought what was ready. I will return to the lab, gather the rest, and return quickly.”

“Fine. I have a party to go to.”

Vane watched Rico close the case and hand it to one of his men.

“You know what to do.”

The beefy man nodded, then began walking toward Fourth Street, followed by his Neanderthal twin.

As Rico crossed the street and climbed back into his truck, Vane waited for the van to drive away. When it did, he noticed it was headed west, the direction of the old hospital. Pulling out his cell phone, he hit the speed dial.

“Tank, I’ve picked up Rico. His goons just delivered a case of goods. They headed toward Fourth Street to distribute. Two human males in a van made the delivery. The van’s heading back from where it came—the old Military Hospital in the west end of the city.”

Vane gave Tank a complete description of the van, its license plate number and a description of the men inside.

“Roger that. I’ll call headquarters and have the case and Rico’s goons picked up immediately. I’m pulling Trigg from party-watch duty to check out the place with me.”

Vane knew if a lab was there, Tank and Trigg would destroy it and take out everyone involved—human, vampire or Rogue.

“Where’s Rayne?” Vane asked.

“He’s already at the charity bash. I sent him on ahead in case Rosa arrived early.”

There were a few moments of silence over the phone before Tank spoke again, and Vane had a feeling what was on his CO’s mind.

“I looked for you to have you go to the charity bash, but Robyn said you had already left the building, though she was not sure where you were headed.”

“Yeah. Sorry, Tank. I...” Vane’s voice trailed off.

“No problem. Listen, Trigg and I will take care of the lab. You follow Rico to see if he is planning on making an appearance at the party.”

Vane disconnected the call in time to see Rico drive off, and glanced at his side mirror before pulling out into traffic.

Cars and pedestrians lined both sides of the street outside the gates where the charity bash was in full swing. Vane had to park his Mercedes a few blocks down and walk. He was fuming because he had lost sight of Rico’s truck through the melee as they neared the estate, and kept telling himself to remain calm. Rico would be attending the party because Rosa was singing, and he would get his hands on him soon enough.

Rosa’s limousine arrived at the home of the two sisters who hosted the annual charity bash the evening before the big horse race. She saw police and security guards taking care of crowd control as people lined both sides of the street to catch a glimpse of the actors and actresses, musicians, sports figures, politicians and foreign dignitaries who had accepted invitations to attend the party.

As Rosa made her way through the entrance of the estate, she glanced around, looking for the Watchers who had been assigned to guard the party from Rogues, but she didn’t notice any among the crowd. She sighed to herself, knowing it was Vane she hoped to see. *The night’s still young*, she told herself as she made her way to one of the large tents.

Rosa approached a woman wearing a uniform and carrying a clipboard. After introducing herself, the woman escorted her to a table where the two hostesses of the bash were greeting several of the guests.

Rosa was in awe of their lavish evening gowns. She noticed both women were exceptionally polite and seemed to treat everyone with genuine affection.

Surprisingly, their affection included her. After they praised her talent, though she doubted either one had ever visited the Black Panther Lounge, one of their staff handed her a schedule of the night's entertainment with her stage time highlighted. She checked her watch, gave her politest thanks, then excused herself to head for the restroom, wanting to make sure her appearance was up to par before she was to perform.

Rosa headed for the small cottage the staff member had told her was designated for restroom and quiet time use. When she reached the door, a movement out of the corner of her eye made her jump, but to her relief it was Rayne. She gave him a quick smile, which he returned, then Rosa went inside.

The cottage was empty. Rosa was glad. She needed the peace and quiet. She had hoped and prayed each day leading up to the party the Watchers would catch Rico, but he was still out there, somewhere.

Rosa hated living in fear, especially after what she had gone through when Evan had kidnapped her. She could now somewhat imagine what kind of life Robyn had lived all those years ago and the thought almost brought her to tears. She wondered how Robyn had gotten through it.

Opening one of the doors off the hallway, she found a small bedroom with a personal bath. She walked in, and silently closed the door behind her.

The bathroom off to the side of the bedroom was just what she had been looking for. Noticing a full-length mirror behind the door, she closed it to freshen her make-up and check her appearance.

Rico waited in the shadows, staying out of sight of the Watchers who seem to blend in with the other guests. When the one standing beside the cottage turned and spoke into a communicator, he made his move, slipping silently into the cottage to follow Rosa.

A slow smile curved his lips when Rosa entered one of the rooms and closed the door behind her. He quickly stepped up to the door and listened, only hearing her footsteps and the closing of another door.

Once inside the room, he turned and eased the door closed behind him, turning the lock as he did so.

Rosa snapped the lid closed on her powdered foundation compact, adjusted the bustline of her dress, opened the bathroom door and froze. Standing directly in front of her was pure evil.

Rico was staring at her with his unblinking, cold, black gaze. He smiled, the tips of his fangs showing. Before she could move or scream he pushed her against the wall, clamping his hand firmly over her mouth.

"I would have at least expected a *hello*, Rosa. Aren't you glad to see me?" Rico bent his head close to her neck, and panic engulfed her.

"I've wanted you ever since I saw you at Evan's table," he breathed into her ear, sending a cold shudder down her spine.

Rosa's eyes were wide with terror. She knew Rayne had been outside when she came in. *How did Rico get inside without Rayne knowing?* Oh God, she thought. She was in big trouble.

Dr. Pearson and the technician, who was driving the van, returned to the lab. After pulling up beside the side door, the technician put the van in park and then turned to him.

"Why did you tell Rico we would be back with more of that stuff? I thought that case was it."

Dr. Pearson could see the fear on the man's face over the lie. He couldn't blame him, he, too, felt a little concern at lying to a bunch of vampires, especially Rico, though he had a plan. A plan that would keep him safe from any retribution from Rico.

"I do have another batch, and I will deliver it myself. You help the others straighten the lab. We are done for the night."

The technician nodded, and they got out of the van and went inside the old hospital. He let the technician walk ahead of him, then watched as the man proceeded up the stairs making his way to the lab.

Dr. Pearson turned and left by the side door, walked to his car and drove away. He knew once it was discovered the drugs he delivered were not the product Rico had paid him to create, but one of his own creations, they would come looking for him.

The vamps stupid enough to buy the drugs would either die from using it, or they would suffer horribly. He had been using his *test subject* locked away in the underground lab to develop the quick replacement. Not wanting to kill his captive just yet, the dosages he administered were less than what was given to Rico's goons tonight.

He was going to lay low and see what happened. If needed, he could hide out in the underground lab, having enough food and water down there to last over a year, as well as a secure generator, in the hope someone would take out Rico in revenge for his tainted drugs.

Tank and Trigg passed the old Military Hospital and parked far enough away not to be seen. They kept in the shadows, each taking one side of the building to check for security cameras and motion sensors.

After meeting at the rear of the building, it was evident elaborate security measures had not been taken. Whoever was heading this operation was either stupid, or arrogant enough to think it was not needed.

Tank had no doubt they were at the right place since a van matching Vane's description was parked at the side door.

Looking up, he noticed a couple of windows in the octagonal cupola were open, letting in the cool, clean spring air. Giving Trigg a nod, they scaled the wrought iron railing on the balconies of each floor, then climbed on the roof, and slipped in through the open windows.

Descending the stairs from the cupola, they listened to voices, the tinkling of glass and footsteps below.

Once they reached the third floor, Tank motioned for Trigg to check the room where a television was on. Tank waited while Trigg peered around a corner, then stepped up behind the warrior as he entered the room.

Without a sound and in a blur of movement, Trigg was on a man, who lay on the bed, arms folded behind his head as he watched a show. Trigg's large arms muffled the sound of the man's neck snapping.

Both Watchers searched the other rooms on the floor, but found no one else.

Silently taking the stairs to the second floor, they saw three more men, along with a room full of laboratory equipment.

"Didn't Dr. Pearson come back with you?"

Tank and Trigg blended into the shadows and listened to their conversation.

"Yeah, he's in the basement. He said he had another case of the drugs and was going to deliver it personally. I was surprised when he had told that Rico guy someone here was bottling it up because we didn't make a second batch."

As the two other men turned and looked at each other in confusion, Tank processed this information. He hoped there had indeed been only one batch of the drug.

"Well, maybe he made the batch up himself," said one of the other technicians.

Tank gave the signal and Trigg leapt over the railing, landing on the side of the stairs out of view. In the next second, he followed, then silently motioned he was going out the window and heading around to the side door to the basement. He wanted to find the doctor the men had spoken of.

Tank crept to the window, slid it open, then crawled out and lowered himself to the ground, then made his way to the side door. He was able to open it quickly, but soon discovered no one was in the basement.

Dr. Pearson must have left the building before he and Trigg had arrived, Tank thought with a curse. He went out the side door and returned through the window on the second floor to join Trigg.

Brick columns rose from the floor to the ceiling, providing coverage as they drew closer to the men and waited for them to split up. Finally, one of the men stretched, then headed up the stairs.

After one quick glance at Trigg, Tank moved forward, taking down one of the men while Trigg took out the other. Not a sound was heard as the men's bodies slumped to the floor.

Something was knocked over upstairs, then the sound of frantic footsteps headed toward the stairs. Tank crouched at the side of the stairs, coiled to strike as the man came bounding down. When the man reached the bottom step, he froze, seeing the two men lying motionless on the floor, their heads bent at an odd angle. His hand flew up to his neck as he turned and started to run back up the stairs. He didn't make it very far. Tank grabbed the man and yanked him from the stairs before he could escape. The man hit the floor, knocking the wind out of him. When his eyes opened, they went wide with fright.

"Vampire," the man sneered, his hatred of their race evident on his face.

Tank smiled at him, letting his fangs extend to full view. Trigg stepped forward, hands fisted at his sides, and did the same.

"We have questions for you. First of all, who hired you?"

The man just closed his eyes, shook his head and laughed.

Tank blew out a sigh. This wasn't going to be easy, and he hated doing things the hard way, even though humans were much easier to break given their low threshold for pain.

Trigg yanked the man off the floor, spun him around, pulled his wallet from his pocket, and flung him into a chair. He thumbed through the contents, pulling out the man's identification.

"Jonathan L. Scott. So, Mr. Scott, what are Rico's plans for the drugs you gave him tonight, and where is this Dr. Pearson you spoke of?"

Still nothing. The man stared at the floor.

Trigg turned, then began destroying the lab. Glass shattered as he knocked over tables. A fire started after upending a table containing a couple of beakers of liquid, but Trigg acted quickly, dousing the flames.

The action caught Tank's attention, and when he turned from the technician, the man shot out of the chair, ran to the window and hurled himself at it. Unfortunately, the

impact of his body hitting the glass did not shatter it completely. A large piece of glass had remained imbedded in the window seal, slitting him down the middle from neck to groin as his body sailed through, landing hard on the ground below.

“Ah, hell,” Trigg growled as they both looked at the bloody mess sprawled on the grass. “We got nothing from him.”

“Well, we did get confirmation Rico is behind this and the possibility only one shipment had been delivered to Fourth Street. Take care of the bodies, and I’ll gather everything we need to send to headquarters, then we’ll destroy the rest. Hopefully, we can find Dr. Pearson before he can create any more, and this will be the last of it.”

Trigg nodded, grabbed the two dead men by their legs and began dragging them downstairs.

“Load them up in the van we saw outside. I’ll call someone to take it somewhere and light it up.”

Vane made his way through the crowd, scanning for Rosa. He moved to a secluded spot and called Rayne on his communicator. “Is she there? Have you seen her?”

“Yes, she’s here. She’s in the cottage at the rear of the estate. I guess she is getting ready for her set. I checked the schedule. She’s to go on at ten.”

“I’m on my way.”

Several minutes passed as Vane stood outside the cottage with Rayne, nervously checking his watch.

“I thought you said Rosa was going to be on stage at ten?”

Rayne checked his watch, then nodded. “She is, chill out,” he said with a chuckle.

“How long has she been in there?” Vane couldn’t stop shifting his weight from foot to foot. He was anxious to talk to Rosa.

Rayne gave him a *you are so whipped* grin. He scowled, though he knew his Cell-mate was right.

A thud from inside the cottage made Vane and Rayne still. Vane's heart skipped a beat, and he headed for the door, but Rayne grabbed his arm, shaking his head slowly. Vane understood. Bounding in there could get Rosa hurt or killed.

He entered the cottage with Rayne following close behind, stepping quickly and straining their ears for signs of Rosa.

Vane walked over and leaned against a closed door, and heard Rico's voice on the other side. He placed his hand over the knob, but found it locked.

Rayne pulled lock picking tools out of his jacket and gently nudged him aside, and he found himself holding his breath until he heard the click of the lock being released. As he let out his breath, he prayed Rico had not heard it.

Something seemed totally off in Rico's eyes, Rosa thought. They were glazed, and a slight sheen of sweat had begun to coat his forehead.

"I wanted to give you something, Rosa. Have you been thinking about how it felt when you fed from Evan? He had been working on a drug which will be all the rage in our society. But now that he is gone, I own it. I call it 'VIBE' for 'Very Intense Blood-based Euphoria'. Do you like that? My men are selling it as we speak."

Rico's laugh was chilling. She stared him in horror as his facial expression slowly changed, his color turning a sickly gray.

"I wanted you to be the first to experience my new ticket to paradise."

Rico released his grip over her mouth and Rosa knew what he was about to do. He intended to force her to feed from his wrist as Evan had done, but when he bent forward, his face contorted as if he was in great pain, and he started to double over.

Rosa saw her chance. She raised her hands, pressed them on Rico's chest, and shoved with all her strength, propelling him backward, knocking an expensive vase and other decorative glassware off the dresser, and sending them crashing to the floor.

Something was physically wrong with Rico, or she would have never gotten the opportunity to fight back.

Seeing Rico in the same room with Rosa shot through Vane like a rocket. He leapt on the vampire, who was snarling, spittle running down his mouth and his arms flailing wildly.

The beast rose in Vane, and he welcomed it. Rico had stalked the woman he loved, had threatened her, making her afraid, and he had *touched* her.

Rico never stood a chance. Vane ripped him apart.

He suddenly felt Rayne pulling him back and away from the fight, and what was left of Rico.

Vane sat back on his heels, breathing heavily. After the beast receded, and his head cleared, he saw what he had done, and all the while, Rosa had been standing right behind him.

He glanced up at Rayne, afraid to turn his head and look at Rosa, not wanting see the look of horror and condemnation on her face. He had killed Rico brutally, savagely.

After a few agonizing moments, he gathered himself and stood slowly, his hands at his sides and his gaze glued to the floor. He started to walk toward the door, not daring to look back.

“Vane?”

Rosa’s soft voice floated over his battered nerves, and he stopped.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rayne nod, then step out of the room, closing the door behind him. Velvet fingers touched his arm, but he couldn’t move. When she grasped his shoulder and gently turned him to face her, he dared to look into her eyes. There was no fear or condemnation, only love and concern behind glistening tears.

He pulled her close and held her tightly, running his hand through her hair and down her back before leaning down and kissing her soundly—a desperate kiss, seeking acceptance.

Rosa returned Vane’s kiss with passion. She wanted him to know what she had yet to say with words. She loved him. The days she had spent without him had been pure agony. Every day without him had made her heart break a little more.

She felt his reluctance when he broke the kiss. Leaning back, he placed a hand on her cheek.

“Rosa, I have been such a fool. I never should have let you walk away. I love you, Rosa. I’ve just been too damned afraid to admit it.”

Rosa gasped at his words. *He said he loved me!* She was bursting with joy. She reached up and held his face in both hands, gazing into his eyes. “Vane, I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I didn’t think I had anything to offer. You’re a Watcher, and I’m just a singer at a club.”

He kissed her again before resting his forehead on hers and spoke softly, reverently.

“*Mi dulce*, how could you ever think such a thing? You’re everything to me.”

Rosa took a deep breath, then glanced over to the spot where Rico had been. Now only a pile of dust remained. There was no sign of blood, except what was on the front of Vane’s shirt and pants.

Glowing red numbers behind Vane caught her attention.

“Shit! I’m due on stage!”

Vane laughed and walked her out of the room, shaking his head.

“The show must go on,” she said, chuckling softly.

Vane picked up a jacket someone had left in the cottage and put it on, covering Rico’s blood on his shirt. He escorted Rosa to the stage, and smiled at her lovingly as she stepped up to the microphone. The first song of her set, Sade’s *Sweetest Taboo*, was dedicated to Vane, and she blew him a soft kiss.

The rest of the evening went off without any problems. A few Rogues tried to crash the party, but were abruptly, and silently, stopped by Watchers.

Vane drove Rosa to her apartment. She wanted to be with him tonight. They had declared their love for each other, and she wanted to show him how much she loved him. They had only spent one night together, which seemed so long ago.

They started kissing in the elevator and continued as they stumbled across the hallway, through the door of her apartment and into her bedroom before falling on the bed.

Rosa sat up on her elbow, and stared into Vane's beautiful emerald green eyes. She smiled at him seductively, lovingly, as she pulled off the jacket he had taken from the cottage. She tossed it to the floor, then slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

She felt him shudder as her knuckles grazed the hard muscles on his chest until he shifted to let her pull the shirttail from his pants. She ran her hands under the opened shirt, sliding them over his broad shoulders, pushing the it away.

Vane's body was pure heaven, Rosa thought. She wanted to skim her fingers along his hard lines and then let her tongue follow. She wanted to memorize every inch of him. His warm skin heated hers, and she couldn't seem to get close enough.

Vane gritted his teeth. Rosa was killing him, but he was not about to stop the tender way she undressed him. Running her hands down his abdomen and brushing her knuckles along the waistband of his pants before unfastening them. He used his foot to flip off one of his shoes, then used that one to remove the other. While Rosa pulled his pants down over his legs, his briefs caught inside them and fell away as well.

He lay there naked, watching Rosa under half closed eyes as she crawled up his legs, planting kisses as she did so. Her hands were everywhere, kneading, scraping and caressing. Never would he get enough of her touch.

Gripping the sheets when her kissing and nips reached his thigh and then his hip, his erection rubbed her breasts as she towered over him. He peeled his lips back and hissed in pleasure when she breathed over his erection, then slid him slowly into her warm mouth, stopping only when he was completely inside.

He rocked his hips to the rhythm she was setting, sliding her mouth up and down his shaft, gripping him tightly with suction, faster and faster until he thought he would explode.

Her squeal when he sat up abruptly and flung her onto the bed made him laugh.

She was beneath him, right where he wanted her. Growling deep in his throat, he extended a nail and ripped her dress down the middle.

Her eyes went wide. "Hey! You're gonna have to buy me a new one."

Rosa's tone was teasing, but at the moment Vane didn't care. He intended getting her naked fast, and her panties were the next to go, in shreds. He smiled at her, reveling at the sight of her beautiful flesh before him.

Wild with passion, he could not hold himself back. He wanted her under him, on top of him and in front of him, never wanting to let her go.

She arched up to him as he took one of her breasts in his mouth, laving at the nipple, bringing it to a rosy peak before he shifted to the other. While his hand traveled down her stomach and settled over her bare mound, she cried out softly when his fingers separated the lips of her sex and slowly circled her clit. She was wet for him.

He was holding her down with his arm as she moved and writhed on the bed before shattering into ecstasy.

Vane watched her face as she slowly drifted back to Earth, her eyes glazed with passion. He had thought of nothing but Rosa since he had met her, and had come to realize his life would be nothing without her.

Gathering his courage, he stared into her eyes and opened his heart, praying she indeed loved him as much as he loved her.

"Rosa. I love you, and I need you. When I thought I had lost you, I was too. I could not think or function." He paused knowing his face revealed his hope, and his fear.

"My life felt empty until I met you, and the more I was with you, the more I knew I needed you. You complete me, Rosa. Will you accept me as your mate?"

Vane found himself holding his breath, waiting for her answer. When she smiled at him, then drew his head down to hers and kissed him tenderly, before breathing "yes" over his lips, his heart nearly burst with joy and relief.

He deepened the kiss after hearing her answer. He wanted to love her until his last breath. He would give his life for her.

Gently, he shifted to Rosa's side, pulling her along and settling her on top of him. He wanted to gaze in her eyes as they joined and accepted one another as their other half.

After Rosa straddled him, she took him inside slowly, releasing a moan of pleasure from both of them. She rode him tenderly, rocking back and forth, building her rhythm.

The love in her eyes made his heart dance. She was ecstasy in one beautiful package, and she was his.

Rosa's heart had stopped dead when Vane had asked her a very important question, one she had thought she would never hear. She was stunned. *His mate*. She had been so alone, and her life seemed like just an existence, until she had met Vane.

She loved him with all her heart, and she was going to show it with all she had.

As they made love, low moans escaped through her parted lips, and she didn't hold them back. The feeling of Vane inside her, filling her, was utterly intoxicating, almost to the point of being unbearable. She trusted him with her heart and soul and would give him anything, including herself.

Rosa's panting increased, and she closed her eyes. When Vane felt her shudder, he pulled her to him, kissed the pulse in her neck, then sank in his fangs. Her warm blood pulsed into his mouth. The sweetness almost took his breath away. He savored its exquisiteness on his tongue, swirling it around in his mouth.

Vane lifted his hips, rocking faster and faster, and felt Rosa pierce his shoulder.

Their blood flowed into each other as their bodies reached climax in unison, joining them, binding them, an intimacy unmatched by any other emotion.

Dr. Pearson drove downtown, making a last minute decision to stop at the charity bash he knew Rico would be attending. He wanted to find out if Rico was notified of the switched batch of drugs.

Carefully, he slipped in unnoticed with the throngs of media personnel.

The party was packed with people and entertainers milling about. He stayed within the crowd, trying to keep out of sight while scanning for Rico. Beautiful blonde hair caught his attention, and he moved forward to get a closer look. *Rosa Bella*.

Dr. Pearson remembered Evan boast about having the woman as his mate. A part of him thought her beautiful, but he quickly reminding that part she was a vampire.

He watched Rosa enter a cottage, followed by Rico several minutes later.

“Stupid vampire,” he muttered to himself. Inside he was elated to see this vampire made the same mistake as Evan. Blind lust made them both not only weak, but careless, and he was glad he didn’t have to worry about coming up with a plan to get rid of Rico. He knew the Watchers would do the job for him.

A man approached the cottage and stopped to talk with another man standing beside the building. Suddenly they both turned abruptly and stepped inside the cottage.

This is it. Goodbye, Rico.

After several minutes, one of the men exited the cottage. Dr. Pearson held his breath, wondering who would surface next, praying it was not Rico.

Rosa Bella walked out of the cottage on the arm of the other man, and all three headed in the direction of one of the large tents.

Waiting several minutes after the three had left, Dr. Pearson slipped into the cottage. He peeked inside one of the bedrooms and saw shards of glass covering the floor. Stepping closer, he noticed a pile of scattered ashes. Rico was dead.

Dr. Pearson parked his car on a side street close by the old Military Hospital and walked to the side door. The van was gone, but he shrugged it off, figuring one of the guys had headed out for the night.

The place seemed eerily quiet as he entered the basement, then took the stairs to the second floor. The lab was in shambles and his technicians were nowhere to be found.

“Christ!” he spat. “The vamps have trashed the lab. They must have discovered the drugs were switched and came after me.”

After grabbing a box from the basement, Dr. Pearson hastily packed whatever he could salvage from the mess strewn over the floor, then headed to his underground lab, planning on staying there, hidden away from the vampires looking for him. He had expected this to happen. It didn’t matter. He had a prime specimen locked away and there was a lot of work to be done. When he was finished, he would dispose of his guinea pig and as many of those bloodsuckers he could find.

Epilogue

The night was cool, but it didn't stop Vane and Rosa from enjoying the view from the roof of the Cell's residence. Vane stood behind her, holding her warm and safe in his arms.

Rosa turned and smiled when Robyn and Trigg joined them in admiring the lights shining off the two bridges and the restaurants across the river.

No one said a word as a breeze blew across the water, sending waves and ripples flowing along the banks.

She couldn't clear her head from all that had happened and hoped it was over. Vane had told her about the lab at the old Military Hospital Tank and Trigg had destroyed. Boxes of information had been brought back to the Cell, then sent to headquarters for further investigation of the drug. There had been notes from the lead scientist, Dr. Pearson, alluding to other drugs he had been in the process of creating to kill vampires.

Rosa's stomach had knotted when she heard a case of drugs had almost made its way onto the streets, but the possible outcome would have been worse than what they had predicted.

Headquarters had tested the drug Dr. Person had delivered and found it was not the same drug Evan had produced and used on her.

The image of Rico's face contorted in pain in the cottage brought tears to Rosa's eyes, but her sorrow wasn't for him. It was the realization unsuspecting vamps buying the drugs for a high would have received something horrific instead—a slow, painful death.

Robyn spoke, and Rosa blinked several times, letting the night breeze dry her eyes.

"It's sad Rayne has left the cell. I wish the note he left Tank had given more in explanation than having other business to resolve. Ever since he returned from Charlestown, I had sensed something troubling him deeply."

Rosa sighed, turned her head and placed her face under Vane's chin. His warmth and strength soothed her.

The lone cry of a hawk in the distance broke the silence, and Rosa shivered. Vane drew her tighter against his chest.

Rosa shook her head with a soft chuckle. Then she turned in Vane's arms to face him. "You're going to think I'm crazy, or maybe it was the drugs...but that night at the hotel, when I was watching the fireworks, a hawk appeared out of nowhere...and it spoke to me."

She looked at Vane, trying to gauge his reaction. He smiled as he answered softly.

"Yes, I saw it. It forced you back from the railing of the balcony. You told me in Tank's SUV it had spoken to you."

Trigg overheard their conversation, and remembered Rosa's drug induced actions as they had driven from the hotel back to the Cell. "Rosa, you sure can sing a mean rendition of Nazareth's *Hair of the Dog*."

His humor earned a fierce scowl from Vane, and when he looked down, he saw Robyn scowling at him too.

"What?"

Vane turned back to Rosa. Her face had turned ten shades of red. She had not gotten over her embarrassment of how she had acted, even though she'd had no way of controlling her actions. He wanted to distract her, so he returned to the topic of the hawk.

"What did the hawk say, *mi dulce*?"

After staring at him for a moment, she answered. "It told me to get away from the railing, but it also said you cared deeply about me, you needed me."

Vane kissed her forehead and breathed his reply against her skin. "You're not crazy, *mi dulce*, the hawk was right. I do care deeply about you, and I do need you so very, very much." He bent his head and covered her mouth for a long, tender kiss, one she felt clear to her toes.

Robyn turned to look at Vane and Rosa and sighed. She had always known they were made for each other, but they were both too pigheaded to admit it to themselves and overcome their personal obstacles. Now they would have a chance to experience all the joys and wonder of being mated.

She tugged on Trigg's arm and they slipped away, leaving Vane and Rosa alone to explore each other and their new connection.

Before descending the stairs of the fire escape, Robyn glanced over her shoulder, taking one last look at the loving couple. This was just the beginning of their long, wonderful life together. Even with the continued fight to eliminate the Rogues, she knew they would make the best of it, and cherish each day together, just like she and Trigg.

The five of them, which included Tank, were a unit, a family, but there was a piece missing.

Taking a deep breath, Robyn turned her head further and glanced across the river to the lights along Indiana's shoreline, and thought about Rayne. She hoped the warrior would find peace with whatever was happening in his life, and they would hear from him soon.

About the Author



D. McEntire calls southern Indiana home and relishes life in the peace of the country along with her husband and two children, not to mention the menagerie of animals on the small farm.

An avid reader of romance novels, she decided to try her hand in putting some of the ideas bouncing around her head to paper, and thus The Watchers Series was born.

To learn more about D. McEntire please visit www.dmcentire.com. Send an email to Diane at diane@dmcentire.com.

Look for these titles by D. McEntire

Now Available:

Midnight Reborn

Never look back...

Midnight Reborn

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A Watchers story.

After suffering years of abuse as the virtual prisoner of a drug lord, Robyn Andrews has had enough. A carefully planned escape is her only hope for survival. Her past nipping at her heels, she boards the first bus out of town and heads for Louisville, Kentucky.

Trigg is a Watcher with two missions in life. One, to hunt and eliminate Rogue vampires. Two, to be left alone. Yet he can't bring himself to harden his heart against the petite woman who looks so lost standing in the rain. And when Robyn joins him in a battle against Rogues, the little spitfire shows the bravery of ten Watchers. She's someone special, someone he needs in his dark life.

Someone he can never have. He's vampire; she's human. A future for them is impossible.

But the past has a way of catching up—and changing destinies with deadly speed.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Midnight Reborn:

Trigg woke up with a start. His dreams had plagued him while he slept and left him feeling heavy, both inside and out. His mind suddenly jumped to Robyn and he wondered if she had found the note he had left.

When he had first gone to bed he lay there awhile, trying to drift off to sleep. Robyn's clothing situation had popped into his head. He slid out of bed, went downstairs, and left her a note about the cash they kept in the office for emergencies, as well as the closest place for her to buy clothes. He hoped she found the clothing store on Fourth Street easily and enjoyed herself.

Something inside made him want to cheer Robyn up and see her smile. Her eyes held much sorrow and pain. There was no light, no spark in them and it made his heart ache.

Trigg took a deep breath, let it out and prepared to meet those eyes once again, dreading to see condemnation in them for the monster that she most likely believed he was. She had probably spent the day thinking about what she had seen last night, what he had done to the Rogue, not to mention how he had lost control with Vane.

Robyn removed the biscuits from the oven and set them on the table. The aroma of roast and biscuits wafted up toward the bedrooms. She smiled when she glanced upstairs and saw both Rayne and Vane open their doors at the same time and poke their heads out to check out the smell. It wasn't long before they came bounding down the stairs.

"Man, oh man, *chiquita*. Dinner smells *muy bueno!*" Vane crooned as he walked into the kitchen rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"Yeah," agreed Rayne coming in behind him. "It smells delicious!"

Robyn smiled at their enthusiasm. It was nice to have her cooking appreciated. "Well, you haven't tasted it, yet. I just hope I didn't cook the roast too much for you guys. Trigg had said that you...uh..." Robyn felt a little weird about mentioning the ingesting blood issue, but she continued, "...got the blood you needed from meat."

She walked over to the counter and lifted the lid from the slow cooker, sliced off pieces of roast and began plating them with vegetables, then poured the bloody juice from the bottom of the slow cooker over the meat and veggies.

Trigg came in and took a seat as she began placing the plates in front of them on the table.

"Wow, service too! I could get used to this!" Vane said while smiling brightly at Robyn, who blushed at his attention.

Trigg was watching her as she went around the table. He wanted to catch her eye, to discern some sort of thought from her face. When she came around to his chair to set his plate down in front of him, his hand brushed hers as he reached for it.

They both hesitated, but only for a moment, then Robyn stepped away and Trigg muttered, "Thank you."

When Robyn's eyes met his as she stepped back, Trigg couldn't find any hint of fear, anger or repulsion. He saw...peace. And, was that happiness in her eyes? He felt his muscles relax and his previously knotted stomach ease.

Trigg smiled inwardly while he watched her move about the kitchen as if she had been doing it all her life.

When Robyn reached up to get glasses down from a shelf much too high for her, Trigg jumped out of the chair, almost knocking it backward and was quickly by her side to get them down.

Robyn jumped, not because of his nearness, but because he had been so quick that he startled her. Seeing the slight frown crease his, she quickly thought to explain her reaction.

"Oh, you scared me. I didn't see you coming," she said then laughed softly.

"Sorry," Trigg said quietly. "Sit and eat. I'll get this."

His voice had turned a little gruff, but she didn't give it much thought. She just turned around, placed some roast and vegetables on her plate and popped it in the microwave.

When Robyn turned from the microwave, the guys were all looking at her, smiling.

"What?" She asked, feeling a little uncomfortable at their sudden attention.

Rayne laughed.

"Guess you don't go much for rare meat, huh?"

Robyn bit the inside of her mouth so as not to laugh. "No, I'd rather my meat not squeal, say 'ouch' or howl when I cut into it!"

They laughed and she retrieved her plate from the microwave, then yelped and dropped it on the counter, making everyone jump.

"Ow!" she cried, putting her fingers in her mouth. "I forgot to use the stupid pot holder!"

Hissing in pain, she ran to the sink and shoved her fingers under the cold water.

Trigg stopped in the midst of putting the drinks on the table and walked over to her quickly.

"Here, let me see," he said as he reached for her hands.

“No, it’s okay. I just burned them. I’ll put some ice on them in a minute. You go ahead and eat before your food gets cold.”

Robyn tried to smile up at him, but the pain on her face was evident.

Trigg didn’t wait for her permission. He turned off the water and looked at the blisters forming on the pads of her fingers where she had touched the hot plate. He stared into her eyes for a moment, then slowly raised her hand to his lips.

Robyn had no idea what was going to happen. *Was he going to kiss it and make it better?*

When Trigg opened his mouth and began to run his tongue over the burns, she thought her knees were going to buckle. The moist heat from his rough tongue invoked tingling sensations that coursed through her body and pooled in her lower belly.

Robyn realized this was turning her on, and from the look in Trigg’s eyes, he was there with her, or maybe even more so. They were glowing and showing a tint of red, but not fully red as they were last night when Vane had her against the wall in the kitchen.

Her breath caught at the look in his eyes—hunger and want. When he finished, he kissed her palm gently and slowly released her hand.

Trigg smiled at the astonished look on Robyn’s face. He could see in her eyes that there was something more, she wanted him. When she blinked, breaking the spell, he spoke.

“Your burns needed healing.”

Robyn blinked again. “Wha-what?” She stammered as if she hadn’t realized he had spoken.

Trigg’s smile deepened. “Your burns needed healing. Our saliva has a healing agent, so I healed them.” He watched as Robyn’s eyes seemed to refocus and he could see that the information finally sank in. Her face flushed as she thanked him before sidestepping him on the way to retrieve her plate from the counter.

Trigg handed her a potholder with a chuckle before she could repeat the incident.

When he turned and headed to his chair, he noticed Rayne and Vane staring at him with arched eyebrows and he scowled. He didn’t need either one of them reminding him

that he was playing with fire. He was a vampire and she was a human. Nothing good would come out of a relationship between them.

Love will redeem them...or damn their souls.

The Fallen

© 2008 Gwen Hayes

As Darkfall gains a foothold in the small coastal town of Serendipity Falls, Bridget, a witch and healer, fights a battle on two fronts. Against the chaos bleeding through the fissures of a cracked portal between realms, and against her attraction to a fallen angel with his own agenda. Talon's dark ways and mysterious magics go against everything she believes in, but he's the only man she's ever loved.

Talon, forever haunted by his fall from grace and his ceaseless desire for the headstrong Bridget, longs for what he can never possess. Though he is no longer her guardian, she tempts him with pleasure he can never touch and emotions he can never reveal.

Caught on opposite sides in a war between good and evil, they struggle against their mutual passion. Then an ancient prophecy points to the one who will break the portal wide open and shift the balance of power: Bridget. She has no choice but to turn to Talon, and the love that will damn their souls—or save the world.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Fallen:

"I'm not leaving." Her voice sounded flat and toneless. Defeated. She wished he would go. She regarded the sharp planes of his face. A beautiful face, one that could make a grown woman weep. Perfectly symmetrical features framed by jet-black hair of silk. She knew his skin would be warm and his breath would be sweet. An angel. One so beautiful it was hard to remember that she hated him. And she did hate him.

"It isn't safe."

He faced her again, and she cursed his features. She would rather look upon his face than the most glorious sunset. He must know the power it yielded over women, over her. It always made his damning words all the more hateful, to come from such an angelic mouth. She blinked away her reverie. "Which is why I stay."

"Poppet, it is unsafe for you most of all."

When he loosened his grip, she realized he still hadn't let go of her arms. All her nerves warred with each other to get to the patch of skin he touched. Why wouldn't he just leave? "What did you say?"

He smiled. A lazy, sardonic grin that made her want to spit nails. "I see, in your eyes, great promise for passion. Sometimes, I wonder what it would cost a man to see you finally soften and yield in his arms. I'm certain it would be worth the price."

He was wearing her down—she steeled herself against his charm. "Why is it most unsafe for me, Talon?"

"Even the demons don't know why they are drawn here. They just know the mystical epicenter is humming and enticing them like flies to honey. Some are gossiping about a prophecy. A *Sorceress of Fire* cracking the rift open. Some believe that could be you. Word is, you could be in high demand." He rubbed his hands down her arms. "The Agency can send someone else. You should go into hiding."

"A prophecy? Please. They're only accurate predictions about what *could* happen if the course doesn't change from its current path. The older the prediction, the less accurate it becomes."

"Demons are very superstitious. They put a lot of faith behind those forecasts."

Since when did he care what demons believed? "The demons would be foolish to attempt going after me, and they all know it. I'll stay and do what needs doing, just as I always do."

"Woman, your powers do not make you infallible."

She clenched her fists with purpose, and a loud rumble of thunder shook the house in answer. "Demons *are* afraid of me, for good reason. I don't cower and I will not run." She flexed her fingers and lightning lit the sky, casting purple shadows on the walls. He didn't flinch at her display, but instead gazed openly at her lips. They tingled under his gaze, and she unthinkingly wet them with her tongue, struck dumb by the flash of desire he didn't try to hide in his eyes.

The teakettle whistled, breaking their concentration, and thankfully, he dropped her arms. She turned off the stove. "Again, I have to ask. Why the sudden concern?"

“I have such few pleasures in life. You’re my favorite diversion. I’d hate to see you gone.”

She scoffed and poured the water into two mugs. “Talon, your self-indulgence is legendary. I know you find amusement at my expense, but I refuse to believe that it is one of only a *few pleasures* you seek.”

“Are you offering an alternative pleasure, poppet?” He fingered the end of her hair.

The air was suddenly heavy around them. She met his gaze, even knowing as she did, it would be a mistake. “I have nothing to offer that you would be interested in.”

He smirked as he reached for her hand, bringing it to his lips and gently kissing her knuckles. “You are a beautiful and vibrant woman, Bridget. You offer pleasure of a thousand kinds just by entering a room.”

She closed her eyes, her turn now to nurse the wounds caused by their exchange of words. His compliment only served as a reminder of humiliation. His perseverance to sway her would last only until she wavered. And then he would shame her and laugh at her weakness. Again. Some lessons stung.

“Leave,” she commanded. “I have no use for your games.”

He dropped her hand. “Take heed, please. Let the prophecy rumors die down. Surely your Agency has trouble in every city in America. I’m not asking you to stop saving the world, just do it somewhere else.”

“I’m not leaving. But you are.”

He muttered a curse and stalked away from her, slamming her front door behind him.

She hated him. She hated the way he sauntered in and out of her life. That he possessed not a shred of honor or valiance. That when he left, she would cry for his soul. She hated that she loved him.

And that he was fallen.

He's the leprechaun, but she's the one who can make his dreams come true.

Liam's Gold

© 2008 Jody Wallace

Sal Winter, a computer tech, has lived next door to Liam for years. They're friends—just not that kind of friends. Sal wishes it could be more, but she's come to accept Liam will never want anything from her except her computer skills.

As for Liam, he's a leprechaun in disguise who has no intention of granting anyone's wish except his own: to taste the delights of one Miss Salvia Rose Winter before his sojourn in humanspace comes to an end. Sal possesses a gene that gives her the power to detect leprechauns. The closer Liam sticks to Sal, the greater the risk—and the better his cover, which is becoming critical as his time in humanspace runs short.

Time isn't the only thing running short for Liam. A nemesis from the Realm is bearing down on him, determined to do anything to prevent his return to their homeland. Including murder the woman he's only just realized he loves.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Liam's Gold:

He'd taken off her cardigan and blouse before he unlocked his front door, and goose bumps blushed across her skin. Late September in Wisconsin wasn't exactly toasty. Sal wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her face on his chest, also bare to the night air. Her heart pounded with fear and excitement. What remained of her common sense screamed at her to put her shirt back on and get her ass home before she slept with Lothario Liam, her tomcat of a neighbor.

The problem was, she could tell how good it was going to be. He kissed like an angelic devil, or a devilish angel, some otherworldly sex god, and he knew how to make her whimper. Didn't she deserve the kind of sex she'd always imagined?

Liam tossed her blouse and sweater on the rocking chair near the door and kissed her again. Her purse hit the porch with a thump. His fingers threaded through her hair, fisted, and she couldn't turn away. She could only kiss him back and, well, shove one of her hands down his pants and squeeze his butt. His hips twitched against her belly.

Definitely no way to fake an erection like that. How could this be about Kristiana? No, she didn't want to think about the woman he'd been with last. She just wanted to think about her dreams coming true in a very carnal way.

How many millions of times had she fantasized about this? She caressed his bare, nearly hairless chest, muscular but not brawny. Next she stroked his ribs and ended at the perfect hollow above his hipbone. The hollow she'd yearned to lick whenever he'd been shirtless.

By golly, she'd do it.

She unlocked his fist from her hair and dropped to her knees. His eyes widened and his lips parted, but no sound came out. Sal wrapped her arms around his waist and rubbed her cheek against his flat, hot stomach. His shirt flapped open in the same unseen breeze that cooled her overheated skin.

With her lips closed, she placed tiny kisses around his navel and allowed her tongue to flicker out and sample that delicious spot above his hip. Slightly musky. Clean. Liam. She'd have known that taste anywhere, though it had never crossed her lips. She closed her eyes and breathed him in, rubbed her face across him with a sigh that tickled his skin.

"Sal." His hoarse voice penetrated the fog of lust that had driven her to her knees on a first date, so to speak, not twenty yards from her grandmother's house.

She didn't want to be sane. In response, she licked him at his beltline and trailed a hand from his knee to his thigh, halting at his groin.

He grabbed her hand before she could undo his belt. Sal grinned into his belly and nipped him.

"Let's go inside." He fumbled for his keys and scrambled to unlock the door. The deadbolt always stuck. He couldn't free it unless he pulled back on the doorknob while turning the key. This forced him to release her hand, which she promptly used to fondle his crotch.

Liam wheezed. The door opened and he fell into the living room, dragging her across the threshold. Sal ended up on top, her lace-clad bosom brushing his chest.

Warm air from the house bathed their chilled skin, and Sal shivered. She flattened herself against him. Liam rubbed down her shoulder blades, her spine, and around her

buttocks. There, he lingered and massaged, increasing the ache between her legs. Mmm, he was good. She nibbled his shoulder and tried not to grind her hips like a dog in heat.

“By all that’s holy, woman,” he muttered into her hair. “Why didn’t you drop a hint years ago that you were so...” He swallowed.

“What am I so?” She raised herself and stared at him. Along his cheekbones, his skin had tightened, and his eyes were black. Warm, yellow light from the kitchen, open to the living room at one end, etched the planes of his chest.

Liam blinked. A tiny smile lightened his tense expression. “You’re so half-naked on top of me.” He drew her down for another luscious bout of kisses and squeezes.

A gust of wind whooshed through the open door and up her skirt. Sal uttered a startled whoop. Several dry leaves blew across the hardwood floor and came to rest on the red and brown Oriental rug in the center of the large room.

“Why don’t we take this somewhere more comfortable?” Liam traced the waistband of her skirt before tickling his way up her back. His fingers twitched the clasp of her bra.

“Maybe.” Somewhere comfortable. That sounded so...final. Sal licked her lips, nervous again. Was she really going to do this?

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