

ANGELA CAMERON



NOCTURNAL

Vampires don't like it
when the victim bites back.

NOCTURNE

For
Doc & Mal
because you believed in me when I didn't.

Thanks to Amy, Aunt Barb, and to Aunt Furry (the vampire madam) for giving me courage to be different and never ceasing to crack the whip.

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Nocturne

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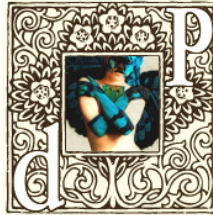
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CHAPTER ONE

ALYSON WINGATE TWISTED THE WIPER SWITCH ON HER STEERING COLUMN and the metronome-like click of the wipers quickened. Driving in the rain always made her nervous, but doing it in the middle of the night, when the darkness of the Appalachian forest drowned what little moonlight did peek through, was moving to the top of her list of things to avoid. She flicked off the radio and leaned toward the windshield, squinting.

As she rounded the bend, a blue streak of lightning cracked to her left and jerked her attention away from the road. When she looked back, she saw *something* stretched across her lane, just yards ahead. She shrieked and slammed her foot down on the brake, gripping the steering wheel hard as the car slid a little to the left on the rain-slick road. She eased up on the pedal instinctively and then pressed again, trying not to over-steer. When the car came to a stop, Aly leaned over the wheel, pushing back the hair that had fallen forward into her face with shaking hands, to peer through the gloom at the road ahead. Her heart pounded almost painfully in her chest.

Just a few feet from her front bumper, illuminated by the car's headlights through the driving rain, lay the shape of a person—a woman with long slender legs and bare feet. She wore a thin, light-colored dress that clung to her body in the rain. Her skin was pale, and dark hair stuck to her face. She looked like she'd passed out on the road except for the blood that decorated the cloth on her upper body and ran off in rain-diluted streaks.

Aly couldn't see movement. Her stomach flipped as she grabbed her cell. With a deep breath to steady her courage, she opened the door and stepped out into the rain. The pink silk button up she'd worn to the meeting would be ruined, but dead bodies trumped style any day.

She glanced behind her to search for headlights. She was on a blind curve, and trees spread their branches over the narrow road. A car coming around at full speed wouldn't see her, much less be able to stop in time to avoid another catastrophe. Aly leaned in and flicked on the hazard blinkers, then slammed the door shut.

“Hey!” she yelled. “Hey, are you okay?”

The loud static of raindrops pounding leaves was interrupted only by the sound of distant thunder.

She jogged over to the body, careful not to slip on the wet pavement, and knelt down to examine it. She teetered on her toes and caught herself, careful not to get water and blood all over her pants.

The chest didn't move, but only a pulse would tell for sure. She pushed up her sleeve, grateful for the experience she'd gained with her job at the paper. She didn't have the calm that seasoned cops and paramedics had, but she wasn't panicking either. Panic made things go wrong and people look foolish. Aly was no fool.

She leaned over, placing two fingers on the woman's neck. Her eyes widened, and she jerked her hand back. Even allowing for the cool fall rain, the skin was startlingly cold.

Aly swallowed hard and reached out, brushing the woman's hair back to reveal a face twisted in horror. The movement jostled the body, and the flesh of the woman's neck gaped open to show meat and bone.

Aly stumbled backward onto her feet, her heels clanking against the wet pavement. She turned and hurried to the car and, once safely inside, thumbed 9-1-1 on her cell.

She propped the phone on her shoulder and rubbed her hands together. The sensation of bugs crawling over her skin would fade, she knew, but it didn't stop her from making an exaggerated shake to try to stop it.

She breathed in deeply through her nose while the phone rang. She was a reporter. She'd heard hundreds of dispatch recordings and there was no way she

was going to sound like some panicked citizen reporting a cat in the tree. She did, after all, have a reputation to maintain.

After two rings, a female voice with a southern twang answered, “911, what’s your emergency?”

“Hi. This is Alyson Wingate with the Hayden Chronicle. I’m on Oak Mountain Road, just west of the state park entrance, and there’s a woman’s body in the road.”

“Hey, Aly, this is Danielle Smith. Did you say a body? Do you need an ambulance?”

“I’m pretty sure she’s dead.”

“And it’s in the road?”

“Yes. Lying in the westbound lane. It’s in a curve.”

“Hold on while I dispatch this.”

Aly rubbed briskly at her soaked arms. Even her insides were shaking.

“Okay, I’ve got people on the way out there, honey.”

She cringed at “honey” but didn’t argue. Instead, she glanced in the rear view mirror, hoping a car wouldn’t come around the curve. “Thanks, Danielle. Oh, and tell them to hurry. I’m sitting in a blind curve, trying to make sure no one runs over her.”

“All right. Do you need me to stay on the line?”

“No, that’s all right. I need to call Kayla and tell her I’m not going to make it for dinner.”

“Aww. Well tell her I said hello. Okay?”

“I will. Good night.” Aly fought the urge to laugh. She’d tell Kayla, but she was sure that her sister would roll her eyes. She thought Danielle was fake.

“Night,” Danielle said.

Aly dialed her sister’s number. She had already canceled three of their after work, midnight dinner dates in a row, but surely, Kayla could forgive her this. It wasn’t as if bodies dropped in front of your car every day. Unless you were aiming at pedestrians.

“Hey, sis.” Kayla’s voice was chipper. “Are you almost here?”

“No. Actually, I’m stuck in my car on Oak Mountain waiting for cops to get here.”

“Why? Did you wreck?”

“No. They’ve got to get a body out of the road.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

“Should I ask?”

“It wasn’t my fault! I just found her lying here.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know. Some woman. Looks like a murder. It’s pretty bad.”

“Are you there alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Lock your doors, Aly.”

“Why?”

“Are you kidding me? The killer could still be there. Maybe he’s watching you.”

“You’ve been watching too many movies.” Aly flipped the locks and glanced out the windows at the trees that lined the road on both sides.

“Aly, you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m—” She’d planned to say she was thinking, but she caught movement out of the corner of her right eye as someone banged on her passenger side window. She screamed and jumped, banging her elbow against the console.

Wil Clark laughed so loud that she could hear it though the closed windows as he leaned over to look in. His gold curls were starting to wilt in the rain. “It’s just me.”

She pressed a hand to her chest, trying to hold in the heart that was fighting to escape. “Don’t do that to me.”

Kayla’s voice hit a high note on the other end of the phone. “Aly? Aly, what’s happening?”

“Open the door,” Wil said, giving the handle a tug. “It’s raining.”

She unlocked the doors, refusing to smile at him. “It’s just Wil,” she said into the phone. “He scared me.”

His green eyes held that twinkle of mischief that little boys get “Just Wil? You want me to leave?”

“No. I just meant you’re not an ax murderer.”

“How do you know?” He smiled again, and Aly groaned, whacking him in the stomach with the back of her hand.

“Kayla, I’ve gotta run. I’ll call you later and tell you what’s going on.”

“All right. Be careful.”

“I will. Good night.”

“Talk to ya later.”

She flipped the phone shut and turned toward Wil. His hair had grown longer and his tan was darker than it had been the last time she’d seen him. “What are you doing here?”

He turned his body toward her as much as the small seat would allow. “I heard the dispatch and your name. Since I was right down the road, I thought I’d come to your rescue.”

Some things never changed. The earth turned, seasons came and went, and Wil thought she couldn’t do anything without him jumping in to take care of her. “I don’t need rescuing.”

He rolled his eyes toward the side window and let out a loud breath that meant he thought she was being unreasonable. “All right. I came to keep you company then.”

She folded her arms across her chest.

“Come on, Aly. I didn’t think you’d want to sit on this stretch of road by yourself. It’s late and there’s a dead body in front of you.” He turned and grabbed the door handle. “But if you don’t want me here, I’ll go.”

He did have a point. She didn’t want to sit here alone, not after what Kayla had said. She grabbed his elbow. “No, wait. I don’t want you to go.”

He let go of the door and relaxed against the seat. "So, do you know who she is?"

Wil always did have a way of dropping the subject when he knew he'd won. At least talking about the body was better than arguing.

"Not a clue. She was just lying there when I drove up."

"Couldn't have been here too long. This road's pretty busy until about eleven."

"Well, it's twenty after twelve. Have you looked at her?"

"No. I didn't want to get soaked."

"Where's your car? I didn't see you come up."

He cut his eyes toward her and grinned. He'd enjoyed scaring her. He always had. "It's back a bit. I saw your lights through the trees and stopped far enough back that people didn't get stuck trying to turn around here. There's a side road there that should give them plenty of room."

She glanced back toward the body. "It's bad. Her throat is ripped out, and her face looks like someone scared her to death."

He didn't speak, and after a few moments of silence, she looked at him. He gave her a hard stare, and then turned to look out the windshield again.

"What's wrong?" she asked, following his glance.

"Nothing." His lips were tense. "Was there anything else?"

"No, that was it as far as I could tell."

He looked out each side window, into the woods.

A flash of electric heat passed through the car and over her skin. Aly rubbed her arms to make the prickling sensation ease. "What is that?"

Wil looked at her, his brows high and eyes wide. "What?"

"That. That feeling. Like static shock. Don't you feel it?"

He shook his head as the feeling faded. "Nope. Not a thing."

"Why is it that you've never felt the same things I do? You never have and it makes me feel like a freak."

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

"Couldn't you at least pretend?"

His eyes narrowed. “Would that have made a difference? If I pretended to feel what you felt, would you have married me?”

She dropped her gaze and looked at the phone in her hands. She flipped it open and began to fumble with the buttons. Wil placed a warm palm on her upper arm and her heart fluttered. Sure, they’d broken up months ago, but she still had feelings for him.

“I know it wouldn’t have, Aly. But if you’d just give me one more chance, I think you’d see that I’m not what you think I am.”

“You cheated on me.”

“Aly, listen to me. Once-and-for-all, I never cheated on you.”

“But I saw you.”

“No, you saw me helping a friend who needed a shoulder to cry on.”

“Is that what you call it?” She let out a sharp sound that resembled a laugh. “What exactly had her so upset that she had to wrap her arms around your neck and bury her face in your chest?”

“I really want to tell you. I just can’t.” He opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. He swallowed hard and trudged on. “Why can’t you just trust me?”

“There it is.” She pointed her finger at him. “Who am I going to tell, Wil? Nobody, that’s who. But, here you are, wanting me to trust you, when you don’t trust me.”

He didn’t answer.

It would never work. It never had. They were just too different, and the more he stayed around, the angrier she would get. Why hadn’t she just let him leave when he’d tried?

Flashing blue lights illuminated the car, and when she glanced behind them, she could see a police cruiser rounding the curve.

She turned, watching the cruiser pull up beside her. “We’re friends, Wil. We always will be.”

“I love you, Alyson.”

She glanced out at the approaching officer and mashed the button to roll down her window. The rain had almost stopped. "I know."

"No, you don't."

"Evenin', Miss Wyngate." It was Samuel Parrish. "You sure picked a good night to find a body."

She smiled. Sam was nice, even if he was a little hokie. "Hi, Sam."

"Detective Nichols will be here in a few minutes. You just sit tight and we'll let ya go after you two have a chance to talk." He bent a little, trying to see in the cab. "Is that Wil? Hey, man."

"Hey." Wil tried to look friendly.

"Man, I thought you broke up. Glad to see you're still gettin' along."

Wil elbowed her, and Aly let out a short laugh. "Yeah. Thanks."

Sam glanced behind them. "Here he is now."

The unmarked car, single blue light flashing, pulled up behind the cruiser.

* * * *

Wil wrapped his arm around Aly's shoulder to block the wind coming down the mountain and she snuggled in gratefully, despite the distraction. Aly tried to listen to the Detective's gravelly voice, but Wil's arm and the chills that ran over her body made it difficult. The rain had mercifully stopped, but she was still soaked and cold.

"Miss Wingate, are you certain you saw nothing else here?"

She looked at him and wondered if her impatience was beginning to show. She hoped it was. "Yes. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Wil pulled her tight. "We just need to wrap this up, Detective. It's late, and we haven't had any sleep yet."

"I'm sorry. We just have to be sure." Nichols closed his note pad and stuck it in his blazer pocket. "I'd say this was an animal attack. Probably a wolf or coyote." He pulled out a business card from his pants pocket and handed it to her. "But if you think of anything else, be sure to call me at the office."

“I will.” She took it and tucked it into her pocket without looking at it. “Can we go now? It’s almost two-thirty.”

“Yeah. Go ahead,” Nichols said and turned his back on them. “Just don’t forget to call.”

Ali slipped from beneath Wil’s arm and walked toward her car. She had to get away from him. He was starting to feel way too good.

He jumped ahead and opened the driver’s door, his eyes trained on something behind her. When he looked at her, she forced a smile and slipped into the seat. He leaned in toward her between the door and frame. The warm scent of his cologne filled the car. “Let me follow you home.”

She reached for the ignition and cranked the car. Her headlights spilled light across the now empty road. “I’ll be fine.”

“It’s late. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Wil, you’re not staying over.”

“That not what I’m asking. Just trust me.” His eyes were clear and pleading. Something seemed urgent.

“All right. Let’s go.”

He shut the door and she watched him jog back toward his vehicle. What was she thinking? Wil had been so hard to get over. He was still hard to refuse. Lately, it seemed that every time he came over, they ended up in bed.

She put the car in gear. Not this time.

* * * *

Aly turned the key in her front door and looked over her shoulder at Wil. “I’m safe. You can go home now.”

He put his hand on the door beside her. “I’m not leaving until I look through the apartment.” His eyes were narrowed and serious. She’d seen that look a thousand times and knew it meant that nothing would dissuade him.

“Why?”

“Because that wasn’t an animal attack. I know what animal bites look like and that wasn’t one.”

“You’re saying a human did that?”

He nodded.

“What do you think happened?”

Wil glanced around quickly as he said, “Let’s go in if you want to talk about this.”

She laughed, pulled her keys from the lock, and swung the door open. Her solid black cat, Ophelia, darted out between their legs. “You’re not staying.”

He smiled that knee-quaking smile again. “You must want me to stay pretty bad if you feel the need to keep saying that.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Aly rolled her eyes and headed up the stairs at the other end of the foyer. “I’ve got to change. Yell if there’s an intruder.”

She turned left at the top and slipped into her room, slamming and locking the door when she heard Wil’s footsteps on the stairs.

“Hey.” He banged on the door. “I haven’t checked in there. What if someone’s in your closet?”

“Then they’re about to get a show.” She pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it onto the double wedding ring quilt, the one her grandmother had made, that rested across the end of the bed. “I’ve got to warm up.”

“Well I’m coming in there.”

“No, you are not.” She pulled open the top drawer and tugged out a white, oversized men’s button up that doubled as her favorite sleep shirt. She tossed it on the bed just as the doorknob jiggled. “Ha. Told you.”

“Aly, let me in.”

“Give me a minute. I’m changing.”

“I’ve seen you naked before.”

“Yeah, but we’re not together now. You don’t get that privilege.” She laughed and stripped off her bra, tossing it onto the bed.

“If you get killed in your bedroom, don’t blame it on me.”

She heard his footsteps move down the hallway and back. He was pacing. She shed the dress pants and replaced them with her favorite gray cotton shorts.

“Aly, answer me!”

Suddenly she heard a heavy thump and the door crashed inward, splintering the frame.



CHAPTER TWO

“WIL, YOU IDIOT! WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?” ALY screamed. She jerked the shirt up in front of her. “Get out. Now!”

He ignored her and moved to the closet.

“Get out of my house, right now.” She followed, watching him open the door and push her clothes around, rattling the hangers.

He moved past her and knelt beside the bed.

She stomped the floor beside him and gritted her teeth. “Wil, get out.”

He raised the bedskirt and bent to see under the bed, then stood and dusted his hands.

“Okay, there’s no one in here.”

“I know, now get your ass out of my house.”

He blinked at her. “What?”

“You heard me. Get out.”

“No.”

“William Clark, get out now. You just came in here to see me naked.” She motioned toward the door. “And you broke my freakin’ door!”

In a flash, he crossed the few feet that separated them and towered over her. He suddenly seemed much bigger, almost frightening. “Don’t yell at me, Alyson. I’m trying to help you.”

Aly held the shirt closer and tried not to look at his chest. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter. “You had no right to burst in here.”

He stared at her for a moment, as if weighing her words. “I was worried.”

Aly turned her back to him to slip on her shirt and his arms encircled her waist from behind.

“All right, Wil.” She tugged at his arm. He squeezed tighter and it gave her chills. “Let me go.”

He leaned close and whispered, “No.” His breath stroked the back of her neck and made her shiver.

“Wil, I told you. We’re not doing this again.”

“Why not? You want it as much as I do.”

Maybe she did, but that wasn’t the point. “No I don’t. I can’t do this again. It’ll just be weird in the morning.”

He pulled her earlobe into his mouth and let it slide out between his teeth.

She shuddered against him. “Don’t do that,” she whispered.

“Why?” He did it again, but followed it with a kiss just behind her ear. “Because it makes you want to do what you want for a change, instead of what you think everyone expects?”

She closed her eyes and tried not to hear him. She did want to break away and do what she wanted, but life wasn’t about what she wanted. Right now, her body wanted him. But in the light of day, all that would be gone. All that would be left was the reminder that they were no longer a couple. In fact, they couldn’t stay in the same room together for ten minutes without fighting or fucking.

In reality, they were just two people who used to love each other, and occasionally had sex. Great sex. He knew everything she wanted and did it without her having to ask. Maybe that was why she kept giving in.

“I can’t help it.” As soon as she said it, she realized it didn’t make sense. *Shit*. That wasn’t what she meant.

“Can’t help what? That you love what I do to you?”

She tried to shake him loose, but his left hand slid down her hip and around to the front of her thigh.

“Let go.”

“Honestly?” His voice was teasing and full of promise. He parted his lips and slid them down to where her neck and shoulder met. “You don’t want me to do

this?” He dragged soft, wet lips and stubble across her skin. Where his teeth touched her skin, it set her on fire. “Tell me to stop, and I’ll stop, Aly.”

She took a deep breath. She was going to regret this tomorrow.

His hand played up her leg, over her shorts, and then slipped down beneath the top edge of her panties. He pushed down, sliding his hand slowly across the fabric. He teased her with his fingertips, while he kissed the back of her neck. When he opened his mouth and sucked her flesh between his teeth, she gasped. “Tell me you want this, or I’ll stop.”

She blinked and took another deep breath. Her life was perfect without a man. She didn’t need one. They always had a way of messing everything up.

He stopped. “Tell me you want it.”

Aly blinked her eyes open through the blissful fog.

Wil turned her to face him in one quick move that made her stumble backwards the few feet to land against the wall. “I do want this, but—”

He closed the distance in an instant. Those warm and sweet lips with the taste of vanilla and mint landed on hers in a fierce kiss that stopped her argument cold.

She’d missed the way he tasted and the way his mouth fit hers. Aly put her hands on his chest. They couldn’t do this, not again. Her heart couldn’t handle it.

Still, she didn’t stop him when Wil grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the wall, one on each side of her head. The spice of his cologne, warm and intoxicating, sent heat shooting through her so fast that the hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention. Something low in her body spasmed, and she leaned into the kiss.

Wil moaned. He pulled away just a fraction, slipped one arm around her waist, and lifted her up so that she was pinned between him and the wall, held up by his hips.

Her arms fell around his neck and she wrapped her legs tight around his waist. When he pushed his hips forward, hers rolled against him, grinding them together.

He kissed her again, deep and probing so that their teeth grazed. His tongue slid against hers, and then he pulled away, taking a gasp from her. His lips trailed down her chin and neck, lingering over her pulse as if tempted to bite the little moving thing. She knew he wouldn't, but the thought made her pull his head up for another kiss.

Wil grunted and gripped her waist hard. He rested his forehead against her collarbone, and his hips pressed harder between her legs. He inhaled deeply. "I've missed the way you smell."

She leaned her head back and snaked her arms down to his collar. Her fingers fumbled over the buttons, undoing them one at a time, until her hands could explore the warm flesh of his shoulders and back. She dragged her nails across his skin and pulled a low growl from his lips that was more animal than man.

She planted her hands on the sides of his face and pulled him into another deep kiss.

Wil's hands searched up her shirt to the top button. When he found it, he fumbled to open it for a moment, then grasped the fabric and gave it a quick yank. Buttons pinged around the room and off the dresser beside them.

Aly groaned and tried to pull away, but his mouth followed hers. His arms hooked around her waist, and he jerked her to him so that their chests pressed firmly together.

When he was aroused, his scent was intoxicating. Aly nuzzled her face into the bend of his neck. She pulled his skin between her teeth and bit hard enough that he groaned.

They half fell onto the bed, Wil on top with her fingers wrapped in his shirt. He pressed his face down the line of her body from breast to navel. His hands looped through the legs of her panties and shorts simultaneously. With one quick tug, he pulled her hips off the bed and the clothes to her knees.

With equal impatience, he pulled them down her legs and tossed them across the room. His mouth came back up to her breast like an assault. He took as much

of her into his mouth as he could while still running his tongue in circles over her hard nipple while his hips pressed against her, bare skin to cloth.

She shuddered and grabbed his shoulders. She pushed, and he let her silently command him to his knees. She leaned forward. Her hands gripped his button, opened it, and then unzipped his fly so that the full-grown length of him spilled toward her. She wrapped her hand around that hard flesh. She reached into her bedside drawer and pulled out a condom, opened it, and dropped the wrapper as she slid it onto the head of his penis and unrolled it up the length of him.

When she squeezed softly, his body convulsed in place and his eyes fluttered. He groaned and pushed her backwards. His body followed hers until their chests met again.

She loved the feel of his weight against her and moved her hands to his back, waiting for him to enter. Instead, he teased, rubbing his dick slowly along her moist skin, making her tremble.

“Please, Wil.” She moaned and nipped at his neck. When she reached for his hips, he grabbed her wrists and pressed them to the bed beside her.

He watched as he pushed himself inside of her, spreading her with a slow, steady force. His hips pulled back, and then pushed again in a cycle that deepened with each thrust.

She rolled her hips to meet his but he pinned her to the bed with his left hand on her hip. Still inside her, he slid his right hand down until he could run his thumb over her clit, working it until he brought her, writhing and moaning beneath him.

When Aly calmed, he gripped her hips with both hands, and fucked her, grunting with each thrust. Twice more pushed him over the edge and into an orgasm that brought a hoarse yell from his lips.

She dragged her nails down his back, wondering if the old tricks still worked. When he pulsed against her again, adding one last convulsion to the climax before he collapsed onto bent elbows, she smiled.

He gave two quick sounds that were somewhere between a laugh and a pant. “You know that drives me nuts.”

Aly’s smile widened, the pace of her breathing matching his. “I know.”

He planted a quick kiss on her lips and rolled to the side, grabbing her grandmother’s quilt from the floor to pull it up over them.

She turned over, curling onto her side so that their bodies spooned. She closed her eyes and lay there, listening to him behind her. It was wonderful to have him so close, to have a man in her bed. Even if it was just for the night.

As his breathing slowed, Wil’s hand moved through her hair in soft strokes. “I miss this.”

“I know, Wil. I do, too.”

* * * *

Aly choked as something filled her throat. Was it spit? Was she actually choking on spit in her sleep?

She tried to cough but the wet thickness filled her throat. Couldn’t Wil hear her? Surely, he was still in bed beside her.

“Drink, young one.” It’s was a woman’s voice, smooth and caressing. One she didn’t recognize. “Drink it or you’ll die.”

Aly swallowed it down, only to feel more fill her throat. She swallowed again and managed a breath. With the air came the sweet, metallic taste of blood. It filled her nostrils and made her stomach roll. She coughed and gagged.

“That’s it,” the woman said.

She fought to move and something pressed against her mouth. More blood poured out, forcing her to swallow faster. Fire stoked itself to life in her stomach and began to run through her veins like molten silver. It might have been blood, but it carried with it a power she’d never felt before.

This wasn’t a dream, it couldn’t be. She could hear things around her, voices and fighting. She could even feel dampness below her and wind, as if they were in the open air, but then there was something else. A connection of some sort.

She could feel someone—a woman—on the other end, as if they'd somehow connected their thoughts.

There you are, the woman thought. *I've been looking for you.*

Something filled her body with power, but it wasn't the blood. It was different and felt like she might have imagined it would if someone stepped inside her skin. There wasn't enough room for both of them. Someone had to go.

Hunger. She was ravenous, and the blood tasted so good. Aly grabbed the wrist at her mouth and sank her teeth into the flesh. She sucked deeply, embracing the power and the nourishment her body wanted. She thought she ought to be nauseous, but her body didn't feel it. It wanted to drink the woman down in long gulps of sticky sweetness.

"Aly." It was a voice somewhere in the darkness, beyond the woman. When it called her a second time, she knew it was Wil.

Help me, Wil, she managed over the sound of blood rushing through her ears. She could feel the woman's curiosity at the name.

My dear, he can do nothing.

"Aly." Wil's voice was high, yelling this time.

She tried to scream back, but couldn't make her teeth let go. Her throat wouldn't stop swallowing down the blood.

"Wake up," he yelled.

She fought past the fog, into the darkness toward his voice. She pulled against ribbons of consciousness that weren't her own, felt anger—someone else's anger—and fear. She wasn't sure if it belonged to her or the other woman.

Hands clasped her upper arms and shook hard.

The pain from his fingers digging in made her aware of her body again. Her skin was damp and her hair matted to her face. Her throat hurt. She gasped for air and when her voice came, it was a whisper. "You're hurting me."

The shaking stopped and the fingers loosened. Wil sounded almost panicked when he said, "Aly? Aly, are you okay?"

She coughed and remembered the taste of blood.

Wil cradled her in his arms; he kissed her cheek and stroked her hair. “You sounded like you were choking.”

“I was.”

“Was it another vision?”

She closed her eyes and tried not to think about how much she hated that he called them *visions*. They were more like dreams that sometimes happened to come true, but she didn’t feel like arguing. His skin felt warm and his arms safe. All she wanted was to stay there with him holding her.

“Was it a vision, Aly?”

“I don’t know.”

He leaned down to look into her eyes. “What was it about?”

Aly snuggled her face in against his chest. His heart thudded deep and regular. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Maybe you should.”

“I don’t feel like it.” If she told him about this one, she’d slip and bring up the other dreams. Lately there were just too many to discuss.

“Just give me the punch line.”

She sighed. “I was drinking blood.”

He nuzzled his face against the top of her head, his voice heavy and slow. “Maybe it was a nightmare. Let’s not talk about it.”

His reaction surprised her, but Aly decided not to pry. She didn’t want to know if she’d had another precognitive dream either. She closed her eyes and listened to his heart beat.

* * * *

“I’m going to be late.” Aly hopped toward the front door on first one foot and then the other as she slipped on the navy flats that matched her pinstriped pants.

Wil held the front door open. His uniform shirt hung wide and his hair was a mess of loose, damp curls. In the light, his skin seemed even more tanned than it had the night before.

“Why don’t you just stay home from work tonight?”

“I have to get in and finish up some research. I fell behind today and there’s a deadline.” She ran a hand over his sculpted abdomen and smiled. “Not that I regret it.”

Wil leaned forward and touched her lips with his own. The kiss was warm and soft, barely there. He pulled away without pushing for more.

Aly fumbled through her keys. She wanted to stay home with him, to stay in bed, but real life called. In real life, Wil had no place with her. He was undisciplined, headstrong, and attracted too many women. She needed a nice, boring guy. Someone who was just for her. Safe.

When she reached the bottom of her front steps, Wil sidled up beside her. “Why are you in such a hurry? You can miss work once in a while.”

“Because I’ve worked too hard to get where I am. If I’m not there, someone else will swoop in and take my job.”

“They’re not going to fire you over one night. You’re too good at your job.”

Aly didn’t stop, but she looked at him. “Wil, I’m twenty-eight and I’m not getting any younger. I need to focus on my career right now, while I can.”

He snorted. “What you need is a life.”

She narrowed her eyes and turned away from him, reaching for the car door. She pulled the handle, but Wil pushed it shut. “Let go.”

“Hang on a second.”

“What?”

“Go out with me again.”

“You’re not listening. I can’t.” She sighed and shook her head. It was always this way with him. She stared up at him, her eyes narrowing. She hoped he could see her anger. She tugged again, but he didn’t let the door open. “You’re the one who broke it off, Wil.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did. When you cheated on me, you gave up being my fiancé.”

His eyes widened and the corners of his lips drew downward. “Aly, you know me. I didn’t cheat on you. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you.”

He reached for her cheek and she turned away. His hand dropped, and his eyes narrowed. “You are so, so stupid, Alyson.” The air began to prickle and his voice came in a smooth wave. “Don’t you think I know that I could have a million other women? I don’t want them. I haven’t been with anyone else since you left.”

She didn’t answer. What was the point? If she did, the argument would just take longer and make her even later.

“Damn it.” He punched the car. “I think you just wish I’d cheated on you. Then you wouldn’t have to marry me, commit to something.”

“I’m sorry. I have to go.” He let her push him out of the way as she opened the car door and slipped into the seat.

She watched in the rear view mirror as he strode toward his Jeep. His shoulders and hands flexed, but his walk was slow and his head down. Part of her wanted to go after him. Once she’d thought he was the love of her life. He’d been perfect. Funny how quickly things change.



CHAPTER THREE

ALY GLANCED AT THE SMALL, SILVER WATCH ON HER WRIST. ELEVEN forty-seven. She'd missed dinner again. The protest her stomach was making seemed loud in the empty office. She'd grab a bite to eat on the way home. If she was lucky, tonight she might even get to sleep without being called out on a late story.

She shook her head and leaned over the desk to a pile of papers. On top was the coroner's report that Detective Nichols had faxed over for her article. According to the paperwork, the corpse in question was one Stephanie Gray of 312 Park Street. 23 years old. She'd been missing for a week. Friends last saw her at the Blue Monkey, an upscale club for college kids that featured local artists.

She'd seen the woman's photo on the news. Ms. Gray had taken her usual morning jog on the wooded trail through the park. She'd been seen later at the club. And that was it. No one in her neighborhood or family had seen her since.

She was anemic. Her digestive tract was completely empty, signaling she hadn't eaten in days, but Gray was amply hydrated.

"Height: 5' 6". Weight: 115. Hair—brown. Eyes blue." Aly's eyes skimmed over the length of the form. "Cause of death. Cause of death." She flipped the page. "Ah ha." She skimmed the paragraph. "Cause of death is ... animal attack?"

There was nothing else. Surely, someone had messed up. Had they just overlooked it? Maybe Wil was wrong, but the idea made sense, even to her. After all, wouldn't an animal have done more damage, or stayed around to eat the prey it had killed?

She flipped the page forward and back, but her attention landed on something else. "Whoa. She wasn't found in the forest. She was on the road. Why does it say she was found in the forest?"

Aly dialed the number to the morgue and waited as it rang. Marty, the pathologist had to know about this. He'd always been such a stickler for details, and this was too big a detail.

She lost count of the rings, but there had to have been at least four. Maybe Marty was busy.

She hung up and stared at the sheet in her hand. Without Marty, there were only two options. One, she could let it go and report what was official, but that would be a lie. The woman's family needed something more. Besides, if it was murder, someone needed to catch the creep. With an m.o. like that, this guy could be a serial killer to rival Jeffrey Dahmer.

The other option was better. She could question Marty and the others until they either satisfied her curiosity or changed the sheet. It wouldn't be easy, since they'd have to do extra work, but with enough attention on the right people, they'd come through.

Option two was much better, but she'd need to look at the body to be sure. Cops didn't like questions, especially when they were right.

* * * *

"Greg," Aly crooned in the voice she'd used to talk Wil into a million things. "You're in school. You need money, right?"

The lanky boy in green scrubs nodded so hard that his red hair slapped his forehead. She smiled up at him. "I'll give you fifty bucks."

"Dr. Fields is not in, Miss Wingate." Greg Jones' eyes were wide, and he fidgeted with the sheet over a corpse on the exam table. "I swear. I can't let you see the body." He stood straight and pulled at his shirt, finding his resolve. "Come back tomorrow."

Aly moved closer, into his personal space, and pushed her shoulder against his chest. "Greg, please let me look." She tried for pouty, turning her eyes up at him. "I have a deadline at six a.m. I'm not going to make it if I can't even take a quick peek at the body."

"Why?"

“I need to describe her and the report doesn’t help much on that. It’s all facts and figures.”

He stared into her eyes for a moment, as if he expected to see a lie. When she placed one hand on his arm, he took a deep breath. “I—um—I could get fired.”

“Not if no one knows about it.” She slipped the fifty into his coat pocket with an exaggerated flourish. “Just go grab a bite to eat and I’ll find her. I won’t even touch her except to open the bag. No one will ever have to know I was here.”

“You swear?”

“Of course.” She smiled and tried to look innocent, though it was admittedly a stretch.

He blinked down at her and didn’t smile back, so she stood on tiptoes and placed a quick peck on his cheek. “Thank you, Greg.”

He flushed and shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“I won’t get you fired. I promise. Just go eat and give me fifteen minutes.” She couldn’t believe he was doing it either. Being a local celebrity did have its rewards, but one day she’d have to do an exposé on the insecure facilities at the local morgue.

“All right.” He nodded and moved quickly toward the door. “You owe me.”

Aly didn’t answer as she waited for the doors to close behind her.

As soon as it closed, she tossed her small brown bag on a clear counter and snagged a pair of latex gloves, examining the wall of metal doors that held the bodies. There were so many. Did Hayden really need this much space to house the dead for such a short time? It wasn’t like they lived in West Memphis.

“Gray.” She pointed from one nameplate to another and mumbled. “Gray. Gray.” She moved from one long section to the next until she finally smiled. “Bingo.”

She pulled the handle and slid out the long metal tray topped with a black body bag. She steeled herself against the sight and smell. The idea of opening the black bag and unleashing its odor made her grimace. Her mind flashed back to images of the mutilated and chewed neck.

A mask. That's what she needed. Ally strode to the counter on the opposite wall, found a fresh box of masks, and slipped one on. She adjusted the rubber band, and then bent the metal nosepiece to secure the gap between her flesh and the fabric.

Hopeful, she moved back to the drawer and slipped her fingers around the cold metal zipper. When she tugged, a foul odor crept through the mask. She shuddered and tried to focus her mind on the memory of pine. Poor Greg wouldn't appreciate it if she lost her late dinner of chicken and fries; someone might get suspicious.

She tugged the zipper down slowly, revealing a dirt-matted mound of wavy, brown hair. A few zipper clicks later, she reached the face, which despite the attack and abandonment on the road, was in good condition.

Ally pulled again, unzipping to mid sternum. There was a gaping wound on the left side of the woman's neck. She hadn't seen that before.

Ally leaned forward and peeked beneath the bag. Half the throat was missing, but there were no other wounds she could see.

She tried not to smell the death; tried to block out the knowledge that this thing had been living a few days earlier. She examined the neck wound more closely, and the scent of blood washed over her in a wave, pulling her back to the vision and the taste of crimson metal washing down her throat.

She leaned back and swallowed down the vomit that threatened to come up. Her head tingled and her body swayed with the beat of her pulse. She grabbed the edge of the drawer and steadied herself. *Just look and then go.*

She shook her head and blinked away the vision. When she reopened her eyes, she could see deep lacerations surrounding the hole. Bruising radiated from it.

Along the bottom of the wound was a small series of bruises. She blinked. Were those human teeth marks?

She grabbed a magnifier from a nearby table and got a closer view. Small, linear bruises in curve. It certainly looked like human teeth.

That watery sickness tickled her throat again, and her stomach rolled. Someone, a person, bit the girl. No, tore her throat out. Someone killed her with their own teeth.

Aly leaned back and closed her eyes to fight the nausea, which mixed with the memory of swallowing blood. The poor girl. She wasn't just murdered. Someone ate her.

Like you ate the blood, said the voice of the woman in her dream.

Aly shook her head and fluttered her eyes open. This woman was murdered. If Detective Nichols knew, then he was trying to make his job easier. If he didn't, he needed a new line of work. Either way, people needed to know. They needed to catch the killer before he did this to someone else.

Of all the ways to die, cannibalism seemed the worst. She reached for the zipper again. She wouldn't fight the smell when she closed it. She, or someone, owed it to Stephanie Gray to see her death through. All of it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the corpse as she closed the bag again and pushed the tray inside.

With a deep metallic click, the door shut. Aly slipped off the mask, tossed it into the trash, and grabbed her purse from the table. This wasn't going to be easy and no one involved would like hearing that they weren't doing their job. Someone was going to roast for this cover-up, and it wasn't going to be her.

She pushed through the doors and turned right toward the outer hallway. At the dispatch station, she smiled at Greg. "Good Night. Oh, and thanks."

"Sure thing." Greg waved and took another bite of his hamburger. "Sleep tight."

Aly pushed open the door and headed out into the cool night, grateful to breathe in the night air and stare up at the sparkling night sky. It was something Stephanie Gray would never do again.

She strode across the parking lot, fishing her phone from the bag. She wouldn't wait to call. Tonight was the time. Everyone needed to know tonight,

before things got too out of hand. She flipped it open, thumbed through the contact list to Marty's on-call number. He'd know what to do.

The phone rang three times, and Marty's voice answered. "Hey."

"Hey, Marty. You..."

His voice came again, but with a recorded laugh. "You've got my voicemail. Leave me a message."

Aly groaned and pressed the "off" button. The poor girl on the slab needed someone to find the person who killed her. If they lost even the smallest piece of evidence, it could mean freedom for the killer. Time meant evidence in cases like this.

She thumbed through the contact list. Wil could help. He'd worked with police on stuff like this before. Besides, he'd been at the scene minutes after she'd found the woman. But, calling him also might mean having to fend off his advances, especially after last night. As nice as he was to look at, she really didn't want to fall for the same trick twice.

Aly slipped into her car and fumbled for the coroner's report in a stack of papers in the passenger seat. She found the card from Detective Nichols and dialed the number.

"Please be awake."

On the fourth ring, a sleepy version of the chain smoking voice growled, "What is it?"

"Detective Nichols, I'm sorry to wake you. This is Aly Wingate with the Hayden Chronicle. I wanted to let you know that there's a problem with the Gray case file."

"Yeah?" he sounded more awake. "Spit it out."

"Well, sir." Aly swallowed hard. "The cause of death is incorrect. This is not an animal attack." She paused and waited for him to comment, but he didn't, so she continued. "It's a homicide."

Silence buzzed between them for a few moments, then his voice returned, "Homicide, huh? What makes you think that?"

“I looked at the body...”

“You what?” His voice was sharp and high. “You’re not a pathologist.”

“Yes, sir. I know.”

He sat silent again for a moment. “Well, what make you so sure it’s homicide, Wingate?”

“The bite marks.”

He laughed.

“They’re human.”

“Human?” He laughed harder, though it sounded strained. “Wingate, have you been drinking?”

She took a breath to clear her head. She wanted to scream, but screaming wouldn’t help find a murderer, it would only hinder further investigation. “I’m sure they’re human. You’ve got something weird going on here, sir.”

She could hear him breathing and teeth grinding on the other end. “Aly, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Aly, close up the bag and put the paperwork on top—”

“I’m not at the morgue.”

“Where the hell are you then?” The first word was loud, but he struggled to control his voice and got it under control.

“Driving home.”

“How did you see the bite marks then?”

She thought about ratting out Greg, but decided he’d be valuable if she needed to get in the morgue again for another story. “I saw them on the road when I found the body. Remember?”

“Well what makes you think you know what you’re looking at? It was dark.”

“Detective, I’ve been on this job long enough, seen enough bodies, and read enough research to know the difference between animal and human bites.” It was a lie, but he didn’t know that. “Oh, and they’ve got the discovery site down as the forest. You might want to have them correct that.”

He was silent again. Aly imagined him clenching his jaws. “All right. You said you work nights, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you should go home, get some sleep, and call me tomorrow when you’ve had time to think about this.” He grunted. “I think you’ll see that you’re mistaken.”

“Detective, I know what I saw. At the very least the discovery site is completely wrong. I’m not going to just magically un-know it.”

“Think about this Wingate, before you make everyone mad. You’re questioning the abilities of everyone involved.”

“I have. I know what I’m saying, Detective.”

“Then I guess I’ll talk with you tomorrow and get your statement. We want to document everything, don’t we?” His last words weighed heavy with sarcasm.

She heard the click on the other end and snapped her phone shut. All men were sensitive about their egos, but cops came with an extra layer, like troopers come with mirrored shades. Detective Jones seemed to come with more than his share.



CHAPTER FOUR

ALY HELD THE PHONE WITH HER SHOULDER AND USED HER HANDS ON THE steering wheel to navigate Saunders Street toward home. Two rings and she considered hanging up. Wil was probably at work, too.

“Hey, Aly.” Wil’s voice answered, bright as midday.

“I didn’t wake you?” She clicked the stick on the steering column to signal, and then turned right onto Oak Mountain Road.

“Nah. I usually sleep days whether I work or not. Too many night shifts, I guess.”

“I know the feeling.”

“So, are you calling to ask me out?”

Aly laughed. “No not quite. I called about that body.”

“Oh, so you have been thinking about me.”

“Focus, Wil.” She tried not to laugh, since it would only encourage him. “The corpse. It was a homicide, not an animal, and the police have it down as animal.”

His voice was suddenly serious. “Why do you think that now?”

“Because I got the coroner’s report. They marked down the discovery site wrong. Then, when I went to the morgue, I found teeth marks on the wound. They’re human, Wil.”

“No. You didn’t.” His voice held a note of something other than disbelief.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Aly, it was an animal attack. I was wrong. Just leave it alone.”

She sat silent and waited for him to laugh, or to say something that betrayed his sudden change of heart as a joke, but he didn’t. “Don’t tell me I’m wrong, Wil. I know what I saw.”

“Trust me; you don’t know what you’re getting into. If you push this, things are going to get really bad.”

“I think I can handle a few bruised cop egos.”

“It’ll be worse than that. It sounds like they’re trying to let this one go, and they don’t do that often. Maybe you should do the same.”

Aly laughed. “Too late, now. I’ve already told Detective Nichols.”

“What?” Wil yelled the word, and it made her jump. “You already called him?”

“Of course. I thought he might want to get an odontologist in—or at least have Marty take a better look at the marks on her neck before they release her to her family.”

“Shit.” Aly could hear his bare feet pacing the hardwood floor of his cabin, mumbling curses as he went. “Aly, you need to come here. Right now.”

“Are you just trying to get me to your place?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. Damn it. We don’t have time for this. You need to come straight here. Don’t go home. Don’t do anything else. Just come here.”

“Are you all right? You sound like you’re freaking out.”

“Just promise me you’ll come here.”

“Okay, if you tell me what you’re so worried about.”

He groaned. “Christ, Aly. Sometimes you don’t see the simplest things.”

“Don’t patronize me, I—”

He interrupted, but she didn’t argue about it. “You just confronted a Detective with the fact that he, the cops, the coroner, and the pathologist seem to be hiding evidence on a case. Plus, you just let them know that you’re not going to look the other way. What do you think’s going to happen?”

Her throat tightened. Wil was right. She hadn’t really considered the idea of them being in on it together.

“Where’s Kayla?”

She blinked at the sudden change in his tone of voice. “I don’t know. She had a job tonight. Why?”

“Give me her number and I’ll call her. She doesn’t need to go to your house.”

“She won’t answer a call from you while she’s on the job.”

“Then you call her. But, get here as fast as you can and don’t stop anywhere.”

“All right, geeze. Calm down, Wil.” She glanced at the phone, trying to will him patience, and then stuck it back to her ear. “Oh. I’ve got to stop for gas. I’ll be there right after that.”

“Can it wait?”

“No.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be fine. It won’t take fifteen minutes tops, then I’ll be there.”

Wil laughed came quick and sharp. “If you knew what I know, you wouldn’t say that.”

Aly rolled her eyes. It wasn’t like Hayden was dripping with dirty cops. They might come for her, but not while she was pumping gas, and not this fast.

“Okay, Wil. See you in a bit.” She clicked the phone shut, and then flipped it open again. She didn’t need him to tell her what to do. Wasn’t that all that men wanted, to boss her around and control her? If she went there, wouldn’t it be giving in? God, she was weak. If she had any nerve, she’d call Wil back and tell him she’d make it just fine without his help.

She mashed the pound sign, then one and Kayla’s number dialed itself across her cell display. With only one digit difference between their numbers, she should have been able to dial it in her sleep. Somehow, Aly didn’t come equipped to dial and drive, at least not without running off the road. Maybe it was lack of coordination

Half way through the first ring, Kayla’s voice answered, “Aly. Where are you?”

“On the road toward Wil’s. You?”

“Driving to the office.”

“Don’t. Wil wants us at his place, like now. Oh, he said not to go home either.”

“What? Your phone’s breaking—” The line emitted a series of digital bleeps as Kayla tried to respond.

“If you can hear me.” Aly shouted as if it would help. “Go to Wil’s. Not home. I’ll see you there.”

She heard Kayla's phone disconnect and shut her phone, too. She hoped her sister had gotten the message, but she'd call again when she finished pumping gas. She turned left into the gas station she'd stopped at every evening for months. It was usually an unnecessary stop, but they had the coldest drinks in town, not to mention a bagel warmer and a fresh supply of pineapple cream cheese, her favorite.

She parked under the canopy of lights at the group of pumps nearest the road. She killed the engine, and then reached into her wallet to fumble through a fold of bills for enough to get her a few gallons. She didn't need a full tank, just enough to get to Wil's, and then home.

She grabbed the keys from the ignition, shut the door, and strode toward the entrance. Just as she reached out to open the door, an old voice cried out in a distinct southern accent. "Ma'am?"

"Yeah?" She turned and looked through squinted eyes to see the figure at the corner of the building, peering around the door of an open soda machine. The sidewalk light overhead had burned out, and the area in front of the machine was darker than the area near the door. Still, she could make out gray hair pulled back in a ponytail, a round face with deep lines, and a sense of style that was roughly a decade behind.

"Could you mash the Mountain Dew button please? I need to see if it's loaded right."

Aly looked into the store but couldn't see an attendant. "Sure." She crossed the distance between them and stopped just short of the machine. From this distance, Aly could see that the woman's eyes were wide and glazed; the look of a crackhead.

"Go ahead."

Aly pressed the button, but there was only the click of plastic, not the sound of the mechanism dispensing a drink

"Oh, I forgot to plug it up again. Be a doll and reach around that corner and plug it in for me."

Aly stepped around the machine and leaned down to pick up the cord on the ground. A cold hand clamped over her mouth, another looped around her waist, and she was jerked backward.

She wanted to move, but couldn't. For the first time, she understood what people meant when they said they'd been frozen in fear. That is exactly how she would describe it if she lived to tell about it.

Finally, her muscles loosened and she kicked at the person behind her. It didn't impede her abduction; instead, the person dragged her backward into the darkness that lay just past the building's light, and into the forest that surrounded them.

She couldn't breathe, but wouldn't panic. If this were a cop trying to scare her, panicking would only make him feel like he'd won.

The person pulled her deeper into the forest. Trees blurred around her and she wondered if it was from oxygen deprivation. She cut her eyes upward and saw a canopy of leaves blacking out what light came from the almost full moon in slivers along the forest floor.

She fought to open her mouth, to get flesh between her teeth. When they slid to a halt, she bit hard on what little of the hand her mouth took in. She squeezed as tight as her jaws would wrench and hoped blood didn't come with it.

A masculine laugh erupted in her ear and the steel arms threw her onto the ground. She hit the ground hard and skidded against a tree, bumping her head on the moist bark.

She spit out the bit of flesh she'd taken with her and gasped past the taste of blood. "Get away from me!"

"Screaming is not necessary, Miss Wingate." She could see the outline of a man in front of her. Though he was close, he wore the darkness like a shroud.

His voice seemed to surround her, puncture like cold needles threatening to pierce her flesh. "You'll only injure your throat. And my mistress wouldn't want that."

Aly felt her way up the tree until she stood. Since it was such an odd choice of words, she wanted to ask who his mistress was, but fear closed her throat as he stepped closer. “Stay away from me.”

“Oh, but I intend to get close.” He stepped again. “Very close indeed.”

She edged around the tree. “Who are you?”

“My name is not important. What is important is that you are far too curious for your own good.”

“You mean the body? I was mistaken about that.” Aly slipped to the side of the tree, her eyes searching for a way to escape. She couldn’t see store lights anymore, or any other sign of civilization.

“Ms. Gray was, too.”

Aly gasped. If he’d wanted to get her attention, it worked. “What do you want from me?”

“What I want from you is not important.” His voice made her feel invisible bugs scurry across her skin. “What you are willing to give is.”

“I’m not giving anything.” She saw a sliver of headlight behind him and to the right. It had to be safety. He couldn’t want company for what he planned to do, so finding anyone would give her a chance. “I’ve called the Detective, you know. He was supposed to meet me at the store.”

“Detective Nichols?” The man laughed; a musical sound that, nevertheless, scratched across her skin like sharp nails. “Let us simply say that I have retained his services. He is of no threat to me.”

Aly looked away and closed her eyes to keep him from seeing her defeat. He’d bought off the cops. Of course. That explained the Detective’s reaction. How could she have been so stupid?

A corpse-cold hand grabbed her chin. Her eyes popped open to the sight of a row of pointed teeth smiling down at her.

This close, she could see him clearly. He was a few inches taller than she, with long dark hair. His face remained in shadow, but some of the details peeked through, like pale skin, dead green eyes, lips the shade of ripe plums in the dark.

She pulled back and he let her go. Her hair caught on a low branch. “Leave me alone.”

“Leave me alone,” he mocked her in a shrill voice and stepped closer, while she fought to untangle her hair. He laughed again and it made her cringe. “So demanding. Most would have begged me not to hurt them by now. I’m intrigued. What would make you scream?”

Aly tried to twist her head to the right, but was again in his firm grip. He seemed unhurried, yet he moved with uncanny speed.

He nuzzled his face in close to her ear, his nose pressing hard enough to bruise her cheek. He rubbed his face down the length of her jugular, inhaling her scent like a perfume. “I bet I can make you scream.”

She shuddered, but found the strength to shove him. “Get off me.”

He teetered a moment, and then pinned her shoulders against the tree. His tongue ran along the same path his nose had taken, and then he licked the spot on her neck where Gray had been bitten.

“You like to play rough, don’t you, human.” He snapped his teeth just above her skin. “We have all night to play, not like the rushed work I was forced to do on Ms. Gray.”

Aly craned her face away from him. “Just let me go. I won’t say anything about Gray. I swear.”

“It’s too late for that. You’ve made too much noise; there is no going back.”

His cold mouth clamped onto her pulse and began to suck, like a hicky gone terribly wrong. When she brought up a knee, he used his hips to push her back in place.

“Get off me.” Her voice sounded panicked, even to her. She wrapped her hands in the cloth of his shirt and tried to push as he sucked hard against her skin.

Something about it must have excited him because he let out a throaty sound. She shivered before he sank fingers into her shoulders.

His teeth met her flesh and pushed until it made a wet, pain filled pop. She screamed, but didn't try to pull away. Screaming made it worse, tightened the muscles of her neck, but pulling away would tear the wound. If he bit harder, she might risk it, but for now, his mouth only broke the skin and he convulsed on her like an overgrown leech.

His grip tightened and his nails cut deep into her skin. She wouldn't whimper, wouldn't give him that satisfaction. If she died, she wasn't going to scream for him. Serial killers got off on that.

"She said get the fuck off." Wil's voice carried an animal like growl that made her eyes cut toward the other side of the stranger. Wil reached for the man's hair, his mouth snarling and eyes narrowed.

Aly swallowed with a cringe of pain, and then managed a whisper. "Don't jerk. He's biting me."

He grabbed the man's hair and what he could reach of the jaw. When he yanked, bones cracked in wet sounds that made her stomach lurch.

The stranger's eyes bled a strange blue light. He let go of her shoulders. Even in the darkness, she saw his jaw sagging at an odd angle. When he turned toward Wil, his hand pushed the jaw back into place with a similar cracking of bone.

Aly dropped to one side, sending her weight to the ground. She crabwalked backward until she hit another tree, just a few feet away. She leaned against it and grabbed her throat to slow the blood that pulsed out with her heartbeat. It didn't come in long sprays, which made her grateful for Wil's timing, but it was still enough to make her feel dizzy and lightheaded.

Wil glanced at her, his brown eyes glowing amber. Something was wrong. He was different. His presence tingled in the air like a hot electric surge, and his eyes were primal.

The man leapt toward Wil, who turned, caught the man in mid air, and then slammed him against the tree so fast that both became a blur. Bones cracked again and Aly felt the weight of the impact slam through the earth below her.

The man groaned, and then leapt up so fast he appeared to be on cables, like in a Hollywood stunt. Wil wasn't impressed. He bounded toward the other man and struck with the same speed as before.

Wil's hand hit the tree where the man's head had been, but only splintered wood. The stranger darted into the darkness.

Wil knelt beside her. Aly stared at him, her mouth hanging open. He stared back, his eyes swirling with a honeyed glow. He reached for her and she jerked back so hard that she hit the tree. "He'll be back, with more. Let's go."

She felt the electricity slide away and his eyes suddenly seemed less unusual.

"Come on, Aly. We have to go."

Never had she been so happy to see him and so scared of him at the same time. He wasn't human, that much was certain, but he'd still come to her defense. The enemy of her enemy was her friend, right?

She leapt toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck. Muscles slid beneath his skin like an invisible animal rolling inside him. The sensation made her let go again. "What was that?"

"I'm not going to hurt you, Aly." Wil grabbed her arm and pulled her to stand. "I'll explain later. Right now, we have to go. Try to keep up."



CHAPTER FIVE

ALY COULDN'T KEEP UP. WIL PULLED HER THROUGH THE TREES SO FAST THAT she stumbled most of the way. Before long, they stood at the edge of the woods behind the store. No one was there. Not a soul looked for her, not even the old woman.

Wil looked around, and then back to her as he passed the tree line. "Have you got enough gas to get to my place?"

"I think so."

"Get straight in the car. Don't let anyone see your neck or the blood."

She looked down at the crimson soaked shirt. "Shit."

He reached for her hand, and then pulled her toward the parking lot. Together, they ran across the cement toward the end of the rows of gas pumps, just in time to see the old woman step out of the store.

Wil ran to the driver's side, so she opened the passenger's side door. Aly glanced at the woman who waved floppy arms and yelled something in their direction. "Go, Wil."

"I can't find the keys." He flipped open the visors, then opened the ashtray.

Aly's heart sank as she patted empty pockets. "I think I dropped them when he grabbed me."

"Damn it." He punched the steering wheel, and then slung the door open. "Get out. Run for the trees across the road. My jeep is over there."

Aly nodded and opened the door so hard it hit the gas pump. She slammed the door behind her and started around the back of the car, almost running into the old woman.

"Hey. I just called the cops. I—" The woman stopped in her tracks. Her eyes widened and a hand went to her mouth. "Oh. Oh, my God."

Aly grabbed her neck. Shit. She'd forgotten to cover it. It must have looked worse than she'd thought.

"Come on." Wil grabbed her hand and pulled her around the front of the car.

They ran to the road and sirens rang in the distance. Wil didn't stop, instead he jerked her through the maze of cars that honked and skidded to miss them.

"Run!"

Lights from the first cruiser flashed across the tree line and Wil looped one arm around her waist. He ran with her faster than she could have imagined possible. They darted between trees faster than she could count them.

The sight of the forest passing her made her head spin. Aly closed her eyes. "Wil, this is making me sick."

"Probably the blood." He said in a growling voice.

She tried to think of other places and things, something to make her head stop spinning.

After a few long minutes he slowed, and then stopped to put her feet on the ground. "Is that better?"

"I think so." She let herself readjust, feeling him holding her shoulders to keep her from rocking side to side. The dizziness slowed, like a fading echo of sickness, then stopped all together.

"Don't fall asleep on me. Okay?"

"I'm not sleepy." She put a hand to her clammy forehead to wipe away a bead of sweat.

"You will be. You lost a lot of blood."

Wil opened the door of his Jeep and motioned her into the seat. "Get in, we've got to move."

* * * *

Aly leaned against the window with her eyes shut. The bleeding had stopped faster than she'd expected, but Wil was right. She was tired, though she suspected it was more from the adrenaline rush than blood loss.

“We’re almost there.” Wil turned another vent toward her, blowing cold air across her face.

She opened her eyes and saw the lights of his place reflecting on the water. It was a log cabin the size of a ski lodge, and he been working on it for as long as they’d known each other. From this distance, she could see what seemed to be a completed job. “You finished it?”

Wil smiled over at her. “Yeah. Just a little more rock work around the bottom and it’s done.”

“Wish I could see it in the light of day.”

“You will tomorrow.”

He parked the Jeep just outside the garage, and she considered arguing that she wouldn’t be here come morning. In truth, she probably would.

“Come on. I’ll get you a clean shirt and something to make you feel better.”

He moved toward the garage door and she saw no sign of a fight. He didn’t even have a bruise. *He really wasn’t human.* Aly folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the Jeep to hide her shakes. “You’re going to explain all this before I go inside.”

He opened the door and looked back at her. “Let’s go.”

“Explain it now or I leave.”

The smile melted off his face. He turned back toward the door and started inside. “Just come inside and I’ll explain.”

She didn’t move. “What are you?”

The question stopped him. He turned, but didn’t let his emotions show on his face. “Aly.” His voice was careful, as if he were speaking to a frightened child. “I have a lot to tell you but we need to get you cleaned up first.”

“Quit stalling, Clark.”

He folded his arms over his chest to match her stance. “You’re being stubborn.”

“Stubborn? I almost got my throat ripped out! I think I’m being pretty fucking understanding since you owe me one hell of an explanation. And you can start with what that thing was, and how you stopped him like that?”

His shoulders drooped a little when she said it. “It was a vampire; one of *La Famille du Sang*.”

Just like that, he’d said it. Vampire. Aly laughed and ran a trembling hand through her hair. “What next? Are you a zombie?”

Wil shook his head and looked at the ground. “No. A Lycanthrope.”

“A werewolf? Don’t make fun of me, Wil. I don’t think I can handle any more shit tonight.” She started to pace, letting her hands fly in broad gestures. “First some creep tries to bite my throat out, then we run from the cops, and now you’re laughing at me and telling me it was a vampire and you’re what?” She stopped and looked at him. “The Wolfman?”

“I’m not joking.” He took two steps toward her, his hands outstretched and face pleading. “I’m serious. Come inside and I’ll explain it all.”

She forced herself to start breathing and tried to look casual. He was being all too serious. “Prove it. Turn furry or something.”

Wil’s eyes cut back to her. “You wouldn’t like me that way.”

“If you expect me to believe it, you’ll prove it.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. When his breath deepened, a warm, musky scent surrounded her. He opened his eyes again, and they’d become fluorescent.

He stalked toward her, each step a thing of precision and grace. She stared up into those eyes and felt a beast staring back at her. The Wil she’d known was gone and an animal had taken his place.

Aly backed up until the Jeep stopped her. He was right. Whatever he was, it wasn’t human. She put her hands up between them while he bent toward her face. “Stay away from me.”

“I won’t hurt you.” He sniffed her.

She wondered if all animals felt like this when predators looked at them. Every fiber of her body was screaming to run. Instinct threatened to take over, to make her run, but she fought it.

Wil closed his eyes and licked his lips. It was enough.

She shoved him to the side with one hand. There was nowhere to go. He was faster and knew this place better than anyone else. Still, she darted through the trees and hoped he wouldn't follow.

A few yards into the woods and he was behind her. His body crashed through the underbrush at the edge of the forest. Twigs snapped, closer with each of his steps. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she turned to see him bounding through the forest like an animal in human skin.

"Stay away!" She glanced around for something, anything, and found a rock. She threw it, and it pegged off his shoulder.

He leapt at her, and pushed her to the ground. When her back smacked the earth, she was thankful not to land on a rock.

"Stop." He straddled her, his face inches from hers. "Stop running." He was panting, but not from running, and his voice was monstrous. "Don't ever run from one of us. It makes you seem like food."

She let out a whimper and tried to stop the tears streaking down her face. "Please, Wil, don't hurt me."

He shook his head and the eyes glowed less bright. His hands loosed and his voice became Wil's again. "I'd never hurt you Aly."

"Just leave me alone." She put her hands on his chest, and tried to push him up. Her arms shook beneath the weight.

"Aly." His voice was soft and his breathing slower. "I can't. How are you going to survive?"

She opened her mouth to argue, but didn't. She did need him, even if he was one of them. So, she said what was true. "You're not who I thought you were."

“Yes I am.” He bent to place a soft kiss on her cheek, but she pulled away. “You’ve always known I was more. You just never wanted to see it. Just like your visions.”

Aly turned her head, and the tears flowed again.

“Look at me.”

She stared out at the forest around them.

“Look at me, Alyson.” His voice was commanding this time, and she turned to look into his eyes, the same eyes she’d always known. “I love you, and I’m never going to hurt you. You know that.”

She looked away again. “You already hurt me.”

He sighed. “Don’t you get it? This is what I couldn’t explain before. The girl you saw me with was a friend. She’d just found out that she had the virus that causes lycanthropy. She didn’t have anyone to talk to, so I tried to help. Can you blame her?”

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like to find out that she was going to be a werewolf and there was nothing to stop it. She shook her head.

“Look at me.”

She looked up at him again, and saw nothing but sincerity.

“I never cheated on you. I swear.”

She stared up into those brown eyes and knew for the first time that he was telling her the truth. Before there’d always been something he was hiding, but now, he’d all but laid his soul bare for her to examine. She couldn’t deny him the truth. “I believe you, Wil. God, help me—I believe you.”

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. They were soft and caressed hers with power that came off in little sparks. Warmth, love, and above all, hunger flowed thick and hot between them. So much hunger that it flowed down her throat and made her gasp against his lips.

Her hands wrapped in his shirt and smoothed along muscles. She deepened the kiss and coaxed his tongue into her mouth. There was no foreplay, no warm up. She wanted him right now.

He pulled back, his breath coming in rapid pants. “I’m sorry. I lost control.”

“Don’t apologize, just kiss me.” She saw his bewilderment, but tried to close the distance again.

He shook his head. “No, you don’t understand.” He leaned back, pulled from her grasp, and stood. “What you feel right now isn’t right. It’s what I feel, but usually I can control it.”

She blinked and felt the lust pull away like ribbons of thick smoke. She took his hand and let him pull her up. “You can do that?”

He looped an arm around her waist. “You’d be amazed what I can do.”



CHAPTER SIX

“OW. THAT HURTS.” ALY LEANED AWAY FROM WIL, WHO STOOD BETWEEN HER knees on the cool stone floor in his rustic cabin bathroom. She glanced down, but managed only to see his bare chest.

“Hold still. I don’t want this to get infected.” He dabbed a bit of antiseptic on her neck.

She wanted to touch him, to run her fingers down his skin, but she had to stay still. She held onto the counter and closed her eyes. The last thing she needed was a virus or bacteria finding its way into the four holes in her neck. Her heart sank and she looked up at him.

“What is it?” He paused in mid-dab.

“Will I be a—” She swallowed hard, trying to bring the word out, but it wouldn’t come.

“No.” He laughed and cleaned the wound. “You can’t get vampirism from a bite.”

“Oh.” She let out a long breath and smiled. “Thank God. I didn’t want to end up a monster.”

As soon as the words came out, she realized what she’d said. She looked up into Wil’s face. He refused to meet her eyes. “I’m sorry, Wil. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s all right. They are monsters.” He pressed a bandage onto the wound carefully and smoothed out the sticky part. “Besides, if you were a vampire, we’d never work out.”

Her brows wrinkled as she looked up at him again. “Why?”

“We’re natural enemies. Sort of like cats and dogs, I guess.” He patted her thigh. “There. You’re done.”

“Thanks.”

A door opened somewhere down the hallway and Wil peeked around the doorframe.

“It’s just us.” Aly knew the voice. It was Chris Edel, Wil’s best friend and partner in crime.

“We’re back here, patching her up.” Wil tossed bloody tissues into the small metal garbage pail, and then stepped out. “Leave that door open, guys. I didn’t hear you coming.”

Footsteps came down the hallway. Wil met them in the hall and their voices moved toward the living room.

Aly wanted to look normal as possible. She smoothed out the bandage where the tape had come loose. In the mirror, she could see that the flesh peeking out from behind the bandage was already a deep purple color.

“How is she?” Chris asked in an almost whisper.

“Fine. Just a little banged up.”

“Guess her world is pretty rocked right now.” Shane’s voice held a hint of laughter.

Aly stepped out and walked down the hall. She half hated to see them again. Would they look still be the pair of playful heartthrob adrenaline junkies she’d known for years? They’d always been so sweet to her, like big brothers. Or would they despise her for breaking up with Wil?

“Did you tell her everything?” Shane asked, a little quieter.

“The big stuff, yeah.” Wil sounded almost afraid to answer.

“Man.” Chris half laughed. “Can you imagine finding out that you’ve been—”

She turned the corner. They stopped talking and looked at her. She smiled. They looked just the same. Chris’ damp, shoulder length dark hair, muscular lean shoulders breaking out of a black wife-beater shirt, and the large cross tattooed over most of his upper arm was still vibrant.

“Hey, little sis.” It was Shane’s nickname for her. “You really have a knack for pissing off the right people.” Shane stood beside Chris, leaner than Chris but dressed the same, chewing on a toothpick that had probably been there for hours.

It had become a habit when he quit smoking, and it remained. His short, sandy hair stood up in front, windblown looking in the way it usually was when he wasn't on duty. His mirrored shades were hooked on the collar of his shirt.

She laughed. He always knew exactly what to say. "What can I say? It's a gift."

"Let's see that bite." He moved to her and turned her head gently. "Looks like you got a little too close this time." She cringed when he turned it farther and he made a whistling sound through his teeth. "Good thing Wil was there or you'd be worm food."

She pulled away. He was right, but she didn't want to think about that now. Near death experiences were bad enough the first time around. No need to rehash it.

"Speaking of which, what's the verdict on their *battue*?" Wil tried to change the subject and she was grateful.

"It's official. They even made offers to some of the wolves to bring her to them," Shane said. "Oh, and her picture's all over the news. She's wanted for questioning in the murder of some morgue assistant."

Aly gasped. Poor Greg. They must have found out who helped her.

"Who's doing it?" Wil asked.

Chris leaned against the wall. "We don't know. There's an old one in town. One of the ancestors, we think."

"Can't we get them all to just call it off if I swear not to tell?" They all looked serious all of a sudden; like there was something she didn't know. "What?"

Chris glanced between her and Wil. "Aly, you're in real trouble here. Someone powerful's after you. No one's going to call it off unless they think they can't win."

She looked at Wil. "I won't say anything."

Wil didn't have a chance to answer. Shane did. "There's nothing you can do. I've asked around. They want you dead."

"What?" She felt her knees weaken and Wil shot a look at Shane.

"What?" He shrugged. "It's the truth. She needs to know."

"He's right." She nodded and ran her hands through her hair. "I'd rather know than not. It's just a little hard to take in."

“Wil, you got a plan?” Chris pushed away from the wall. “Cause this is starting to look bad.” He padded around the living room.

Wil moved toward the hall. “We’re going to hide her and Kayla, and then we’ll call a meeting with the clan. If I can convince their leader that I’ve taken you into my pack, maybe they’ll back off.”

Aly followed him. “Why?”

“They won’t risk a war.” She watched Wil reach into a closet and pull out a large black rifle with a banana shaped clip, check for a loaded round, and then hand it to her. “Hold this.”

She took it, but kept her eyes on him as he pulled out a double barreled shotgun and a box of shells. “Is this necessary? I mean, will it make a difference?”

“They’re loaded with acid rounds. Unless you blow the head off, it won’t kill them, but it will slow them down. You remember how to shoot, don’t you?”

Aly looked down at the gun and remembered the times he’d taken her to the shooting range. What had been an odd pastime suddenly made sense. “Yeah.”

“All right, we’ll shoot to kill if they come here. Vampires and wolves,” Wil said.

“I don’t know if I can kill someone.” She glanced at the guys and back. “I mean, it’s still murder, right?”

“Don’t think of them as human. They’re not.” Chris looked out the blinds.

“You are.”

Wil cut his eyes at her. “No, we’re not, Aly. Not like you. Don’t ever forget that. It’ll get you killed.”

He walked to the couch and put the gun down, along with the box of ammo, then turned toward the guys. “I need your help.”

“What do you need us to do?” Shane rubbed his hands together.

Aly glanced back at the gun in her hand, and then moved to sit on the edge of the hearth. With the fireplace behind her, she felt safer.

She put the gun on the stone hearth. How had she gotten into this mess? Why hadn’t she just turned her head and let it go?

“You’ve really got to work on hiding your feelings.” Shane slid onto the hearth beside her. “I can smell your fear, and they will too. Fear draws them like sharks to chum.”

“Oh, thanks for that analogy.” She shook her head and tried to put the image out of her mind. “I’m so in over my head.”

He patted her shoulder and smiled. “Try putting up a wall around your mind so that your feelings aren’t on the surface, like when you lie about your feelings for Wil.”

“What?”

His smile widened. “When you lie, you block yourself. You always have.”

“How do you—” Aly started but stopped when Shane winked at her. “Oh, crap. Never mind.” She tried it, tried to block out her feelings, to stuff them deep.

“That’s it. That’s how you do it.”

She watched the other two men and tried to hold onto that feeling. Wil ran a hand through his curls. “Well, we knew it would happen eventually. Bloodsuckers aren’t going to wait long before they swoop in.”

“We knew they’d come when they knew Rocheleaux was dead, but this soon?”

Wil opened his mouth to speak, then stopped, and scrunched his brows. He craned his head to one side, toward the forest. Chris followed his lead, both with an ear toward the back door. Shane watched them, and then scented the air like a dog.

“Is that?” Chris said.

“Take her.” Wil made it a command and didn’t look at them. “Don’t say where you’re going. Block yourself. I’ll meet you there.”

“What is it? What do you hear?”

“Go. Just go.” Wil moved toward the open back door at an increasing gait. “I’ll handle these three.”

“Is it them?”

Shane grabbed the rifle. “Yeah. Now get a grip and let’s go.”

Wil bolted out the door with a howl that echoed around the room like thunder. Chris grabbed the shotgun and ammo on the couch while Shane ran to

the front door ahead of her. He jerked it open and motioned outside. “Run, dammit. They’re almost here.”

The way he said it, she knew it was bad. Vampires were in the forest, but this time she had a gun and none of them would be nibbling on her neck.

Electricity filled the air and prickled along her skin. It was Wil’s power filling the air. It called to her and made her stop and turn.

Shane shoved her out the front door. Why didn’t he answer the power’s intoxicating feel? Aly would ask if they survived.

She darted out the front door behind Shane and Chris, and down the stairs. They were faster, werewolf fast, and made it to the car before she reached the landing. When she hit the ground, she was in full run toward the open back door of Shane’s black Tacoma. Her heart thundered in her ears, interrupted only by the sound of howling nearby. Chills climbed up her arms. It was Wil.

She dove in just as Chris floored it and spun gravel backwards. They turned and started forward toward the driveway. Just past the end of the house, a vampire landed on the roof and reached a pale hand in through Chris’ window. A shower of glass rained down beside her.

Chris grabbed the arm and yanked down, breaking it backwards over the window frame. When he released, the vampire fell beside the SUV and became a bump under the back tire.

They bounded down the hillside driveway as a flurry of gunfire erupted behind them. The sounds, too close together to be anything but automatic weapons, made Aly’s stomach tie in knots.

An image filled her mind, and then vanished. Just a flash, a single frame of Wil falling to the ground. It wasn’t real; couldn’t have been. She wasn’t psychic. Kayla was the crazy one, not her. She never had been and didn’t want the burden of it.



CHAPTER SEVEN

ALY WALKED UP THE CRACKED WOODEN STEPS BEHIND CHRIS, RIFLE IN HAND.

The thought of entering Ray and June Clark's house made her reconsider her chances with the vampires. It had been too long since she'd visited them before their deaths, and they'd always been so nice to her. June had always treated her like the daughter she'd never had. Aly had attended the funeral, though she and Wil had split just days before their plane crash. Even though she'd been a jerk, he'd welcomed the company. Still, she felt like she had no right to be in this house.

"Wil didn't think they'd find us here. We'll rest for the night and work out a plan." Chris turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

Moonlight spread across the living room and they followed him inside among the covered furniture. It still smelled like June's air freshener and fabric softener combination, even after two years.

"It seems sad without them here," Aly said.

"I'm going back outside to keep watch. Try not to make too much noise." Chris moved back out the door, shut it, and cast the room in darkness.

Shane disappeared behind the basement door, and when her eyes adjusted, Aly moved toward the kitchen table. They'd shared so many Sunday breakfasts here, but never once had Wil's parents hinted at the knowledge of his furry problem. Had they known? She imagined June worrying over her boy's midnight jaunts through the mountains, and a smile snuck across her lips.

She laid the gun on the table with a clunk. Shane must have flipped the breakers because the lights flicked on, as did the microwave, refrigerator, and air conditioner. Aly moved back across the room and flipped off the switch, then

returned to her seat in the darkness. It was best if people couldn't see into the house, and she didn't want anyone to see her right now.

"You can turn the lights on now." Shane closed the basement door behind him.

"It's all right. I prefer the dark."

He nodded and headed to the table. He slid June's seat around backward and straddled it. "So, you still think Wil cheated on you?"

Aly looked at him. He just had that way of getting straight to the point that only cops and lawyers can appreciate. "Not that it's any of your business, but no."

"It does matter to me, you know." He laughed and slipped on the shades. "He's our Alpha."

She arched a brow at him. She knew what the term usually meant, but she wasn't sure what it meant in werewolf terms. "Your what?"

He leaned against the back of the chair, arms folded across his chest. "He didn't tell you?"

"No."

"He is."

"Does that mean he's the most powerful in the group?"

"Basically."

"Am I missing something here?"

"No." Shane shifted slightly. "I just don't know how much to tell you."

Aly leaned back and mimicked his posture. "Just tell me all of it. You know I'm going to find out."

He laughed. "But I don't know what Wil wants you to know."

"I don't care what he wants."

"I do."

"Why?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "Being our alpha means more than just being boss. His word is law, Aly. At least among us."

"So he'll get mad if you tell me too much."

He laughed again, nervous this time. "Yeah. You could say that."

"He loves me, and I want to love him back, but I need the truth to do that."

Shane stood and walked toward the window. He didn't answer. Instead, he rolled his shoulders and kept his back turned to her.

"I need to know if there's something that could get me killed."

"No. It's nothing like that."

"Then what is it?"

He turned back to her and looked down with narrowed eyes that seemed much older than he was. "He's in danger here. Because of you. This vampire, the ancestor, is way too powerful for him. But he's going to fight and put all our necks on the line for you."

Her heart filled with ache and a lump grew in her throat. "I didn't ask for this."

"No." Shane chuckled. "You didn't have to. You never have to ask." He moved closer. "Wil's so wrapped up in you that he turns away every woman that acts interested. He didn't sleep for weeks when you dumped him. Now, he's risking everything because you stuck your nose where you shouldn't have."

"I'm sorry. I'll ask him to stop. I can handle it myself, Shane. I don't want this. Not over me." Tears stung her eyes and she stood. "I'm really sorry."

He grabbed her hand. "I don't want you to leave." He pulled the glasses up to the top of his head and let them rest in his hair. "I just think that you need to appreciate what he's doing here. You can't do that if you don't know the whole situation. See, we don't just do this for humans, or even for powerful lycanthropes. He's doing this because he really loves you." He patted her hand. "So, little sis, I can't stand back and let him do this if you're just going to hurt him again."

She wanted to tell him he was wrong and defend herself, but he was right. She simply nodded. "I don't feel the same way now, Shane." She swallowed the bitterness down. "I'm not going to hurt him again."

"Do you love him?"

She nodded.

He smiled. “Good. Now I don’t have to kill you.”

She slapped him across the chest with her free hand and pulled from his grip. “Just don’t tell him. He’ll get weird on me.”

A howl erupted out the window behind her. Shane’s head turned so fast it should have snapped, and another howl came from the porch. Aly jumped and chills erupted on her skin.

Shane laughed. “Guess he thought one of us might blow his head off.”

* * * *

Aly sat on the beige counter in the upstairs hall bath, the one that June had decorated in Victorian fluff around the same time Aly and Wil had first agreed to marry. She tried not to look at Wil as he stripped off his clothes. “Ya know, I’m not sure this is necessary. I think Chris and Shane could manage to guard me if someone broke in.”

Knobs squeaked and water beat the tub. “They needed to secure the area and I want to make sure nothing happens to you.”

She heard the lacey shower curtain close and glanced up. The scent of cherry almond shampoo wafted toward her. He was trying so hard to protect her, but she might get everyone killed in the process, including him. “Wil, why don’t you let me go?”

He pulled the curtain back a bit. His hair poked out strangely with shampoo. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re risking more than just your life.” She tried to make it sound logical. “Why don’t you let me handle this? I’ve talked myself out of bad situations before.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” He shook his head and closed the curtain again. “You can’t do this alone.”

“Maybe I can. Would that be so hard to imagine?”

His voice echoed from behind the curtain. “Aly, trust me. This isn’t something you can do alone.”

“What about the other people? I don’t want them risking their necks for me. They don’t even know me.”

“They know me, and what I say goes. Besides, if they weren’t fighting for you, they’d be fighting to keep these same vampires from overrunning us.”

He was probably right, but it didn’t seem any less strange.

“Do you think I’m weak?” Maybe that wasn’t what he thought, but it was easier for her to deal with that than his need to protect her.

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it.” He glanced back out of the curtain again. “Come here.”

She almost didn’t move since he made it an order, but then he smiled. She slid off the counter and moved to stand just outside the shower. He slipped a wet hand around her neck and pulled her to him. Water splattered her face as he gave her a gentle kiss. Then he pulled back far enough to speak in a hushed voice.

“You’re not your mom, Aly.”

Her breath caught in her throat and that feeling of abandonment swept over her again, as it had in the forest. Her body jerked forward and something low grew moist and warm.

When she leaned forward, he put a hand to her and stopped her advance. “What is it? I can’t feel what you’re thinking.”

She exhaled and let the tension flow out with it. Her mind relaxed and she willed her feelings toward him like a weapon.

He must have felt it because he inhaled quickly and pulled her back to him. Their mouths met in a hungry kiss that pulled her into the shower. Water beat down and threatened to drown her, until he turned his back toward the showerhead. His lips trailed from her mouth to neck and found her collarbone.

Sultry power washed over her, licking at her body like flames. Beneath it was a need, a hunger like human lust, but much larger. She gasped and he took her lips in another kiss that pushed them against the tile wall. Her head swam in the intoxicating power. He pulled back, his eyes swirling again. “I feel it, this isn’t us.”

She blinked up at him. “What?”

“This isn’t us. Someone’s manipulating it.”

She kissed along his chin. “Does it matter?”

He shivered. “Not if you really want this.”

“I do.”

“Then don’t shut me out again.”

He kissed her and that need rushed back over her in a boiling wave that made her latch onto his arms. She wanted to feel it, all of it, even if the need consumed her.

He gasped, and then growled against her lips. “I can feel your power, Aly.”

Wil grabbed her around the waist and lifted her against the wall. He pressed in against her and devoured her mouth. Whatever was beneath the Wil exterior wanted her, all of her, too.

A cool wind wrapped around her leg and snaked upward. She broke the kiss and they both looked down.

“What is that?” Wil asked as though he could see or feel it too.

Aly shook her leg and tried to hide the panic in her voice. “I don’t know.”

The sensation darted up and wrapped her in an icy breeze that climbed until it touched her mouth. She shook her head and squealed through tight lips. Then she pinched her nose shut just in time to feel it go there, too. She didn’t know what it was, but she wasn’t about to let it get in.

“It’s vampire.” Wil growled at it, like he could see it, but it vanished as quickly as it came.

She opened her mouth to fill her lungs with air, but the specter flowed in through the opening. The world faded to black, then eyes that weren’t hers opened to see Kayla chained to a bed. The view changed as the head turned.

Kayla tried to scream through the duct tape and she looked back in time to see her struggling. Her eyes cut sideways, tears flowed down her face, as another vampire came into view.

It was the vampire from the forest, and he bowed her direction. “As you wish, mistress.” He moved to the bed and lifted Kayla’s arm as far as the chain would allow. He snaked a tongue over her skin, then plunged his teeth into her wrist.

Kayla bucked and screamed as the man gnawed at her arm. Blood flowed out from around his mouth and drained down her pale skin. His body bowed with the force and within seconds, Kayla’s fight slowed. Her eyes fluttered, and then she slipped away behind dark lids.

The eyes through which Aly saw turned to a mirror on the wall. For the first time she saw her counterpart. A woman with pale skin, dark flowing curls and a Victorian-mourning dress smiled back at her. At first glance, she appeared no more than twenty. But in the eyes, centuries of evil dimmed the spark of humanity.

You bitch, Aly growled. If I could reach through and grab a handful of that black hair.

“So much need for control in you, young one.” Her dark lips moved with the words. “You are not in control of this.”

Who are you?

“Some call me the night. However, you may call me by the name given to me before my sleep—” She offered a sweeping bow that took Aly’s sight to the floor and back. “—I am Nocturne.”

Why are you killing my sister? She has nothing to do with this.

“Ah, but you wouldn’t come to me nicely and your wolf interfered.” She smiled, but it didn’t suit her. “I suppose it is for the best. You see, my servant here would have killed you, and I would have missed the pleasure of meeting such a worthy companion.”

The woman closed her hand and Aly’s head ached. When she opened the fist again, it eased.

“You see, your power responds to me, as does your hunger. I can teach you to harness them so that no others can do what I do now. In return, your hunger will serve to increase my power, as it did with your wolf just now.”

There was a flash of pure lust that echoed through her body, and then it faded. Wil was right; the bathroom thing was a vampire trick.

“I have a proposal for you, young one. If you come to me, without your little wolfie, before the next midnight, then I will release your sibling unharmed.”

But you're already hurting her.

“Only a scratch. She will clean up quite nicely.”

And if I don't come there alone?

“Then I will allow my people to do as they please with her. I assure you, it won't be pleasant.” Kayla made another muffled scream, but the woman didn't allow her to see what was happening.

I'll come. Don't hurt her.

“Do I have your word on it?”

Aly thought for a moment and couldn't see a way around the answer without causing Kayla even more pain. *Yes.*

“Good. And if you're thinking that you won't, let me show you what will happen.”

The eyes closed and Aly was in darkness again. She felt a mouth clamp down on her neck, and then another on her wrist. The teeth sank home, followed by others on her other arm, and legs. They chewed and ground their teeth into her as if they were dull. She screamed, too scared to move, terrified that the pain would increase.

One of the mouths pulled on her neck, and tugged at the skin until it tore loose. She screamed again and felt something wet break inside her neck. She didn't know what it was, but her head felt loose, wobbling in place. She grew weaker as death crept over her, but the teeth kept digging.



CHAPTER EIGHT

ALY HEARD A VOICE AND STRAINED TO UNDERSTAND THE WORDS. HER HEAD felt heavy and her eyes wouldn't open more than a crack. The lids shut each time light seeped through, as if it would burn her eyes.

"Aly?" It was Wil, and his body was close. He dripped water on her face and she forced her eyes open further.

She saw the wall of Wil's room and knew where they were, then Chris and Shane's faces came into view behind him.

"What the fuck was that?" Shane leaned further over Wil's shoulder. "It looked like you were possessed."

"Turn off the light." She managed through a croaky voice, which made her cough. "Why can't I talk?"

"Probably because you've been screaming for five minutes." Wil smoothed her hair away from her forehead as Chris flipped the lights.

"Who is Nocturne?" Chris knelt beside the bed. "You said we could call you Nocturne."

"It wasn't me." She shook her head once, and it made the pain worse, so she stopped. "She said that to me. I saw her."

"And she wants you to come to her?" Wil's brows arched and lines formed between them.

"Yeah. She has Kayla." Chris and Shane shared a look as she continued. "She wants a trade, and I'm going."

"You don't even know where they are."

"Yeah, I do. Don't ask how, I just know."

"Where?" Shane said.

“Warehouse Row. She knows you guys are with me and she said that she’d kill Kayla if you came.”

“Wil, you’re not going to . . .” Chris squinted, and the two seemed to share an unspoken thought.

Wil shook his head. “Nah. It’s too risky. They’ll know we’re there and kill her before we get in.”

“What if I just do what she asked?” Aly tried to make it sound casual. “I already promised I would be there.”

Wil looked at her. “You mean go in there alone?”

“Yeah.”

“No!”

“Why not? It could stop there, and you’d all be safe. It makes perfect sense.”

“Alyson Wingate, you’re not going there.” Wil’s eyes narrowed. “Nocturne’s a psychopath, Aly. The real deal.”

“I sort of guessed that.” She closed her eyes, but it didn’t stop the blinding pain.

“She’s not just any murdering vampire. She’s sadistic.” He stroked her face in a tender touch that didn’t match the voice. “She feeds on fear and pain. Not just blood.”

Chris added, “She’s the one who has the progeny with dull teeth.” He shivered when he said it. “I didn’t think she was alive anymore.”

Shane shrugged. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“Either way, it’s out of the question. I’m not going to risk losing you to her.”

She was too tired to argue. Instead, she laid her hand over her eyes. “Why does my head hurt so badly?”

Shane never missed a beat. “Cause you just got mind fucked by an old vampire bitch.”

Wil groaned and rolled his eyes to them. “Guys, go watch the perimeter and wait for the others. They’ll be here soon. Aly needs rest. We’ll sleep in shifts after

daybreak. Shane, you take the first watch. There are more guns in the closet if you need them.”

The guys left and when the door shut, Wil added, “If you think I’m going to let you walk in there alone, you’re crazy.”

“First of all, you don’t have to let me do anything. I’m going to do it with or without your help. Second, I have to save Kayla. There’s no other way.”

Wil leaned closer. “I can make you do anything I want, you know.” His voice grew deep, supernatural. “You don’t want to challenge me on this.”

It was like mentally arm wrestling with someone three times her size. She wanted to cave, just to stop the pain. Then Wil stopped it for her.

“Wil, I’m sorry. I don’t want any of you hurt. It’s my fault.” The hair on her arm stood at attention. “I don’t want to die, but I don’t know what else to do.”

“You’re not going to die, and I’m not risking your life for hers.” He looked away when he added, “Besides, she may already be dead.”

She fought not to yell. “She’s not dead, Wil. I’d know if she was.”

“Are you sure?” His voice was hushed.

She wasn’t sure. For all she knew, the attack she’d felt had been on Kayla and she’d felt her sister’s death. “I can’t handle this right now, Wil. My head hurts, I’m exhausted, and I’ve already been a snack once tonight. I just want to rest for a while.”

He nodded and slipped into bed beside her.

“What are you doing? She’ll use it if I feel any need for you. That’s what happened before.”

He curled against her back, wrapping her in his arms. “You need rest and comfort. I’m giving it to you. Just try not to think about sex, okay?”

His power flowed over her, but this time it was like a warm, fuzzy blanket. She tried not to think about his body, or the way he felt against her, or even the fact that he was in nothing but a towel. Nocturne would use it and be even more powerful, so she closed her eyes and tried to think about something boring, like

listening to guys talk about football, but even that reminded her of skintight pants. Wil would really look great in those.



CHAPTER NINE

ALY RELAXED ON A BED OF WHITE COTTON IN A SUNLIT FOREST. THE CANOPY OF green loomed overhead, punctuated by dark, held up by moist bark that flowed down into blankets of moss and fern. The air felt crisp and smelled of clean sheets. It was a dream, but she didn't care. The peace was a welcome change.

She snuggled in and listened to the sounds of insects singing in the distance and birds talking overhead. She closed her eyes and rubbed her face against the pillow. It was heaven on earth, and Wil was the only thing missing.

A warm, familiar hand slid over her arm and down her chest. It was him. Nice how the dream world works. She snuggled her face in against his chest and listened to the sound of his breath as a hand stroked her hair.

The hand moved to her face and grew cold. Long nails smoothed hair away from her neck. She'd felt those nails before.

She jumped, and her eyes flew open. There were no sounds save a thick, icy breath panting against her cheek, and Nocturne's eyes stared down at her in the darkness.

In a blur of motion, the figure was suddenly at the foot of the bed. It crouched low over something. Aly heard the slurping of a mouth against skin.

Don't go near it, she thought, but her body sat up and crawled along the bed. *Run*, her brain said, but her hand stroked Nocturne's hair.

The woman turned a blood-smeared face to her. Drops fell from her chin and landed on the white sheet, where they spread like paint in water. Her bloody arm was pressed against the face of a woman who lay stretched across her lap.

In an otherworldly voice, Nocturne commanded, "See my creation, young one."

Aly leaned around her. The woman's hair was brown and straight, and hung around a face much like her own. The sound of slurping echoed through the forest.

Aly slipped off the bed and moved around to Nocturne's side. From this side, she saw that the drinking figure looked very much like her. No, it was her.

Her hand darted over her mouth to muffle her scream. Her scream caught Nocturne's attention and her eyes flashed to Aly. She released the wrist and leapt at her, knocking Aly to the ground with all the force of a linebacker, despite her delicate size. When Aly fell backward, the copy of her growled and bared its teeth. Nocturne's voice sang loudly, "I am a god, young one, and I will have you."

Aly screamed and her eyes flew open to see the room around her in the real world. Sunlight peeked through blue curtains that Wil had drawn to keep out the day. Beside her, he slept with small snoring sounds. A fan hummed at the bedside table, turning to blow across them in a regular rhythm.

She snuggled back in next to him and watched his eyes flutter with a dream. He was positively angelic when he slept, and she'd forgotten that. Whatever happened, she swore, Wil would make it out of this alive. Even if that meant that she'd become Nocturne's slave.

* * * *

The living room of the farmhouse was full of people, both familiar and strange. Wil, Chris and Shane stood together along the wall that separated the kitchen from the rest of the house, while the others sat on the couch, chairs, and floor.

"So, let me get this straight." A man with salt and pepper hair sitting in the cream wingback sat up straighter. "We let her go in the warehouse with a bunch of vampires, then bust in and grab them both."

"Pretty much." Shane's face didn't change when he said it.

"I don't see how she'll survive," the man said.

Wil glanced at Aly, then back to the man. "If there's another way, I'm all ears."

They all glanced back and forth at one another; each seemed to expect someone to come up with a better idea.

“What about...” The slim young man on the floor paused. “Oh, never mind. They’ll know a decoy before it gets into the building.”

“You’re right.” Wil stood there looking more authoritative than she’d ever seen. “We’ve weighed all our options and it seems that our only choices are to let the sister die or this.”

“We *could* just not get involved.” An older woman in a gray suit stood by the window. “She’s not lycanthrope. She’s not even powerful. She’s just—” She shot Aly a better-than-thou look. “—She’s just human. It’ll look like we’re declaring war on them over her.”

Wil nodded. “I’ve considered that. However, I think it’s just postponing the inevitable. They’re here to stay unless we drive them out, and if we attack now they’ll be weaker.”

The man in the wingback leaned forward, propping his elbows on knees. “Say Torin agrees to perform the *cicatrice* on her.”

“He’s already agreed.”

Aly shot Wil a look when he said it. What in hell was a *cicatrice*, and why didn’t it sound like something she’d enjoy?

“All right, say he marks her. What’s to say that it will keep Nocturne from taking her? I mean, it’s a power thing, right? Maybe she’s stronger than he.”

Chris broke in this time. “That’s a real possibility, but I think our alpha has considered all the possible outcomes. This is the best hope we’ve got. If Nocturne takes Aly, she could increase her power exponentially.”

Aly arched a brow. “How?”

Wil shot her a look that said, *Don’t question us in front of them*, and then answered. “Your family has a line of metaphysics that is more defined than most. The way you fight not to have it, you’ve made it stronger, but untamed. I’ve felt it and you’re strong. If she gets into your head and can control it, you’ll have no way to stop her because you’ve ignored it all these years.”

She turned her back to the group and walked toward the stairs. Great. Not only could she become a walking corpse before this was over, but she could also

round out her freakdom with a nice helping of psychic to go with it. Why had that not seemed an important thing to mention before now?

“She definitely doesn’t need to then.” The man said, sitting back in his chair again.

Aly heard the others agree as she reached the top of the stairs.

“There’s no choice. We’re going in at eleven.” Wil left no room for rebuttals, but she didn’t hear anyone trying either. “Chris and Shane will lead groups at separate entrances. I’ll lead most of you in the door that she’ll be driving into. Any questions?”

No one indicated confusion, and she opened the door to Wil’s old room. She closed it just as Wil said, “All right then. We’ll meet at the docks. I’m sure they’ll have scouts, but it won’t really matter. They’ll know we’re there before we attack either way. Just remember not to let them know what you know.”

* * * *

The sun loomed over the trees, casting an orange glow across Wil’s bed. Dust glittered in the air. Aly sat on the floor in the corner with her knees pulled to her chest, her eyes locked on a picture of Wil in a high school baseball uniform. The person was younger, but still had that same melting smile.

Hours of rethinking the plan hadn’t shown an upside. The plan was good, but something was out of place. She didn’t like the thought of entrusting her life to Wil and the guys, but that wasn’t it. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but she knew that they weren’t considering something. She could feel it.

Knuckles wrapped on the door, before Wil peeked around the edge and slipped inside. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t look at him.

The door clicked shut behind him. “You’re terrified.”

There was no reason to lie; Wil would know either way. Aly nodded and hung her head. “Why didn’t you tell me about the power issue?”

“I didn’t want to scare you.”

“And the *cicatrice*? What is that?”

He swallowed hard. "Same reason."

"Wil, what does it mean?"

He exhaled slowly. "It means he'll bite you. It's a bloodmagic thing, sort of like making you a servant." He put up his hands. "But he's not going to enforce it."

"What?" She sat up straight and glared at him. "Are you out of your mind? I'm not letting another one of them bite me, at least not when I have something to say about it."

Wil moved closer and knelt beside her. "I knew you'd react like this, that's why I didn't tell you earlier." One hand reached for hers and she jerked away. "But we don't have much of a choice. You don't stand a chance without this."

"And he has to bite me?"

"That's how it works."

"Why doesn't he just go with me? He's a big, bad vamp too, right?"

"Yeah. But if he comes in, it will become a battle over territory. If he wins, he takes this city. If he loses, she gets it fair and square."

Aly took a deep breath and nodded. Of course, she didn't want to do it, but Wil knew this world and she didn't. She'd have to trust him. "Will it hurt?"

"Probably not. Torin's kin are notorious for addictive bites." He let out a small laugh that sounded like it took more effort than it should have. "Don't think I'm going to let him bite you again when this is all over. I don't want you to become a *biberon de sang*." She shot him a look and he smiled. "It's a term for someone who lets them drink regularly, basically means blood bottle. They're kind of like bite junkies."

"I promise you, we'll make this work." He put one arm around her shoulder. "I'm not going to lose you." She fell into his arms and nuzzled her face against his chest. He was warm and smelled of cologne. Then the power inside him rolled down her body and tickled the part that Nocturne manipulated so well.

"Just make me like you, a wolf."

He sighed and pulled her close. "No. I'm not doing that."

Aly pulled back to see his face. "Why not?"

Wil turned away. “I don’t want you to be this way. It’s not something I would do to my worst enemy.”

“So you’d rather trust a vampire to make me his slave? Isn’t there something you can do? Can’t *you* mark me?”

He squeezed her tight. “I’m doing all that I can without making you one of us. You don’t want that.”

Aly hugged him close. If the chances of his plan working were as bad as the group thought, they were screwed. Still, Wil was determined to save the day. Since she didn’t have a better idea, she’d shut up.

“I wish it didn’t have to happen this way.” He tucked his chin and looked down at her.

Aly craned her neck upward as Wil leaned down until their lips met. He squeezed her and let his power flow over her. Something stirred inside her and then it sparked. The passion flared to life and she pushed him onto the floor. She fell with him, then her legs climbed up to straddle him, and their lips pressed hard against each other.

Wil pushed her back with one hand. “They’re manipulating you again. I feel it. Cut it off or you’re just feeding her, right?”

“I smell vamps,” Chris yelled from the hall.

Aly leaned forward again to kiss him and Wil growled, “Get it under control.”

When her power faded, she rolled off him and watched him move to his feet in one fluid motion that seemed more natural than human movement ever had. He held out a hand and when she took it, he pulled her up to her feet so abruptly that it threw her against him.

She closed the distance between them and her mouth landed on his neck, just below the jaw. She sucked the skin softly, let it roll over her teeth, and then felt the faint pulse below. She felt Nocturne there, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was the feel of him in her mouth.

“Aly, stop.” Wil pushed her back carefully and broke the suction with a loud snap.

The fog in her mind rolled back slowly and she shook her head to try to speed it.

Wil opened the door to see Shane standing there smiling at them. “Impeccable timing.”

“Yeah.” Shane chewed a toothpick as he spoke. “We smelled sex and would have left you along, but then the vampire thing happened.”

Aly blushed and tried not to look at him.

“What time is it?” Wil asked as he put his arm around her.

Shane glanced down at the silver watch on his wrist. “Just after seven.”

Wil dropped a quick kiss on her shoulder, and then pulled away. “We need to leave. I don’t want to lose any time.”

He followed Shane down the stairs and she trailed behind. At the bottom, Chris stood beside the front door, crossbow in hand. He flashed a knowing smile at them. Did everyone in the house know what they’d been doing? Surely, wolf noses weren’t that keen.

He handed the crossbow to her and opened the door. She turned back to see Wil handing a pistol to a small, disheveled looking man in jeans and a t-shirt.

“Time to roll.” Chris slipped past her onto the porch and into the evening light.



CHAPTER TEN

ALY WALKED TOWARD THE PAINT CHIPPED DOOR THAT LED INTO THE CORNER shop on River Street, in the old district. The metal hinges on the old *Aberrant Magic* sign creaked back and forth in the wind that whipped the banner on the café across the street with a snap each time it hit the building. The humidity had gone. The air felt cooler and carried the smell of water.

She'd seen the sign so many times before, but she'd never realized that it belonged to an occult store. Actually, she'd never given it any thought. Strange how hints of this world were around her every day, but she'd never paid them much attention until now.

The first crash of thunder sounded in the distance just as Wil opened the door and made the little bell overhead clang. "After you."

Aly slipped into the cloud of incense smoke that billowed out the door. The dimly lit shop held shelves of books, herbs, and various jars that she imagined held magical ingredients. Haunting Celtic music played in the background and a dark grey cat paced along the top of a worn counter.

A young woman with flowing dark curls moved from behind the counter. Her crinkled forest green skirt flowed around her as she moved into view. A loose white shirt hugged her body enough to show off ample curves. In a word, she was entrancing, even to Aly. "William and Christopher. *Bonsoir, mes hommes beaux.*"

She glanced at Chris and Wil, whose eyes locked on the woman. When Aly elbowed Wil, he blinked and looked at her with a puzzled expression, before turning back to the woman. A twinge of jealousy sparked to life.

Aly remembered only enough French from college to be dangerous, but she gave it a shot. "*Bon souire, Mademoiselle.*"

The woman moved around Wil and trailed her hand along his arm. She didn't look at Aly as she spoke. "Ah. *Parlez vous français?*"

"A little, yes."

The woman's hands settled on her hips, and she gave Aly an appraising stare. "I am Jules Rochelleaux. And you must be Alyson."

Aly didn't appreciate the look, but tried to be neutral, at least until she knew what Rochelleaux's intentions were. "We were told that you could help us. I'm meeting—"

Jules held up a hand and thin metal bracelets clanged together. "I already know."

Aly blinked.

"Wil called to warn that you were to meet our lovely Torin here." The woman smiled, but it looked strained. "I must say, from what I've been told, I thought you'd be more."

Aly glanced at Wil, who still sported a dumbfounded look, then looked back at the woman. "More what?"

"Just." She shrugged in a way that made it seem like Aly should have understood. "Just more. They speak of you as if you have power, but I feel nothing from you." She held out a thin hand. "Give me your hand."

She didn't have to because the woman took it and ran her fingers over Aly's palm. She nodded and mumbled. "You do have power, but you do not recognize it."

"So I'm told," Aly said and let the condescension ring.

Jules didn't acknowledge it. "I feel precognition, perhaps even a telepath. A natural oneiromancer. Yes. I will get you a copy of the *Oneirocritica*."

The woman looked up at her, then back to the hand. "You have—" She jerked her hand away and wiped it clean on her skirt. "Careful what you do, *ami*. If you choose wrong, you bring darkness to us all."

"What?" Aly wiped her hand too, though it probably wasn't for the same reason.

Wil spoke, though his eyes were sleepy. “Is—is Torin—I mean—”

“Let us go downstairs. Torin would be useless in here. I have been burning cloves all day. A special mixture that affects only supernaturals.” She shrugged. “I had a premonition about tonight, *ami*. One must not be careless, even with friends.”

Aly nodded and tugged Wil toward the door by the arm. Chris shuffled behind them down the aisle and around the counter to a back hallway.

Jules opened a door and motioned them toward a dark stone stairway that descended into pitch black. “*Après vous.*”

Wil shivered and seemed to shake off the cloves as they descended. He seemed surprised at the presence of their companion. “Jules, where is Torin?”

“He is downstairs.” She smiled and pointed downward. “When you finish, I have something for your friend.”

“Thank you.” He kissed her on the cheek and Aly fought not to cringe. “We owe you.”

“Speak nothing of it, *ami*. I am happy to do it.”

Wil bounded down the steps ahead of Aly. She was glad he’d come back around, though she could do without all the kissing and French. At least he’d be aware during the meeting with Torin, and she was grateful. She was already planning to meet one too many vampires alone tonight and had hoped not to add another to her list.

The stairs ended at an old fashioned, steel-reinforced oak door. Wil pushed it open, making it look effortless. Aly followed him into a room with walls the color of midnight skies and dark gray stone reminiscent of an old castle. It held a massive fireplace and a hallway that seemed to go on forever into the darkness.

She moved further into the room to admire a shield that hung on the wall. It was made of crude wood and below it hung a sword in a similar style. Together, they reminded her of Viking legends.

“Welcome.” The voice was both male and delicate. It called from across the room, from a corner where Aly had seen no one just seconds before.

When Aly turned, she saw a young man who appeared no older than she, in a suit with a tie the color of ink. His skin was pale, but with a hint of color that may have been more from the fleshy pink colored shirt and French collar than his own skin.

The face was chiseled, the perfect man's face, but with a beauty that one often finds in the female form. His brows, thin moustache, and goatee were dark and reminded her of a Musketeer. His hair was almost to his shoulders in soft curls. It tried to look relaxed, but she had the feeling that every hair was in its intended place. He was enthralling.

"Torin." Wil said with an abruptness that meant the man had taken him by surprise, too. "I thought perhaps you had decided not to show."

"Never, my friend. I always honor my word." His voice carried the smallest hint of an accent, though Aly wasn't sure what it was. He offered a hint of a smile that seemed both warm and menacing, since his dark blue eyes never softened.

"This must be our Alyson." He moved toward her and extended his hand to reveal a true French cuff. On his finger was a wide band of silver that matched a thick bracelet with ancient looking carvings.

Aly held out her hand and he took it and turned it palm down. He made an elegant bow as he kissed it.

She looked at Wil and arched her brows, but his answer was an extravagant roll of the eyes. When she glanced back, Torin's eyes locked on her face. His eyes were deep blue, like two small oceans, and she felt herself falling forward into them. What an odd trick.

"It is my honor to meet you, Miss Wingate." Torin stood straight again and released her hand. "I am Torin."

The words rolled off his lips like lyrics and the voice was too perfectly beautiful to be human. Even the sound of it felt like a lover's hands smoothing over the curves of her body. She felt an urge to close the distance and wrap herself in his arms. With Wil so close, she wondered if he could feel it, if he knew how

easily Torin swayed her. Wil had said to be careful, but she hadn't quite taken him seriously.

Torin smiled as if he knew what she was thinking, then broke the gaze and looked toward Wil. "I am not using bloodmagic on her. I was simply offering a warm welcome."

Did Wil say something? She looked at Wil and saw his arms folded across his chest.

"We don't have time for this. Are you sure it will work?"

"As I told you before, it will help. Much of it depends on her will and how well our bond is forged. Nocturne is rising from a century's sleep. She is not at her full strength or she would have already taken her prey." He looked at Aly again when he said it. "She seeks someone to strengthen her, and I believe she has found the source. If all goes well, and Alyson is as stubborn as you say, I believe this will hinder her plan."

"All right, let's get this done." Wil's eyes narrowed and sweat gleamed above his brow. "We need to get to the docks."

"William. One cannot rush the *cicatrice*. If she is not fully concentrated on me when we attempt this, I may have to push too hard. We risk her becoming a slave to my power."

Wil nodded, but Aly folded her arms across her waist and tried not to look at Torin. He had too much control with those eyes, and even without the special effects, he stirred her. She'd never seen a man as completely and utterly sexy. It practically oozed from him. Even standing two feet from him, she felt the pull of his presence. If Wil was in the room when he bit her, and it had the affect she thought it might, he might feel just how much her body responded to him.

"She already feels apprehensive." Torin cut his eyes to her, made a *tsk, tsk* sound and scratched his temple. "I believe this will not work with you in the room, *ami*."

Shit. She'd pulled the walls back up tight. Still, it made her wonder if Torin could read her actual thoughts, or just the emotions that went with them. She didn't ask. Hell, she didn't really want to know.

Chris and Wil looked at each other, but Wil spoke. "I think I'll stay in here."

"He's right, Wil. I am nervous." She relaxed her hands down to her sides and tried to look calm. "I just need to do this without an audience. Just wait outside the door. I'll scream if I need you." She smiled. "You'll still be able to hear with the door shut. Right?"

"Yeah. But I don't like this."

"This was your idea. You said you trust him. Remember?"

Wil looked at Torin, and his power followed, blanketing the room in warm waves.

Another power pushed back at Wil's warmth, like cool rain falling from the ceiling. Torin folded his arms in front of him and didn't look awed. "I assure you, I am not here to steal your love from you, simply to offer my help."

"If you do anything to her that we haven't discussed, I'll rip your throat out." Wil turned. Chris followed him and they moved onto the stairs. The door closed behind them with a loud thud.

Aly felt strangely alone, as if the vampire at her side wasn't there at all. Torin turned to her, and she averted her eyes to avoid the blissful fall.

"You have quite an effect on the *garoul*. I cannot recall him ever losing his temper over something as trite as this."

Aly didn't answer. What was there to say? It could have been her, and it could've just been the cloves. Who knew?

"Did he explain what is to happen?" Torin stepped closer, but she didn't move.

"You're going to bite me."

"In the crudest sense, yes."

She nodded.

"Do you understand what this will mean?"

"That it will make me your slave and protect me from her."

“I don’t intend to make you my slave.” He reached down and touched her hand. This time, power arced between them. It started at their fingers as a cool chill and crept up her arm, then over her chest until it wrapped her in a serene flow. “Most of my servants, even the least connected, feel a certain *desire* for my presence and favor. If we meet again, you may feel it as well.”

Aly nodded. Her heart went to a slow and surprisingly calm pace. “As long as you don’t exploit it. I don’t want to be a zombie or anything.”

He laughed and the sound filled the room. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” He smoothed the top of her hand with his other, his fingers encasing hers. “Do you still want this? It is irreversible, unless I meet with ill fortune.”

“Yes.” She nodded, but still didn’t meet his gaze.

“As you wish, but first, you must drop those clever defenses. I will use my power to make this a pleasant experience, and if you struggle, it will only make our tie stronger.” He moved one hand to her shoulder and stepped closer until their chests touched. “And, you must look at me, dear.”

She took an emboldening breath. When she looked up, his eyes were the same crystalline blue as before, and she felt herself falling into him. She breathed again and let his power swim through her until it threatened to drown her. She didn’t want to drown, she wanted to ride the waves of it, and fought to keep her mind from sinking in the depths.

His eyes flared with blue light. His hand released hers to reach around her back and pull her hair to one side. The side of her neck, opposite the other bite, arched toward him. He breathed along her skin. “Relax your mind. You must allow it to consume you.”

She steadied herself by placing her hands on his chest. A wave of what she could only describe as lust washed over her, but it wasn’t lust for sex. She wanted to bite him, or to have him bite her. It didn’t matter as long as teeth and blood were involved.

His nose brushed her neck and cool breath blew across her jugular. She smelled his shampoo and the scent of his cologne. His lips brushed her skin like butterfly wings, and it made her breath come out too fast.

“You aren’t frightened?”

“I don’t think so.”

The arm around her waist held her like she might run, but she wouldn’t. She didn’t want to. She wanted those teeth against her skin, to feel them sink into her. To feel her flesh give way to him, putting her at the mercy of his will.

For a moment, she wasn’t sure if the thought was her own, and then she felt his lips against her skin. Teeth followed like tiny pinpricks that brought a rush of pleasure and made her body tighten. She let out a whimper and dug fingers into his sides. When the teeth plunged deeper, her knees quaked. He held her against him and with each draw of blood, things deep inside her flexed. Her heart fluttered in her ears, and the speed of the beat increasing with the force of his pull, like a caged bird trying to escape.

He made the fourth draw of her blood a slow and carnal thing. His hands flexed on her flesh and molded her to him. She wanted to cry out, to have him take her, but managed to keep the words to herself.

Torin broke away, and then snaked his tongue over the wound. He lapped at the blood that flowed down her neck and made her body shake with pleasure until the clot formed.

His mouth moved to hers and took it in an overwhelming kiss. She didn’t fight, but instead, melted into his embrace and let him fill her mouth with blood. It wasn’t sickening or frightening. In fact, it was better than her dream, though she knew somewhere in her mind that vampire tricks probably had something to do with it.

Torin withdrew his tongue, then slipped it back in slowly. This time, she tasted different blood, his blood. It burned warm, like melted chocolate on her tongue. She tried to pull back, but strong arms held her in place. Each stroke of

his tongue placed more of the crimson fluid in her mouth, until it was scalding and sweet. When she swallowed, it filled her with the taste of him.

The feeling grew in her chest, an outward movement of molten light. He made a vulnerable sound against her mouth, but when her knees gave, it was his arms that held her up.

With the next swallow, flashes of rolling hills and dirty men in kilts filled her head. Words she didn't understand, and then a woman with auburn hair whispered *Ruadhan* in a strange accent. She knew the word, because it was her name. No. His name.

She drew more of him in and fed the light. This time she smelled blood and death. Men fought great beasts, werewolves, for days on end. So much blood, rivers of red. Ancient battlefields flashed past, and the putrid smell from distant pyres grew and faded again.

Light exploded and brought them to their knees. Words came from Aly's lips with the accent of the red headed woman. "Ruadhan."

Oh god, she heard him say, but his lips didn't move. Although he still held her, he looked as though he might thrust her away at any moment. He panted, when he hadn't breathed before, and his heart beat against his chest.

Wil and Chris crashed into the room with Jules close behind them. "What the hell was that?"

Neither looked at the intruders, instead Torin stared at her as if she would vanish when he looked away. Actually, he did think that. Aly knew. Then came the words in his old language, the one of the red haired woman. Again, his lips didn't move, but she heard it and knew that he said, *What have you done, darling?*

I didn't do anything, she thought, rather than said.

His eyes widened and he released her so fast that they fell apart. He glanced toward the others, then stood in a flash, and straightened his clothes.

Wil rushed over and helped to her up. The few feet he pulled between her and Torin felt like invisible strands of power were snapping between them. It wasn't quite painful, but it was close. Aly felt barriers slamming into place and her own

went up again. It made her feel empty this time, as if she'd lost a part of herself in the distance between them. Was this how it was to be?

"I said, what the hell was that, Torin?"

Torin looked down and brushed invisible lint from the front of his shirt. He gave a fleeting look at Jules, then Wil, and then to Aly. "It was her power."

"Her power?" Wil leaned so that he could look down at Aly. "Is that what we felt?"

"Yes. She's held back so much." Torin swallowed and shivered. Aly wondered if it was more of her blood on his tongue, and he glanced at her as if he'd heard the thought. "It called to mine, and when our blood touched, it—" He seemed to look for the word.

"Exploded," Jules finished.

"*Exactly.*"

"Does this mean she's bound tighter to you?" Chris seemed to take in the information faster than Aly could.

"I do not know what it means. In all my days, I have never seen such a reaction to the *cicatrice*." Torin straightened his cuffs. "This could mean anything."

"What is wrong, *aimé*?" Jules placed a hand on his arm, and looked up at him as a lover would. Why hadn't she seen that look before? Was it his feelings making her see them for what they were now?

"*Tha mi'g iarraidh ni nach fhaigh mi,*" Torin said in an accent that sounded like Irish to Aly, and then glanced in her direction.

Why did she feel like she knew what that meant? She'd never heard the words before. She didn't even know what language it was, but it was familiar. Scottish? She'd assumed he was European, maybe French by the way he dressed, but the vision had showed him long ago, and not in France.

Jules reached up and touched Torin's face, turning it back to hers and speaking to him in a low murmur.

French. Aly didn't actually hear it or understand it so much as *know* what the woman said.

He shrugged and smiled crookedly. "It is of no consequence."

Wil pulled Aly around to face him, so that her back was to Torin. "Aly?"

"Yeah?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"No."

"I said we need to go."

She tried to look calm as he took her hand, and pulled her toward the stairs, but she wanted to fight. Something was wrong. Very wrong. She wanted to stay with Torin and moving further away made her ache.

She heard Torin whisper the word *sang*, the French word for blood, as they passed the doorframe.

"William," Torin said, as he caught up with them on the stairs. "I would like to attend this *convoquer* with you."

Wil stopped and didn't look happy. "Why?"

"I fear what will happen if Nocturne is powerful enough to flip my bond. Aly will be a powerful weapon against us all."

Wil nodded. "Fine. Just keep your vampires out of our way."

Torin offered a small bow. "I will tell my kin to stay where they are unless I call to them."

Wil headed up the stairs again with Aly in tow, and it made her feel submissive and weak. She jerked her hand out of his. He glanced back, but didn't speak.

When they reached the top of the stairs, she felt a resounding wave of need, like an echo of Nocturne's power. Torin gasped behind her. She glanced back. He'd felt it, too? With the bond they shared, they could be powerful. On the other hand, things could also go terribly wrong.

* * * *

Aly stood in front of the counter as Jules rustled through a small bag made of crimson cloth on the counter. She pulled out items and named them as she went. One was for protection, another to ward off vampires. The men waited outside since the cloves overwhelmed their senses.

“*Trés bon*. Do you believe in God, Alyson?”

Aly’s eyes widened. She hadn’t expected the woman to ask that. Somehow, that word and Jules just didn’t go together. “Yes.”

“Don’t lie to me. Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“Then this should work well for you. An enchanted silver cross. It is very old, one that my Rocheleaux had before he changed.” She held it up and the cross began to shake. The silver shined brighter. Jules gasped and stuffed it back into the bag. She whispered, “*Mon dieu*.”

“Why did it do that?”

“It must be the *cicatrice*. That is the reaction it has to vampires.” She tucked the bag under the counter. “This is not normal, Alyson. I must research it.”

Aly laughed. “Nothing’s normal about this whole situation.”

Jules took her hand. “In your world, it is not. In the real world, *this* world, it is as normal as one gets. You must learn to trust yourself and the will of those who protect you. They are your only hope.”

Aly nodded.

“No, young one. I have been where you are. I loved one of the *La Famille du Sang*. It was not easy, but it was real. Hold onto that. From this moment on, there is nothing left of your old life. Trying to go back will only give you heartache.”

“I will.”

Jules patted her hand. “If you make it through the night, come back and I will give you books to study.”

Aly nodded.

“This life is not all bad. Like your friend out there.” She pointed toward the door. “He’s very loyal.”

Aly smiled and scooped up the trinkets. “Yes, he is.”

“Take care of him, *ami*. Good luck with this. I hope to see you soon.”

“So do I.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

“READY?” ALY ASKED, AND HOPED TORIN COULD HEAR HER EVEN THOUGH they couldn’t see each other. She stared at the rusted dockside warehouse and squeezed her hands on the steering wheel. If the werewolves and Torin were hiding out there, she couldn’t see them.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said to herself and took off the seatbelt.

The vehicle crept forward. Nervous just didn’t describe the feeling she had, an overall sense of impending doom was more like it. Her throat was so tight she could hardly breathe.

She stopped just short of the graffiti painted garage door. Then, she pressed her hand to the horn until it beeped three times. When the door rolled up overhead, she slipped her foot off the brakes and let the car roll forward.

Inside the warehouse, shadows and light from fires burning in oil drums danced around the periphery of the room. Two young men stood, one to the right and one to the left, in gray camouflage with matching combat boots. The one on the left had spiky hair. He waved her forward while another, larger man with long white hair, a black shirt, and jeans stared at her from the center of the space.

She eased into the building while the garage door closed behind her. The man from the forest suddenly appeared at her door and opened it. Her heart thudded against her ribs. Up close, his soft features and pale blue eyes were almost sweet. Even though he’d been close enough to kiss her, she’d never clearly seen his face.

“Please step out, Miss Wingate.” He motioned toward the room. “Our mistress would like to speak with you.”

“What’s your name?” She didn’t want to, but she slid her legs out the door.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He closed the car door behind her and she sidestepped once to put distance between them.

Aly kept her back close enough to the car that no one could squeeze between her and it. When the guys came in, she wanted to be able to move. Worst-case scenario, the car would burst through the metal doors to get her out.

She took a steadying breath, and remembered to swallow her feelings, too.

“Smart wolf of yours. He’s taught you well.” A female voice called from the darkness.

Aly squinted, then closed her eyes and opened them. A female form draped in a sleeveless black dress that hugged her form and dragged the ground moved into the light. Slits snaked up both sides of the skirt, so that when she walked most of her thigh was visible. The top dipped so low that it threatened to show her navel at its lowest point. The woman’s black mane flowed like silk to her chin, and then stopped abruptly, making Aly wonder if someone had hacked it off in a fit of rage. The woman’s face was pale as milk; her eyes painted dark, and her lips were the color of fresh blood.

“Yes, I can read your thoughts. But I don’t have to. I know William quite well.”

The woman’s words were like a hard slap in the face.

“Oh, didn’t he tell you?”

Wil didn’t tell her a lot, but this wasn’t true. No sooner than she questioned it, a thought came to her. *Wolves hate us*. Someone spoke, even through the blocks.

“Has the cat got your tongue?” Nocturne was close now, but still not quite far enough to reach her.

“No. I was just thinking about what a liar you are.”

The woman smiled and revealed tiny white fangs. “You should watch your tongue if you don’t want to lose it.”

They didn’t have time for this. Any minute, the guys would bust the doors down. “Where’s my sister?”

“Oh, she’s around here somewhere.” The woman glanced right and left. “Kayla, dear?”

Kayla stumbled from the dark as if pushed. How many were there? Four for sure, but certainly there were more lurking in the darkness?

When the light struck her, it was clear that they'd beaten her. She was pale with dark, anemic circles under her eyes. On her neck and wrists were the remains of dried blood. She looked the same as in the vision and it made Aly's body ache with memory.

She straightened and turned toward Nocturne. Kayla had to go. She didn't ask for any of this. "All right. Let her go and I won't even struggle."

"Well, aren't we one for demands?" The woman snorted. "What if I take both of you?"

Aly's heart dropped to her stomach. "No. That wasn't the deal. Let her go."

The woman laughed, that same ear-shattering laugh. When Aly reached to cover her ears, it stopped.

"We can't do that, Love. We need you both." Nocturne shrugged. "Besides, either I keep you two, or take you two and your wolf. It's up to you."

Aly glanced at Kayla, then back to the woman. Could Wil save them fast enough or would Kayla die in the process? It was a big risk to take and her money was on the latter.

Someone whistled from the rafters. "It's a trick. She brought the wolves."

"No, it's not," Aly threw up her hands. "They're only here to make sure Kayla goes free—like you said."

Nocturne bit her lip and crooked a finger in her direction. "Come here then." With the other hand, she motioned toward the door. "Take this one outside. Give her to the wolves."

Aly took a steadying breath and stepped away from the vehicle. She smiled at the sight of Kayla stumbling toward the garage door with spiky hair.

Three more steps and she stopped just out of the woman's reach. "Okay. Here I am."

"Closer, dear."

Aly listened for the guys, but didn't hear anything. She didn't have a chance to speak before the woman was on her. Aly screamed, but Nocturne plunged teeth into her neck with a speed that even Wil didn't have.

If the *cicatrice* worked, she couldn't tell. The woman bit right on top of Torin's wound, with only a grunt of disapproval to say that she'd noticed it at all.

Kayla screamed somewhere behind her and a male voice shouted. "Grab her."

Wil was close enough that she felt the heat from his power. Then Torin's came in as an icy mist that smelled of his cologne. His voice blew through her mind again in a whisper. *Do not give in to her. Do not let her have your will.*

Gunfire erupted behind her and metal crashed in the direction of the garage doors. Screams and shouts drowned out everything but the pound of heartbeats in her ears, but the chaos submitted to the darkness.

* * * *

"Wakey, wakey, Princess," said a male voice that seemed vaguely familiar. It brought her around to the feel of a cold metal chair against her back.

Aly's head pounded and she forced her eyes open to a stone cellar with a single naked bulb dancing from the ceiling. Shadows moved with it and made the room shift in time with the dripping of water. She shifted, but tape bound her wrists together.

"Is she damaged?" Nocturne's voice came from a shadow to the left.

"Of course not. Just a bit hung-over from your snack." The male voice answered. "You still haven't gauged your new power, Mistress."

Aly squinted in the direction of the sound until a figure came into focus. Though shadowed, Aly knew the vampire from the forest. His skin was still pale, but gray in the artificial light. His shoulder length black hair hung loose.

"Mark her. Feed if you like, then bring her to me." Nocturne turned and disappeared into the shadows. From the sound of her footfalls, she moved along a hallway. "Oh, and Gabriel."

"Yes, Mistress?"

"Do not kill this one."

He made no indication that he'd heard her. Instead, he stepped from the darkness with a wicked smile.

"I'll hold her still," he said to someone behind Aly. "You get the gun." He slid into Aly's lap, straddling her, and hands smoothed her cheeks. "Not so tough without your wolf friend, are you?"

Before she could respond, he jerked her head to the side.

"We're going to brand you."

"Why?"

"So others will know who you belong to." He ran one hand onto her shoulder and neck, almost caressing her. "But I'd rather give you my brand than hers."

Aly shivered. Somehow, she knew that his brand wouldn't be as pleasant as Nocturne's.

He sniffed up the line of her neck where Nocturne's lips had been. "Now, shall we finish what we started?"

He pressed his nose to her flesh and inhaled her. Aly leaned slowly away, only to have him jerk her neck back and clamp his cold lips over her newest wound.

It was only a tease, but enough to make her squirm. He moaned his pleasure, and then scraped a fang across her skin. Suddenly a heavy and dark presence surrounded them. It pinched at her skin and brought with it the scent of sulfur.

She closed her eyes and bit her lip. She wouldn't react to it. She pulled at the duct tape, but didn't scream. Screaming would make it worse.

Gabriel's hands squeezed her hard enough to bruise, then one fang dug into the skin and pulled down to make a paper cut size wound. Pain shot up her neck and she jerked. His laugh muffled against her skin, and she turned her mind from him. She wouldn't give him more.

She concentrated hard on Torin. She saw his face and could hear his satin voice, but couldn't make out the words. She could almost smell him and taste the salty sweet of his skin. For a second, she even thought she saw him arguing with Wil and Chris standing between them.

Pop. Gabriel's teeth broke her skin in an explosion of pain. There was no peace in his bite, only the feeling of her life's blood ripping from her through the small openings in her neck. She bit her lip hard and tasted blood. Nausea rose into her throat and threatened to come up, but it was good. It kept her from passing out when he ground his teeth. She wouldn't do that; wouldn't give him the pleasure.

He writhed against her body like a leech on its prey. She had the overwhelming sensation of being drunk. The room swam. In the distance of her mind, she could hear Wil screaming something, cursing.

Help me, she thought. She'd give anything to have them bust in right now. If only Wil were here. He was right; she did need him. Did that make her weak? Right now, it didn't really matter.

* * * *

Gabriel's tongue ran over the wound, somehow stopping the flow of blood. He looked up with a confident smirk. "How was it for you?"

She turned her face away from his as he licked the crimson fluid from his lips, and she felt guilt, but it belonged to someone else. Without Nocturne, and perhaps even with, Aly knew that his next meal would be her last.

"Ready." A baritone voice sounded from behind her.

Gabriel pulled her head to one side again—the same side he'd bitten the first time, in the forest.

A loud buzzing filled the room and she knew immediately. She'd heard the same one every time she walked past the tattoo shop in the mall. Funny, she'd always thought of getting one, but this wasn't exactly how she'd imagined the experience. Being forced to get one wasn't as fun.

Suddenly the flesh below her ear began to vibrate and she winced, but didn't move. Surviving all the vampires' attacks, only to die from a tattoo gone wrong wasn't on her to-do list.

"Whoa. She's a bleeder," the other man said.

"Keep going. She'll be fine." Gabriel held her still, the smirk changed to an eager smile. He was enjoying this way too much.

Within seconds, the pain faded to a general vibrating of her head. Her teeth chattered when he pressed especially hard. Otherwise, the process was relatively painless. Thankfully, her body responded to the pain.

“Okay, it’s done.” Baritone pulled the gun away.

Gabriel smiled. “Ready?”

She didn’t respond; didn’t need to because he slipped from her lap, then bent behind her and pulled the tape off her wrists as if it had rotted in the sun.

Another light flickered on and illuminated the hall entrance. She stretched her arms and winced at the pain she hadn’t expected.

“Get moving.” Gabriel kicked the back of the chair and sent her scrambling to her feet.

She walked toward the hallway and felt the newly stolen body heat radiating from him. She needed that blood back. Without it, her feet seemed not to touch the floor and motion trails followed everything whenever she turned her head. If he took any more, she’d be out cold.

She followed the stone hallway where it turned right and then left. About twenty later, they passed a stairwell that led upstairs. Then, just past that, the hall ended in front of a tall, rough wooden door with old metal brackets.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night, if she keeps you too long.” Gabriel reached around her and pressed her between his chest and the door. He lingered just a fraction too long, then turned his key in the door. “I wake before the rest.”

The door opened to a room with a sunken tub filled with what appeared to be blood. Nocturne lay almost submerged in it her arms and head resting on the edges, while a woman lay on the floor at the edge of the bath, chained to a block. The woman’s head rolled toward Aly and she could see that one eye was missing. The face showed a long scar with thick black stitches. Aly wondered if this was Gabriel’s playmate.

“Come here.” Nocturne waved a hand at Aly.

Aly stepped forward three steps and even that seemed too far.

“Closer. I’m not going to hurt you right now.”

Aly stopped a few feet from the rim. She was not going in the water, no matter what.

“Did they brand you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. As we agreed, you will stay here and be my eyes and ears. Help me learn the ways of this new time. In exchange, you will have my protection. If you are very good at this, then perhaps I will allow you a bit of my blood—on occasion—so that you might have increased abilities with which to help me govern this city. ”

“I don’t want your blood or your deal. I agreed to come here, but I won’t become one of you.”

Nocturne arched a slender brow, and then spoke in a caressing voice that didn’t fit her face. “Since Morpheus has seen fit to bestow your blessings upon you, you are worthy of my attention. You will be my companion. It is not a punishment, but a gift, child. You will be favored by the gods, your work and intelligence repaid in abundance.”

She didn’t know who Morpheus was, but if she lived, she’d find out later. Now, she needed to stay alive. “I do not want your blood, but I will help you.”

The woman stood. Blood flowed down her flesh in red streaks and dripped from her breasts. “Yes, you will. I have your sister and will take your wolf. If you disobey me, I will give them both to our beautiful Gabriel. They will take the place of this one.” She motioned to the bound woman. “While she is healing, Gabriel is without a companion.”

Nocturne slammed her power into Aly and she stumbled backward. Nocturne was powerful, much more than Torin and Wil, probably more than both were together.

“You have no friends powerful enough to stop this. Either I will kill them all, or you can save them all. The choice is yours.”

The woman motioned toward the door and one of the guards turned and left. When he came back, he dragged Kayla like a rag doll. She stared crookedly at Aly, and then her head fell forward. Her voice was weak. "Help."

Aly started toward her, but the man jerked Kayla's head to the side and bared fangs.

"The choice is yours." Nocturne's voice was confident.

Aly watched Kayla. Kayla didn't deserve this, nor did Wil. The warning had been hers and she'd ignored it, not them. Now the only chance for them was if she paid for the mistake in blood. She closed her eyes and sighed. "I want them to live."

"I thought you'd see it that way." Aly looked up to see Nocturne smile. "Now leave me while I finish my bath. The sun will be up soon."

Someone grabbed her from behind and dragged Aly back down the hall. They tossed her into the tattoo room where she skidded against the chair.

Gabriel smiled down at her from the chair. "So, you're back to play so soon."

Her stomach turned as he reached down and took her hand. When he pulled her to stand, she didn't look at him. Instead, she looked around at the room. There were two ways of doing this. Willingly, which meant he would probably be a little easier on her since it wouldn't be as exciting. Or she could go out fighting, which meant that he'd probably beat her, then do it anyway. He'd enjoy that more, but she was tired of giving in.

She jerked away, and grabbed the chair, holding it up like a lion tamer as she backed against the wall. "Just stay away from me."

"Oh, so you do want to play?" He closed the door behind him, locked it, and stuffed the key into his front pocket. He smiled and it made her wonder if Stephanie Gray had seen that same smile.

The room suddenly seemed smaller. She closed her eyes and saw Torin standing in front of a large bed. She could only think, *Help me*.

Then she felt him like rain washing over her face. A frigid wind of his scent moved her hair.

Gabriel laughed. “How sweet. He’s trying to help you, but it won’t work here.”

Anger that wasn’t hers came in a flood that brought Torin’s voice through her mind. *I will rip your heart out of your corpse.* The anger grew and the words escaped from her mouth in a voice that wasn’t hers either. “Coward. You dare not feed from my servant, for the penalty is death.”

Gabriel laughed again and moved toward her. He hunched over as though he’d chase her. “A very interesting trick, old friend.” His arms went out to the sides and when she moved, he mimicked it. “I hope you enjoy this.”

Run, Torin’s voice said, but an idea came to her; stab him in the chest or head with the chair leg.

Aly darted to the side and he leapt on her. They tumbled forward as the voice in her head warned her: *Do not scream.* She bit her lip and held it back as Gabriel crawled up her back.

He whispered in her ear. The words rolled out of his mouth in a voice that she would have otherwise equated with sex. “Your mistress knows there are so many ways to make you scream.”

Aly scrambled forward, but he grabbed her ankle and pulled her back to him. Her fingertips cut on the rough stone floor. When he flipped her over to face him, he threw himself on top of her, the length of him pressing against her. She could feel his excitement.

Aly landed a fist hard against his nose without thinking, but he didn’t move. Instead, he pulled her hands over her head and pinned them in place. Curses spoken in Torin’s voice ran through her head, in English first, and then in other languages. Torin’s frustration and anger ate at her, and when her mouth opened, it was his voice that came out. “Be warned, Gabriel. If you harm even the tiniest part of her, I will stake you out for the morning sunlight.”

“Will you?” Gabriel teased his free hand down Aly’s side, then over the front of her zipper. “You can threaten all you like, but who’s to stop me?”

He pushed himself hard against her hips until her legs parted. He pulled her arms out to the sides, stretching her wide like a crucifixion scene, and then his mouth pressed to hers. She tried to turn her head, but he matched each move.

Another flurry of curses in Torin's strange language brought the weight of his anger on her chest like an ocean. She wouldn't kiss Gabriel, wouldn't open her mouth to him, but the emotions made it so hard to concentrate.

She stretched her lips tight and struggled to keep her face away. He laughed and bit until he caught skin. He pushed down hard enough to bring blood on her lip.

No. Do not give him that pleasure. Torin pushed courage toward her, but it was too late. She screamed against Gabriel's mouth and he groaned with pleasure.

It was what he'd waited for. He ground himself against her body, turned on by the sound of her terror.

The kiss broke, and he wrapped a hand in her hair. He jerked her body one direction and pulled her shirt open with the other, sending buttons flying around the room. His mouth landed just above her bra and dull teeth sank into the soft flesh of her breast. He wouldn't get a lot of blood there, but then that wasn't what he wanted. Gabriel had other hungers to feed, the kind that generally went along with decapitation.

She didn't scream as the world went white with pain, or even when he ground himself against her pants. She went to that place where Torin was and felt his phantom embrace, heard sweet things whispered in the other language. When the world started to go dark, she heard his voice say, *I will repay him for this.*



CHAPTER TWELVE

SOMEONE SHOOK ALY INTO THE RECOGNITION THAT HER ENTIRE BODY ACHED.

“Maybe Gabriel killed her,” said a female voice she didn’t know.

“Not quite.” Nocturne was close, real close. “She is awake now. You may take off her blindfold.”

Cold hands pulled her to her knees. Metal slipped between her skull and the fabric around it, then it tugged and the fabric fell.

Pines towered around Aly on all sides surrounding a large clearing centered by a raised stone platform just ahead of them. In the distance, she heard a howl, and then Wil’s power washed over her. She didn’t try to hide the smile when it spread across her face.

Someone slapped her head and she looked up to see Gabriel scowling down at her. “Don’t be so quick to welcome him.”

Torin’s power crashed into them like icy water, so cold it burned the skin. There was anger in the power, and bloodlust.

The vampires looked up. The one with spiky hair shivered and Gabriel shot him a look.

Torin stepped silently from the tree line. His clothes were dark and His hair looked like he’d been running his fingers through it. He was breathtaking.

She didn’t know the people that stepped forward with him, but their skin was pale and glowed in the moonlight. Her power recognized them as Torin’s kin. Two women, both beautiful specimens. One was blonde and the other red, but otherwise almost identical. The others were men, just as handsome. Still, Torin was the obvious leader. Power seemed to radiate from him.

Aly felt Torin’s pull and tried to stand.

Gabriel shoved her back onto her knees in front of Nocturne. “Stay down.”

“How nice of you to join us, Ruadhan.” Nocturne stroked Aly’s hair. “Your human has been rather eager to see you.”

Something flashed across Torin’s face, but she couldn’t tell what it was. She wished the link between them was open and running.

Torin offered a slow bow. “I came only to retrieve my servant, Anna.”

Anna? Aly knew the name. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the vision she and Torin shared during the *cicatrice*. There had been a woman, a red head. She opened her eyes and glanced to Nocturne. The eyes had more age and the hair was different, but everything else was the same. Nocturne been his lover. The thought made her shiver.

Another howl erupted, and this time it was close enough to send chills across her skin. Wil and his pack emerged from the forest behind the vampires. The men wore no shirts and all were shoeless.

Mr. Spiky pulled Kayla toward them. Her body dragged along the ground as they crossed the clearing. When they were a few yards away, he shoved her so that she fell at Wil’s feet.

Shane knelt beside her and loosed her hands.

Torin’s power flexed in place. “Trade with me, Anna. I am certain that we can find someone suitable for your needs.”

Nocturne laughed that glass shattering sound again. Her hands caught in Aly’s hair and she went very still. “You have tasted her, Ruadhan. Do you really think I will let her go so easily?”

He made no acknowledgment of the words.

“She has already agreed to become my companion. The deal is set. Her sister and her wolf—for her life.”

“No,” Wil growled and jumped forward, but Chris grabbed him. *Good*. Wil didn’t have the power to stop Nocturne, though she doubted he cared.

Torin’s gaze didn’t waver. “I had first claim on this one.”

“You know the rules.” Nocturne moved again, but it felt strangely forced.

“I do, but if the plan is set.” Torin’s hands splayed wide. “Why are we here? It is not like you to waste time.”

“I wanted you, her friends, to be here for the transition.” Nocturne laughed and pulled Aly to her feet by the handful of hair. “She is to be a goddess.”

“Whoa! That wasn’t the deal.” Aly glanced at Wil, who suddenly looked stricken. “I never agreed to that.”

“You agreed to be my companion, and to take my blood.” The woman kissed her cheek too hard. “That is what it means to be my companion.”

Aly’s heart sank. How had this gone so wrong? She’d trusted the guys with her life. Now she was about to join the Leach Legion for an eternity at Gabriel’s hands. Dead was a much better option.

Tears burned behind her eyelids. She wouldn’t cry. She’d always been weak, just like Dad said, but not now. She’d gotten them all into this mess, and if getting them out meant she would be a vampire, then it just did.

Wil growled and his power flooded across the grass. He went on all fours and some of the pack began to shift. Fur flowed and howls cut through the darkness.

Nocturne hissed. “Wolf, do you not see the power I offer you? She may still be your lover. I will feed from your passions as I have of late. The two of you provide an abundance for my needs.”

Aly felt heat creep up her face. They’d been fuel for Nocturne. The idea made her stomach turn.

Wil must have understood too because he leapt past Shane’s hand and let out a howl. Others followed him, heading for the vampires at full speed. By his second leap, his skin was gone and blonde fur took its place. This was Wil’s beast. A muscular wolf that was larger than most men.

Nocturne jerked Aly off the ground and shot into the woods behind where they’d been standing. Aly had a moment to catch a glimpse of Torin bolting after them before trees began to whiz past. Limbs snapped behind them as other things followed. Powers erupted and clashed against each other like collisions of fire and ice. She couldn’t keep up with whose power hit when, it was just rush after rush

of electricity from a forest that was alive with it. A howl rose over the din, and then others.

Torin's power pushed at the walls of her mind until they caved in. There was the scent of him again and the feel of his skin on hers. *Show me where you are.*

Aly looked around, but it was all the same. Growls and crashes could be heard in the distance, but it wasn't enough to pinpoint her location. All the columns of moonlight and tree bark looked the same.

Stop her so we can find you.

Aly twisted and writhed, prying at Nocturne's hand. Things broke in the brush and guns fired around them. If she dropped, she'd probably be trampled, but she snaked down a few inches and hoped for the best.

When she finally managed to get one leg in front of the Nocturne's, it brought them tumbling across the forest floor. They skidded through earth, moss, and leaves to stop against the base of a large pine. Luckily, Nocturne landed on the side against the tree. They shook it hard enough to start a shower of small limbs and pinecones.

The woman snarled. "You ungrateful wench."

Aly clawed her way to up to her knees. Torin's power was calling her stronger than ever, forcing her to be stronger than she was. It helped, and she managed to get to her feet.

Nocturne leapt at her knees and brought her back down.

She kicked into Nocturne's stomach and stunned her. Then she was up again, running toward Torin's power, but Nocturne tackled her again.

She fell face-first into a tree. Her cheek burned and her eye started to swell even before the woman grabbed her hair and threw her to the ground. Aly screamed and Nocturne's mouth clamped over her own so hard that teeth punctured her bottom lip and brought blood.

The woman straddled her and bowed down to stare into her eyes. Aly punched her in the side and she flinched, but didn't move. "You have betrayed my good nature, child."

She brought Aly's arm to her face, clamped her mouth over the wrist, and sank her teeth deep.

Aly screamed again as the fangs hit bone, but Nocturne's hand over her mouth didn't let the sound escape. Nocturne pulled blood from the wound with so much force that Aly's back bowed. She bucked under the woman's weight, but nothing eased the pain. Now she knew there were worse things than Gabriel's bite.

She threw her fist into the woman's side, but this time Nocturne didn't move.

She tried again, but her strength was going fast.

The third attempt left her weak. She tried again, but her arm fell back to the ground with a crunch of leaves. There wasn't enough strength left in her for a fourth try.

No! Aly screamed silently.

A rush of Torin's panic accompanied the words, *We're almost there. Do not let her take you.*

Darkness edged in to frame the view of Nocturne feeding from her arm as the woman's other hand dropped away from Aly's mouth. She tried to scream for him, but now her voice wouldn't come.

No! Fight her, Torin said in her mind.

But she couldn't. Her eyes were too heavy. She couldn't feel her chest moving to pull air in and out of her lungs. She felt cool. No, cold. Deep inside she was cold and tired. Even though she'd never died before, she knew this had to be death. Even as the sounds of fighting faded, her eyes closed and she dropped into a crisp blankness that held rest.

* * * *

Aly choked. Something filled her throat so that she couldn't breathe. When she tried to cough, the wet thickness filled her throat and trickled down her esophagus.

It was the dream. Nocturne was changing her, and panic roared through her head, but she didn't swallow. She wouldn't drink; she'd rather die.

“Drink, young one.” Nocturne’s voice was strangely nurturing. “Drink it or you will die.”

Drink it, darling. We’ll sort the rest out later. Torin’s voice edged with defeat.

No, she thought and hoped he heard.

They have William. I dare not attack with you in her grip. Drink it, and then pull free of her arms. I will not lose you.

There was something in his tone that made it all seem okay. It made her swallow the blood down. Then, when more filled her throat, she swallowed again. She did manage a breath even though she didn’t need it, but as soon as she did, she regretted it. It brought the sweet, metallic taste of blood. Just like in the vision.

“That’s it,” the woman said.

She tried to move, but Nocturne’s wrist pressed against her mouth and forced her to drink.

With the next gulp, fire stroked itself to life in her stomach. It ran through her veins and brought with it power, her own power.

Nocturne gasped. “That’s it.”

Try to take her. Drink in her power and don’t stop until she is down.

Aly grabbed the wrist, and sank her teeth deep. She drew blood in, and embraced the bit of Nocturne’s power that came with each mouthful. This time, she didn’t want to be sick. This time, she wanted to drink every bit. Each time she pulled at the wound, her power lapped at the electricity that powered the woman’s corpse.

“Stop.” Nocturne pulled at her wrist, but Aly wouldn’t let go. “Stop it!”

Aly opened her eyes, still hugging the arm to her mouth. The night glowed and the stars glittered like Christmas lights overhead where there’d been none before. Something was beside them, something breathing in the shadow. She cut her eyes that way, but saw nothing when she looked directly.

“Release me, now.” Nocturne put her free hand on Aly’s head, and tried to push her away. Aly didn’t budge, and the first hint of panic widened the woman’s

eyes. It made Aly smile. Nocturne screamed as she jerked her wrist away, leaving flesh behind.

Aly turned her head to the side and spit. There was power in her now. If Nocturne wanted to fight, Aly was ready.

She put a hand on the ground to push herself up, grabbing a broken limb as she stood.

“You will pay for this. How dare you bite me?”

With a speed she’d never had before, Aly slammed the wood into Nocturne’s chest.

Torin leapt from the shadow. “No, Alyson!”

She jumped, but the wood had found its place.

Nocturne fell to the side in a bloodied heap. Then Aly felt it. A deep, aching pain started in her chest and pierced through her in a dull stab, but when she looked down, there was no wound.

“You cannot kill your creator this quickly.” He was there, pulling her into his arms. “You are dying with her.”

She clutched her chest as the invisible stake probed her heart. She managed to scream his name before her voice turned to sharp sounds. Fire erupted in her chest. She clawed at it, feeling death radiating from the spot. It moved outward, numbing her body as it went. She’d thought death would be welcome after this, but now that it had found her she was truly afraid. Being a vampire was better than being dead.

Torin leaned close and his voice was calm. “If you truly mean that, say it. I can try to take you as my own. But know that it will bind us forever. We will be matched in every way and young William will not approve.”

The numbness took her arms. Only her face felt the wind blowing between them. Pain faded, along with her strength, as the darkness pressed in again. *I don't want to die.*



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alyson felt the darkness forcing in the edges of her consciousness. Something cut her wrist deep, and blood flowed free. Torin was there, but he wasn't drinking. He spilled the blood to the ground. *Dead blood.*

Blackness returned for what seemed like the smallest of moments, and then blood flowed over her lips. It filled her mouth with the sweet syrup of him. When she swallowed, her body flared with life. It flowed down her throat in warming strokes until it reached her center. She convulsed in a pleased squirm, then clamped her mouth over his wrist.

With each drink, she sucked harder until it drew a moan from his lips. Her tongue rolled over his skin, salty sweet with the blood. She drew harder still, but it wasn't enough. She wanted him pressed to her, his neck bared to her mouth. She wanted to bury herself in the smell of him and have his arms around her, holding her to him.

"Stop, Alyson." His voice came thick, and his eyes fluttered shut. "Or you will unravel me."

She slurped more of him down until he pulled his arm away. Aly groaned, but didn't fight. She leaned against Torin's chest and heard his heart beating wildly in its cage.

The world around them was dark, but life emanated from every corner. The fighting was over, but the sound of a dozen heartbeats bombarded her now.

He smiled down at her and wrapped her in his arms. "It is a rare thing that this heart beats. I am too old."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Do not thank me, yet."

“I owe you my life. She killed me.” She looked up to meet his eyes and felt her heart flutter. “But you gave me life again.”

“That is a wonderful sentiment.” He smiled and let his arms fall away. “Let us see if you still feel the same once you tell William.”

She sat up easily enough, while he got to his feet. She stood and watched him straighten his shirt. The movement of even the fabric fascinated her. It looked different, almost magical.

“Tell me what?” Wil moved from the darkness as a man, but the eyes still dark and deadly. He sniffed the air and snarled.

“Nocturne. Uh—Nocturne turned me, Wil.” She motioned to the body.

“I know, I can smell it.” He crinkled his nose when he said it.

She swallowed and tried to continue. “I killed her, but it took me with her. When I died, Torin brought me back.”

Aly waited for his reaction and was suddenly aware of how still Torin was. Wil’s eyes narrowed and he turned to pace. Torin watched. Wil turned toward her as if to say something, and then started pacing again. He did it several times, and they watched him, carefully waiting to see if they should bolt or stay.

“Nothing changes. I will not keep her from you. She is yours for as long as she likes.”

Wil whirled to look at him. His finger pointed at the man’s chest. “I know what this means. She’s yours now, no matter what we had when she was alive.”

Aly felt a hole appear in the middle of her chest and it felt real enough that she looked down. “I am alive, Wil.”

She looked up and saw a grimace stretch his lips.

“Wil, please.” Tears stung her eyes. “If it wasn’t for him, I’d really *be* dead.” She pointed to the pool of dark fluid on the ground. “Nothing has changed between us.”

He started to pace again. “Yes it has.”

“I still love you.”

He stopped. His shoulders sagged, and he stood there silent for what seemed an eternity. “All I can do is try, Aly. I can’t make any promises.”

She went to him, but even then, she felt Torin’s magnetic power pulling at her. She wanted to go to Torin, to wrap herself around him. It was agony, but she smiled and wrapped her arms around Wil’s neck instead. He couldn’t know.

Wil looked down at her, and then wrapped his arms around her cautiously.

“I still loved you, Wil. Even when I learned what you are. Does the fact that I’m one of them make that big a difference?”

His tension seemed to seep out with his breath. “I guess not.”

“Excellent.” Torin said in a reserved voice that she wasn’t sure was sincere. “Alyson will need to train with us until she learns to survive on her own. Then she may come back to Hayden for as long as she likes.”

Wil tensed again. “Why does she have to go?”

“Can you teach her what it is to be Kith?”

He didn’t answer.

Aly squeezed him. “It’s all right. I’ll just go until I get control of this.”

Some emotion passed across his face, too fast for her to name it. It was gone when he nodded.

“I won’t be long. I can’t take off work that long.” Wil and Torin shared a look that made her turn in his arms. “I can’t go back, can I?”

Torin let a smile creep across his face. “I believe we can arrange for her name to be cleared and her job returned, if that is what she wishes.”

“I want my name cleared.” Aly wasn’t sure if the title, news reporter, fit her new life, but she didn’t want to talk about it right now. There’d be plenty of time to talk about it while she was on “vacation”.

Torin examined his fingernails. “How is your pack?”

“Shane’s a bit banged up, but he’ll survive. He’s holding that Gabriel guy for you. Your people said you wanted him alive?”

A sinful grin stretched across Torin’s lips, but he didn’t look up. “I do.”

Aly hoped the bastard burned for a very long time.

Wil continued. "Some of the vampires died with her. The one with the weird hair is alive though."

"The ones who died are young, as our Alyson understands too well." Torin looked up finally. His face was a blank mask. "I must leave. We have other things to attend to before dawn." He made a flourished bow. "William."

"I'm going to stay here with Wil for the night. Then I'll leave tomorrow."

"As you wish." *Sleep well*, his mind said.

Aly smiled and caught the hint of his returned smile. He was looking forward to torturing Gabriel and part of her wished she could go. "Have fun."

"I intend to." With a whoosh of cool wind, he disappeared into the darkness.

* * * *

The lights in the basement of Ray and June's house were out, and only the light that flowed down the stairs from the kitchen pierced the darkness. Aly followed Wil down the stairs and she understood why he never needed lights in the dark.

"I'll get the light," Wil said.

"Don't worry about it. I can see."

He sighed and she suddenly wished she hadn't said it. "Did you mean what you said about Kith and wolves being enemies?"

"Not really." He stepped into the safe-room and waited for her to enter before the door closed again.

Darkness surrounded them but still she saw the faint edges of him. She reached out, took Wil's hand, and pulled him toward the small bed that June had added for times when he might need shelter for the night.

"Are you scared?" His voice was quiet.

"Not anymore." She sat and scooted toward the wall.

"You're not scared of me, either?" He sat beside her, making the bed squeak. "You've seen what I really am."

"No."

"It's going to be bad, you know. They're not human." He leaned forward to elbows on knees. He sounded sad, tired. "Most of them are heartless monsters."

He looked at her and she couldn't read his thoughts. Her connection with Torin blocked Wil completely, and she couldn't feel the connection with Torin at the moment either. It made her feel alone. "I sort of guessed that, but I think Torin will protect me."

"What makes you think that? I've known him longer than you have."

"Just call it a hunch."

"I don't know how this is going to work." His hand slid over hers. "But I still love you, Aly."

She slipped her other hand over his to cradle his fingers.

"It's not like we can go back now, is it?"

"No, I suppose not." She could feel his sadness, like bitter herbs on her tongue, and wondered if it was the new power that made her feel his emotion without a link. "Kiss me, Wil."

He leaned toward her, and the other arm slid around her neck. When their lips met, power sparked between them. He startled, and then pressed his lips against hers. He tasted spicy and his skin was so warm. She ran her hands up his bare chest and felt the thick muscles moving underneath. His heart pounded behind them and she wanted to touch it.

Wil groaned against her mouth and pushed her back onto the bed. She could feel something else lurking close. His power was just under the skin. When she moved her hands down his back, it sniffed her, and then backed away into darkness.

He broke the kiss panting. "I can't do this. I don't know what will happen. You're inviting the monster, and I don't think I can control it if we can keep going."

"I don't care. As long as I can't get pregnant or die, it'll be fine."

"No, you can't get pregnant now. I meant that I might turn."

She pulled and he didn't come to her.

"I don't care." She kissed along his chest. "We have nothing to hide now, Wil."

He hesitated, and then let himself down on her so hard that the bed squeaked. His mouth met hers, and with his hand came long nails that scratched softly across her skin. Wherever they met her clothes, he ripped them from her body in shreds until she lay naked beneath him.

She groaned and reached for his pants, fumbling with new speed until she unzipped them and used her feet to push them down his legs.

Wil planted his hands against the bed and pushed his weight against her. He was firm and ready. His power flared over her like boiling water, bringing her power and the scent of Torin.

He stopped and scented the air, then growled.

Aly's power met his and flared back. He shivered, and when his fear became a tangible thing, she brushed her hands up his back again and stroked him in long, comforting motions.

His eyes opened and his mouth snarled at her. She nipped at his neck and played across the pulse there until he whimpered. Her tongue ran the length of his collarbone to his ear and brought a low purr from his lips. She wanted to bite him, but bit her lip instead and brought the taste she craved from her own skin. The need wasn't hers, or maybe it was and Torin reined it in. Either way, he was there, inside her.

Wil's hips pushed against hers again. He teased himself against her in long strokes.

She kissed him like she would eat him and wrapped her legs around him, pulling him inside of her.

When his arms caved, one of her new canines nipped his skin. He flinched, and she watched the blood bubble to the surface, then she took it in one long lick and let it slide down her tongue.

Aly took the second drop greedily and kissed him to taste the warm spice from his mouth. She rolled her hips and pulled him deeper, sucking his lip into her mouth at the same time. When he gave himself to the act, she moved her mouth to his neck and nipped him there, too.

Blood came faster this time and she sucked to get every drop. Her womb spasmed and she could feel Torin's desire building with her own. For a moment, she wondered how he would sate his hunger and felt a twinge of jealousy.

Wil pushed harder and it brought her back into her own body. Her back bowed and her teeth sank into the soft skin at his neck. His blood was hot and spicy. She grunted and drank harder.

Wil yelled out his pleasure and pushed them both over the edge. The crest rolled on for an eternity and she couldn't focus on just one thing. The blood and the sexual pleasure intertwined. They bonded so tightly it made her wonder how she'd ever managed one without the other.

"Aly, stop."

She let him pull away, careful not to tear his skin, and licked her lips as he held her to the bed. When blood fell from his neck, she caught a drop of crimson on her tongue and rolled it over her palate.

He laughed and his body jerked inside her. "I thought I was the most dangerous thing in this bed."

She rolled her hips again, and his back bowed toward her. With each subtle move she made, he leaned closer until his eyes flared with power. He pushed again and finally found a rhythm that made the wolf stir beneath his skin, but he kept his grip on her arms. The creature's hunger grew and power flared. It pushed at hers, but didn't attack. Wil was holding back.

Aly nicked her tongue and his mouth went immediately to her. She gave him the bit of blood that it brought. She raised her hips on the bed and tightened herself around him.

He grunted and pushed. It reached the depth of her and brought him in a wave of heat that spilled into her like warm honey. His body jolted, and a howl echoed off the chamber walls before Wil collapsed on top of her.

His heart thumped against her chest. She listened, but there was no beat of her own to match it. For a moment, she wished it would.

* * * *

“Day’s coming.” Aly said, pulling Wil’s arm around her. The room was growing colder, like someone was sucking all the heat from her body.

“Are you scared?”

Any other time, she would have denied it. Now, with everything that had happened, a little fear just didn’t seem like a horrible thing. She nodded. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“I don’t know. I just know you’ll be asleep.” He placed a kiss on her shoulder.

“Will you be here when I wake up?”

“Yeah.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” Wil shifted a little. “I know how you hate to be bossed, but you do realize that they call their leaders ‘Master’ for a reason?”

“Yeah. I’ll deal with it.” She hadn’t really thought about it, but she didn’t want to know either.

“You can’t control everything in *this* world.”

“I know Wil. That’s why I’m going to need you now more than ever.” There was a time when she’d thought she could, but with death came disillusionment.

He turned her head to look at him. “I can’t believe you just said you need me to do anything.”

She laughed. She really would need him now, whether she liked it or not. Maybe she shouldn’t have been in such a hurry to be strong. Sometimes she just couldn’t be the toughest kid on the block. “Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

He nodded and snuggled his head into her neck.

“I’m sorry, Wil.”

“I’m sorry, too.” He squeezed her, and she felt a tear land on her shoulder. “Sleep well.”

She started to respond, but couldn’t. Coldness took over her skin and the heat drained out through her toes. The sun was coming, and she wanted to tell him goodnight, but her mouth wouldn’t move. Her body was relaxed, asleep, and her

mind would go too if she let it. Was this what daylight felt like, what each of her mornings would be like from now on? Would she just die again every day?

“I feel you fighting it.” Wil kissed her on the cheek. “Just sleep, Aly. We won’t let anything happen.”

She wanted to take a breath and let herself go, but her chest wouldn’t rise. A feeling close to panic spread through her. It wasn’t that she needed to breathe, but it felt wrong. She fought against it until Wil’s hand stroked her hair. She let the stroke take the tension away, and the darkness took her to the place everyone goes when they die.

