

VIII



**Blood Fever**

**Stephani  
Hecht**



**Pentacles**

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BLOOD FEVER:  
TABOT - EIGHT OF  
PENTACLES

BY

STEPHANI HECHT

## DEDICATION

*To Rachael H. You helped me get this vampire  
book on track.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is the prequel to the Drone Vampire Series.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Welcome to the world of vampires. You may think that because you now are immortal, have super strength, and many other special talents, that you are special. You're not. You were made a vampire, not born one, and that makes you a Drone. That means you have no rights, you have no privileges. In short, you are nothing.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

**I**t's funny how at one moment you can have everything only to lose it in a matter of seconds. After a lifetime of hard work, hard training and hard living, it all slipped through Ryan's fingers in the time it took to blow a whistle. Once destined to have the whole world on a platter, it was all gone. Now he had nothing. He was nothing. His future was just a bleak picture of nothing. Thanks to fate's fucked up sense of humor, he was back in his small town, with his tail between his legs.

Today was his first day at the auto factory. It

was the same factory that every man in the town worked at. Ryan's father had worked there every day until three months ago, he had keeled over right on the assembly line, dead from a heart attack. Ryan had thought he beat the odds, that he was going to be one of the few people who got out, but here he was sitting in the foreman's office, wearing a pair of dirty jeans, heavy work boots, a battered Red Wings ball-cap and flannel shirt, getting ready to face his first day on that same damn assembly line.

*Nothing.*

The foreman smirked, almost as if he could hear Ryan's thoughts. The foreman was anything but nothing. At two hundred and fifty pounds of flubber and flab, he seemed to dwarf the smelly, grubby office. His name was Aaron and he had hated Ryan ever since they had gone to school together.

"I'll bet you never thought that you would be here?" Aaron's pimply, ruddy face wore a smirk. His greasy brown hair was combed over to the side, Richie Cunningham style, despite the fact he was in his early twenties.

Ryan shuffled his feet, trying not to wince when the movement aggravated his bum knee. What he really wanted to say was, *Actually I called my friends at the Psychic Network and they never let me know this was going to happen. But what can you*

*expect for \$2.99 a minute and, to be fair to them, I did rush the conversation so I could save a few bucks. Not that he'd ever call a physic nine hundred number, it was just his inner sarcasm begging to come out. He never called the other nine hundred number either. Well...maybe once or twice, but what guy didn't? He kept his face bored as he replied, "Look, just show me where I'm suppose to work."*

But Aaron had latched on the topic like dog to a bone and he wasn't about to let it go. The fat lard leaned against a battered green desk and crossed his arms over his chest. He was wearing a short-sleeved dress shirt that was so cheap Ryan could see the t-shirt underneath straining against his massive gut. The top was coupled with a pair of black dress slacks and a tie that had obviously been a gift from his mommy. In the background, Ryan could make out the loud bangs from the machines on the line, mixing in with the curses and yells of the workers.

The air was rich with the scent of metal, oil and sweat. He knew the smell well. His dad had come home reeking of it every night. Ryan's gut tightened when he realized he was now going to be coming home with that smell clinging to him, just like Dad, and that he was probably going to die in this shithole, just like Dad. He pulled the bill of his cap down further, hoping the misery he knew was prancing around in his brown eyes was



shielded from view.

“What’s the rush?” Aaron’s upper lip curled in a sneer. “It’s not every day I get a washed up, has been hero, in my office.”

That comment stung, but Ryan wasn’t going to let the dick know it. His looked down at his work boots and shoved his hands in his jean pockets. A lock of his brown hair had freed itself from the front of his hat and was in his eyes. He focused on it so he didn’t have to look at the foreman. In order to save his sanity, he fired off another internal comeback, what he really was itching to say, but didn’t dare. *Better to be that, then the asswad who got caught jacking off in the bathroom in eighth grade.* Ryan kept up with outward mute silence.

Aaron continued, “It must really suck, knowing you were this close to getting out of this life.” He held up his thumb and pointer finger an inch apart.

Ryan noticed that his fingernails were dirty and stained orange from his cheesy puffs.

“You were some big hockey star all through high school. Then you got to go to college with a full ride because you were such a golden boy. All of these professional teams were just drooling to get their hands on you. But it all ended when you got hurt. So now you’re back here at our small town, in the same factory your brother and friends sweat in every day. It sucks to be you.”

It did suck to be him, but Ryan was going to be damned if he was going to admit it to the prick. "It just wasn't meant to be, I guess." *God, I just want to kill this jerk, then kill myself so I can be out my misery. But knowing my luck, we'd both end up in hell and my punishment would be having him as my roommate for all of eternity.*

Aaron gave a little laugh, running his tongue over the front of his teeth. "Let's face it, you were never going to make it. You were a loser in high school and you're still a loser."

Ryan thought back to those high school days. If anyone had been the loser, it was Aaron. A second stringer for the football team, the fat jerk had gotten his rocks off on bullying anyone smaller than him. And he was truly a lard ass that had consisted of most of the student body of Hadley High. One day Ryan had come across him smacking Chris Dane, a drummer from the band. Ryan had intervened, turning the tables on Aaron when he beat his ass into the chem labs floor. That day he had earned a bitter enemy in Ryan and a devoted friend in Chris.

Ryan yearned for a replay of the ass kicking right now, but since Aaron was his foreman and Ryan desperately needed this job, he kept his hands in his pockets and his trap shut.

Aaron pushed his massive frame away from the desk and waddled to the door. As soon as he

opened it, the sounds from the auto factory increased tenfold. Ryan pulled the pair of earplugs out of his pocket his brother had given him before he left and went out to his new life.

\* \* \* \*

Ryan got out of his truck and limped up to the house. Even after five grueling days at the factory, the harsh manual labor was still not getting easier on his body. Not only was his brain trying to get used to working the midnight shift, but his hands were so overused and battered by machinery that they felt like raw hamburger. He fumbled with the door handle several seconds before he was able to get it open. The pain had made his hands useless, the fingers curled up in protective claws. In truth, every inch of his body ached, both from the repetition of doing the same task over and over for endless hours and the sharp jerks the machines made whenever he didn't have a bolt lined up just right. Despite the pain, he never dared slow down or stop. He had only a minute to do a job that really took a minute and ten seconds to do. He knew how long it took because he found himself counting down those precious seconds in his head again and again as he fell further and further behind.

That was worse than the physical pain, the

stress of trying to keep up with a job that never ended. As soon as he managed to get one task done, another was waiting for him, then another, and another, and another. A panicked feeling of apprehension and fear was constantly tying his stomach in knots. Aaron would love to have a reason to fire Ryan and him not being able to handle his job on the line would be a perfect opportunity for the fat bastard. Ryan would die before he gave him the satisfaction.

He found Mom sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for him, just like she had been every morning for the last five days. Even though she had moved out of the family home after Dad had died in order to live with her elderly mother, she had still driven clear across town to be there for him when he came home. A bowl of hot water with Epson Salts and a cup of coffee were sitting in front of her. He shuffled to the table and, before his ass had even hit the chair, he was plunging his hands into the soothing warmth of the water.

The house was silent—his brother Matt worked the first shift so he was gone. Ryan and his mom sat in silence, her studying his abused hands, him studying her. *God, when had Mom gotten so old?* Her brown hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, but he could still see the threads of gray that shot threw it. She had the same brown eyes he did, but hers were lined with wrinkles. Her lips were

pursed in worry and she looked too pale for his comfort. Since she was wearing her smock, he knew she was getting ready to go to work at the grocery store. Pain sliced through him, making his chest tight with emotion. Mom shouldn't have to work anymore. If he hadn't fucked things up by getting hurt, then maybe he would have been making enough by now to send home so she could retire like she deserved.

"I'm so sorry, baby," she finally murmured.

Ryan felt his breath hitch when her face filled with such despair and shame. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Mom. If it's anyone who should be sorry it's me. I should have done better by you."

"Oh, baby." Tears made her eyes bright. "It's not your fault. I just wish that you hadn't of gave up on college. You deserve better than this."

Raising a wet hand, he cupped her cheek. "It's okay, I really didn't want to stay after I got hurt. They were only keeping me on the team out of pity and Dad taught me better than to take anyone's charity."

A tear tickled down her cheek. "I just always wanted more for you."

"I know you and Dad did the best you could. I don't blame you for any of this."

"That man from Canada called again. He really wants you to come and work for his hockey school. He's willing to pay you twice as much as

the factory.”

God, he was tempted. He missed hockey so bad it sometimes became an almost physical pain. He yearned to feel the artificial cold of the rink, to hear the rasp of a skate blade as it dug into the ice, to see the glass shudder as bodies were checked into the boards. He even missed the smell of the locker rooms. But that life was gone now and he was better off forgetting it all together. No sense being around something he couldn't really have. “That place is far away.” He gave a half-shrug to fake indifference. “I don't want to be away from home and leave you, Grandma and Matt.”

“You left home when you went to college.”

“That was different, I could come back on weekends. This school just isn't across the border, it is deep north. I won't be able to come home if you suddenly need me.”

His mother plucked nervously at the tablecloth. “That's the thing. In a month there won't be anyone here to come back to.”

Titling his head to the side, he wondered if his exhaustion was making him hear things. “What are you talking about? Matt and I live together, he's been working at the factory for five years. He's not going anywhere.”

“He enlisted in the Army yesterday,” she revealed, clasping her hands so tightly together her knuckles turned white. “He leaves next

month.”

“Why would he do that?” Shocked, Ryan’s heart thudded in his chest. “With the war he has to know the chances are he will get deployed.”

“Like you, he has his pride. He thinks it will be a good way to get a college education while making a difference.”

Ryan looked away as guilt once more weighed heavily on him. If he’d gone pro then he would have been able to send Matty to college. Even though his brother had graduated ahead on Ryan it had been no secret he’d always wanted to get a better education. The family had just never had the money to pay their bills let alone extras like that.

“That only makes it even more important I stay for you and Grandma. With Matty gone, who will look out for you two?”

A sad look came into her eyes. “Grandma doesn’t even recognize us anymore. I can’t take care of her anymore now the Alzheimer’s has progressed so much I don’t have a choice but to put her in a nursing center.”

Ryan wasn’t too surprised by that news. Grandma hadn’t been herself for years. “What about you? I can’t leave you alone.”

A small smile played on her lips. “I can take care of myself.” She gingerly grabbed one of his battered hands and kissed it. “What I can’t do is

watch you waste your life away. I can go live with my sister in Florida. It would be nice to get away from these winters. ”

Again temptation reared itself. “Tell you what, I’ll think about it, Ma.”

The relief on her face was heartbreaking. “Thank you, I’ll take that for now.” She patted his arm. “Go on up to bed. You look beat.”

Not needing to be told twice, he made his way up the stairs to his bedroom. It was the same room he’d had since the day he was born. The only difference was the posters of all the professional goaltenders that used to line the walls had been torn down. They were crammed into the back of his closet, along with all his trophies.

Not even bothering to undress, he tumbled onto his bed. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.



## CHAPTER TWO

*Rule Number 45: You must never convert a human without prior consent of the Vampire Regulation Force. Not only does it draw attention to our existence, but it unbalances the local population. We can't have vampires outnumbering humans, it simply won't do. After all, it never pays to have more predators than prey.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

Later that night, Ryan's mood still hadn't improved. He was sitting at a table situated in the farthest corner of the bar, trying his best to avoid the pity looks being tossed his way by the locals. To make matter worse about an hour after they had arrived, Chris had disappeared with a leggy blonde and had yet to return. Ryan seriously doubted that he was going to see him again tonight. Not that he had minded much. He had his

good friend, Jack Daniels, to keep him company.

He toyed with the glass, noticing the wet ring that it left behind on the brown tabletop. Around him people talked loudly over the eighties rock music a novice band was cranking out on the small stage. Not very many people were taking advantage of the small, dusty dance floor, most occupied themselves with the dartboards or pool tables.

The joint reeked of stale beer, popcorn, greasy fries and loneliness. Life continued around him, even as he felt everything that he ever wanted slipping further and further away.

“My God, you are not seriously letting them get to you?”

Both surprised and annoyed at having his pity party interrupted, Ryan looked up with a scowl. When he saw it was Elizabeth, he smiled instead. All ratted blonde hair, red nails and heavy makeup, she was about ten years his senior. Born in this town, she'd been working at the bar since she'd graduated from high school. With no children of her own, she'd taken to mothering all the future generations in town. She plopped her tray down and took the chair next to him.

“They are a bunch of nobodies who have nothing better to do with their time, but gossip.” She shot a dirty look over her shoulder and some of the gawkers averted their gazes.

"It's no big deal." He slammed back a shot, grimacing as it burned down his throat. "I'm getting used to it."

"Just give them a week or so and they'll find another topic to latch onto."

Ryan grunted, somehow he doubted that. In their small town, gossip never died down. They still talked about things that had happened three decades ago. He held up his empty glass and gave a questioning cock of his head.

Elizabeth gave a slow shake of her head. "I don't think so, tiger." She took the glass from him. "You've had enough for tonight."

"Come on." Ryan knew he was whining, but he was beyond caring this point. "It's not like I'm driving. Chris brought me here."

"Chris?" She arched a too-thin brow at him. "You mean the Chris who left not too long ago with his latest slut of the month?"

"Crap." Ryan put his head on the table. "How the fuck am I going to get home now?"

"Stop it right now!" With a frustrated growl, she slammed her hand on the table.

Ryan's head shot up, surprise taking the edge off his buzz. "Stop what?"

"This feeling sorry for yourself. It's getting old."

"That's real easy for you to say," Ryan shot back, anger making him all but snarl the words.

*Who is she to judge me?* “You have no idea what I’m going through.”

“Oh really?” She let out a harsh laugh. “So you think that the Great Ryan is the only one who’s ever had dreams, hopes? You’re not the only one that life has crapped on.”

“Oh God, if this is another pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps speech I really don’t feel like it now.” He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I’ve lost everything. It’s just not the hockey either, my whole family is leaving me.”

“Maybe that’s because they don’t want to see you throw your life away.”

“That’s just is, I have no life left.”

Several patrons had turned to look their way.

“You are one the smartest guys I know and you still have so much to give.” Her eyes grew warm with concern. “Matty told me about the job offer in Canada. Why don’t you go coach? Just because you can’t play anymore doesn’t mean you’re hockey career is over. Get your head out of your ass and your ass out of this town. If you don’t do this now, you will regret it forever.”

“Look, the factory was good enough for my dad, why shouldn’t it be good for enough for me?”

“It’s more than the factory.” Looking around, she lowered her voice. “There are things going down here, bad things.”

"Yeah, there is one of those new superstores going in downtown," Ryan said sarcastically. "It's a real tragedy."

Her blue eyes grew dark with rage and a low growl came from her throat. "Forget I said anything." She got up to leave.

Ryan reached out and snagged her wrist at the last minute. Standing, he wrapped her arms around her and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. Elizabeth was one of his favorite people and he would rather cut off his right arm than hurt her and damned if that wasn't just what he'd done. The overwhelming odor of cheap hairspray nearly choked him, but he didn't pull back. "I'm sorry for being such an ass."

"You were an ass," she agreed, her voice muffled against his chest.

He laughed. "Will it put me back in your good graces if I call that hockey school in the morning?"

"Promise?" She pulled back and gave him an earnest look.

"Scouts honor." He raised two fingers up.

She snorted and batted them down. "They kicked you out of Scouts."

"Hey, could I help it if they had a strict policy about using cherry bombs at camp?"

"You were a menace even then." She gave him a peck on the cheek, no doubt leaving behind a smudge of her lipstick. "You better make that call

tomorrow.”

“I will,” he vowed and, for the first time, he really meant it. He’d heard of plenty of players who had been hurt going on to coach others. That hockey school in Canada would be the perfect place to start. Even though he was no longer able to play, the ice still called to him and he yearned to strap on his pads again and glide over the surface on the blades of his skates. He could do that again. He could still be somebody.

Suddenly it felt as if a thousand pound weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He wasn’t going to have to die in that factory like Dad. There was still a future for him. Sure it wasn’t the one that he had always imagined, but it was a damn site better than what he had now. Hell, he might actually be able to make a difference in some kid’s life. That thought cheered him up for the first time in weeks. As he watched Elizabeth walk back to the bar, he couldn’t help but grin.

A husky, feminine voice interrupted his thoughts, “Why are you smiling all of the sudden? I have been watching you for an hour and, up until a second ago, you were one Gloomy Gus.”

A dark-haired vixen stood in front of the table, appraising him with her dark eyes. A black drink stirrer was situated between her full red lips and she was toying with it suggestively as she fucked him with her gaze. Her silken hair was pulled

back in an intricate knot so her slender white neck was bare except for a thick black choker. Full inviting breasts threatened to spill out of the low cut red top she was wearing. It was sleeveless so her creamy shoulders were open for display, too. His attention drifted down to her legs, he got an eyeful thanks to the tiny skirt she wore. All the blood in his body instantly went south. Oh dear Lord, she was wearing back fishnets and she had a pair of black stilettos on, too. *Perfect, to wrap around my waist as I screw you senseless, my dear.*

Her gaze honed in on the numerous empty glasses in front of him before she pressed her lips together in a disapproving manner. Ryan felt a flush come to his cheeks as he realized he was probably coming off as a lush. For a second, he thought she was going to bail and look for greener, more sober pastures. Instead, she stayed rooted in place and continued to work that drink stirrer.

Tilting her head, she asked silent permission to join him. He got up and pulled out a chair for her, making sure she was comfortable before he retook his own seat. Her mouth curved into a smile. He was drawn to her full red lips, so red that they looked like they had been stained by something she'd ate, maybe strawberries. She showed only the briefest hint of her white teeth before they disappeared from view again.

"I'm happy because I just had an epiphany," Ryan explained.

She raised one elegantly arched brow at his statement before she slid her chair so close to him she was almost sitting on his lap. "Did this epiphany involve lots of rough, dirty sex?" she whispered hotly in his ear. He jumped a bit when she nipped at his earlobe. Her teeth felt strangely sharp, she soothed the pain away with a gentle sweep of her velvet tongue.

"No," he rasped before wincing. Yeah, that had been real slick there, sport. Usually he was more on his game than tonight. It was just no female had shown him any interest since his glory days had faded. God, it had been months since he'd been laid. Something he hadn't really noticed, until this sexual explosion had walked up to him.

Her hand somehow ended up on his upper thigh. Fingers trailing up until she was cupping him through his jeans. Darting a furtive glance around the bar, he worried someone was going to see her manhandling him. Then she gave his cock a generous squeeze and he suddenly didn't give a damn who saw them. Leaning into his neck, she rained kisses down his flesh before she scraped her teeth against him.

"Ouch, you're teeth are kind of sharp." Sadism had never really been his thing. During his freshman year, he'd roomed with a guy that was



deep into the whole BDSM thing and, while he never judged his friend for it, it had never appealed to him either. But for some reason, he could so see himself getting into some spanking action with this chick. She had a dangerous aura about her, with underlying promises of taboo touches and dark fantasies. His cock got even harder.

She gave a slow seductive giggle. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Hell no."

"Let's get out of here," she suggested

Cool fingers grabbed hold of his hand as she jerked him out of his chair and led him out the door. He followed liked the obedient puppet his dick had made him, all the while staring at the way her ass moved under the tight fabric of her skirt. He licked his lips. Before the hour was up, he vowed that he was going to feast off that nice backside.

\* \* \* \*

Sable and her partner, Eric, had been out driving the streets of the small town for most of the night with little success. A pair of criminal Drone vampires had escaped and everyone in the Regulation Force was out looking for them. They were known human killers and the last thing any

of them needed was the human government breathing down their necks. *Yes, vampire pun intended, thank you very much.* Adding more crap to the shit sundae, was the fact that the Pure vampires would love nothing more than to have fuel for their, Drones-are-inferior-weaker-and-unstable theory.

Eric and Sable were part of the Loser Patrol, the under-trained, under-funded Drone branch of the Vampire Regulation Force. One step over the criminals and two steps below a human meter maid, they were disdained by the rest of the force.

Eric kept his speed down so Sable would be able to scan each street careful, making sure there was no sign of vampire activity. For all their searching, there had been nothing. Just empty streets, one street light and about three churches. It was your typical, dull, small town that hadn't a lick of action in it. *Boring.* She let out a groan of frustration that didn't go unnoticed.

"I would think you would be right at home here," he observed in a droll tone. "The town you grew up in was just like this one."

She curled her lip, knowing that she was showing a bit of fang. "That was a different time, a different person."

Eric didn't seemed put off by her attitude. "Oh yes, I forgot. You're some deadly vampire named Sable who never had the name Jane. You never

went to a private Baptist High School, never worked at the local bowling alley, never spent most of your nights drinking beers with the locals.” He snorted. “Who are you trying to convince, me or yourself?”

She gazed out the window, refusing to answer him. The night she had been made a vampire, her sire, Corbin had given her a new name in hopes she would acclimate to her new life better. Then he had taken her away from the only home she had ever known and thrust her into the dark, often times violent, world of vampires. Corbin had tried everything, including beatings, to make her forget who she was and become the coldhearted killer he desired. None if it had worked. Much to his disgust, deep down, she still remained the simple girl next door. More Peggy Sue than Vampiress. Although she had given in on one point, she had never gone back to her human name. “It doesn’t matter what my name used to be,” she muttered into the dark night. “That girl died years ago.”

Eric gave her a purposeful look over, deliberately taking in her dark hoodie, comfortable workout pants and ending at her black Converse shoes. She had written, *Bite Me and Die!* on the white toes of them with ink pen. She had emphasized the threat by adding a smiley face. “Yes, because you so look the part of a deadly vampiress named Sable.”

She suddenly wished she had dressed in the leather pants all the other female vamps preferred. Or at the very least, done something more sophisticated with her hair than pulling it into a set of Heidi braids. "Shut your face," she retorted, knowing how lame her comeback was but too hurt by the truth to come up with something more eloquent.

Eric reached over and flicked one of her braids. "Seriously, Sable, I could plunk you down in the center of that bar over there and you would fit right in with all the small-town girls." He pointed over to a tiny bar across the street. The large number of cars told her it was the most popular spot in Hadley.

Sable sighed. Truth be told, she would feel right at home in the small bar. Even without being inside, she knew there would be a pair of pool tables and at least three dartboards. The burgers would be to die for and the fries so greasy they could cause instant heart disease. She had spent many nights in just such a bar with her three brothers before she had turned. Just looking at the place made her miss her sibs so much a hard lump built up in the back of her throat. Her vision got blurry before she blinked away the tears forming there. "Is there any reason why you're verbally attacking me like this?" A few snowflakes had started to drift down, making the night seem more

serene, quiet and lonely.

“Ever since our clan moved near this town, you’ve been acting down. It took me a while, but I finally figured out it was because you’re homesick.”

The soft caring tone of his voice tugged at her heart. It had seemed while she had lost her three human brothers, she had gained another one. One that happened to be a six-foot four vampire with a blond military cut, razor sharp blue eyes and a killer’s disposition. In short, a real teddy bear.

“You don’t need to worry about me, I’m—” A couple were leaving the bar. The male was walking on unsteady legs and the female was leading the way. Thanks to her supernatural eyesight, Sable was able to instantly recognize the bitch. “Minx,” she spat, already getting her sai out and ready.

That was all she had to say. Eric spun the car around and headed back to the bar’s parking lot. Sable only hoped they would get there in time.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Rule Number 16: Now that you have become immortal, you must cut off all ties to your human past. Yes, that means your family. After a few decades, they are bound to notice you aren't aging and then the questions will come. The last thing the Vampire Regulation Force wants is questions. Then they have to deal with the messy job of eliminating the ones who are suspicious of us.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

Ryan stepped out into the cool night air with the mysterious female. It wasn't until he stumbled a few steps, he realized he was more than a little drunk. A low, husky laugh drifted from her as he tripped and almost fell. Acting more amused than annoyed by his sloppiness, she continued to lead him away from the bar. Intrigued by her behavior, he tugged at her hand to stop her. "What's your

name?"

She gave him a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. Ryan pulled back, surprised at the abrupt change in her gaze. It had suddenly become cold, almost predator like. Off in the distance there was a muffled sound that could have been a scream. Evil laughter followed it, so full of malice and darkness that Ryan felt a shiver slide through him. His body grew cold from the inside out as he tried to shake it off. All of the sudden, the darkness seemed looming and threatening, almost like it was shielding something dangerous.

The female was giving him a questioning look, her brow arched in a silent question. With a shake of his head, he tried to lose the whole scardy cat routine. "Sorry." He tried to pull off a smile and knew that he failed miserably. "It's been a long week."

Pressing her body to his, she rolled her hips against him, once, twice, before letting out a sexy laugh. "You're not changing you mind about having some fun with me, are you?"

Even though the sane part of him was telling him to walk away, the horny part of him told him to stay. As usual, the horny part was louder, though there was still a bit of apprehension pooling in his stomach. Up closer, her lips looked even more red, despite the poor lighting of the parking lot. It reminded him of blood now instead

of strawberries.

“You still haven’t told me your name.” That evil chuckle sounded again off to his left, not much more than an echo in the wind, but still there. With a slight shake of his head, he told himself to dismiss it. It was just the booze making him see and hear things that really weren’t there. Shit, he must have drunk a lot more than he’d thought if he was having hallucinations. What he needed to do was cut his losses and leave before he made a huge ass out of himself. He tried to pull his hand away, but she tightened her grip, her nails digging into his flesh.

“My name is no importance to you, cattle. You’re not going to live long enough to use it.”

Okay, this was getting too freaky even for him. Her nails were still digging into his wrist and he could feel a wet stickiness that told him the bitch was drawing blood. He’d never backed up from a fight before, but for some insane reason that’s what he felt his feet doing. There was something about this female that was setting off all his alarm bells. Hell, she was doing more than that, the evil coming off of her was setting off alarm bells, whistles and fog horns. His first instinct was to fight back, but Dad had taught his brother, Matt, and him from the crib a real man never hit a woman. Changing tactics, he tried to use his wining personality. “Look beautiful, I just



remembered I have to go to work," he lied smoothly, flashing his best gigolo smile.

She responded by squeezing his hand so tight he actually heard his bones creak in protest. Okay, so much for his winning personality. He bit back a girly scream and struggled to remain on his feet because the pain was making his knees weak. Whatever kind of steroids this chick was pumping, he wanted because it was obviously top-market stuff.

"What have you caught, Minx?" another voice asked from the darkness.

Ryan sighed with relief when he realized someone else was in the parking lot and they would be able to help him. His relief suffered a quick death when he got a look at the newcomer's eyes. They were black as midnight, but held a glint that a hunter got right before it took down its prey and he was looking at Ryan like he was that prey. The man had long, dirty, blond hair tied back in a low ponytail. He seemed to suffer from the same leather fetish as the female, although his was black head-to-toe.

Moving with such speed, Ryan didn't even see him coming, the male grabbed Ryan by the front of his shirt and pinned him to the wall. Ryan gasped in pain, both from having his back slammed into the hard bricks and from having his hand ripped away from the female's talons.

Clawing frantically at the guy's wrist, Ryan tried to twist away from his grip, but the man was strong. Shit, he was stronger than anyone Ryan had ever come across before. Now the warning flutter in the pit of his stomach gave way to a full-blown *oh shit* inferno. The male's lips curled up and Ryan was amazed a smile could seem so menacing.

"I asked you a question, Minx. What have you managed to catch?"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You're not supposed to use our names, remember?"

"That's okay," Ryan gasped. "I'm not going to live long enough to use it."

Both the attackers paused to give him surprised looks. They'd obviously never had one of their victims make jokes before. Ryan didn't have the heart to tell them he wasn't really that witty, it was the pure bone numbing fear that had rendered him stupid. A low rumble came from the male and built up until it was loud growl. Even if he had wanted to fire off another comment, he wouldn't have been able to. Terror had made it impossible for him to say anything. Slamming Ryan's body against the building again, the male started up with the growling crap again. The sound coming from his attacker was inhuman almost monster like.

This. Was. Not. Good.

Instinct took over and Ryan started to claw

again at the hand holding him up to the wall. Except that hand was unmovable. He may have been fighting against a steel beam for all of his efforts. The attacker shifted his hold, but only long enough to slam Ryan on the ground. Every nerve ending in his body screamed as the hard road refused to give.

Ryan tried to wiggle away, but the male threw himself on top of him and held him immobile. No matter how hard he fought, Ryan couldn't get out from under the male's heavy body. When the male opened his mouth, Ryan almost pissed his pants. The dude had fangs. Not fake dime store plastic ones, but real fangs, and he was getting ready to use them. The razor sharp tips seemed to gleam in the moonlight as drool slithered down them.

"Be still, cattle," the male ordered.

If he had been standing and able to look down at his body, Ryan would have. Why did they keep calling him a cow? Had the lack of daily hockey practice made him fat? *Focus, you idiot, you're two seconds from becoming a snack and you're worried about how big your ass is?* The female's mocking laughter drifted through the cold dark air and it made his fear give away to anger. "If you think that I'm going to roll over without a fight, you're sadly mistaken," Ryan growled right before he head butted the male as hard as he could.

Thanks to all the pucks he'd taken to the head

over his years as a goalie, Ryan hardly felt a thing. His attacker sure as hell did though. With a howl of rage, he rolled off Ryan and held his head between his hands. Ryan didn't plan on staying around long enough to do a victory dance. He scrambled to all fours and started to stagger to his feet so he could run.

The only warning he had was a hiss of air before the female threw herself at him. She landed on his back and he was once more pinned to the ground. He was shocked to find she was even stronger than her buddy. He twisted his head around just in time to see the flash of her fangs. "What in the hell are you?" he gasped.

Red lips curled into a cruel smile. "You're worst nightmare come to life."

*Vampire.* Even as the word came to his mind, he dismissed it. They weren't real. But yet, it was the only logical explanation.

Striking as quick as a cobra, she sank her fangs into his neck. The bite wasn't the sensual things he'd seen in vampire movies. This was hard and brutal. It was primal, like a wild animal devouring its prey. Skin and muscle tore right before a sudden rush of blood left his body. She'd obviously hit a major vessel because he was bleeding out fast. Knowing that he only had seconds before he died, he decided to go out fighting.

Her arm was close to his mouth and it would only serve her right to find out her latest meal bit back. With a growl of his own, he latched on, Doberman style. Even though his teeth were blunt and completely human, he still felt her skin pop underneath them. She let out a cry of pain and he couldn't stop the chuckle that slipped from him. Blood filled his mouth, the flavor of it was odd, it wasn't tangy and metallic like a human's, it tasted of spices and something else he couldn't identify.

His vision got fuzzy and he knew once he lost consciousness, he would never wake again. The snow was under him and he knew he should be feeling the cold wetness soaking into his clothes, yet oddly all he felt was comforting warmth spread throughout his limbs. Every muscle in his body went limp as his mouth fell away from her arm. The air grew tangy with the scent of his spilled blood.

"You took in my blood," the female accused. "You have no idea what you have done. This is going to make things even more fun."

Ryan closed his eyes as he took in a shuddering breath. He took in another breath, this one short and harsh, and then he took in no more.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Rule Number 17: If you are to come upon a feral vampire, you are to immediately eliminate it. Under no circumstances are you to finish the transformation by giving it your blood. Violators are subject to fines, corporal punishment, prison time or even termination.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

Sable ran as fast as she could toward the fallen human, Eric working hard to keep up. Her gaze focused on the poor human and the bitch. The vampiress on top of him didn't even notice anyone was approaching. She was too busy ripping at the poor guy's throat. The human was no longer thrashing under her, his body lay still and Sable feared the worst. They had been too late. The blond male vampire was still off to the side, holding his injured face and moaning. Blood trickled between his fingers and told Sable the

human had broken the idiot's nose. *Score one for the human.*

"Son of a bitch," Eric spoke low so he didn't alert the attackers of their presence.

Although Sable doubted anything could be overheard over Blondie's whimpers and the female's noisy slurps as she fed.

"She's being so brutal."

The human still hadn't moved and Sable felt a twinge of sadness. She'd seen the way he fought back and she admired his bravery. Most humans froze or cried when they found themselves face to face with an attacking vampire. Not this guy though, he'd gone done kicking.

"Minx has always been a murderous bitch. Why should today be any different?" Sable was already raising her sai, a pair of twin blades that were held with the hilt flush to her hand. Although she was much more comfortable with a Glock, they couldn't risk the gunfire. The last thing any of them needed was more humans involved in this cluster fuck.

"Which is going to make it harder to kill her," Eric confirmed grimly as he pulled his own weapon out, a claymore. The moonlight reflected sharply off its honed edge.

"I'll take her, you take on her boy-toy."

The two vampires looked up at the same time as Sable and Eric finally got within striking

distance. The female's feral gaze locked with Sable's, her eyes red with madness. Not pausing at the disturbing sight, Sable launched herself at the attacker.

The other female jumped up, too, and they met in the air, a flurry of claws, blades, fists and fangs. Sable could smell the human's blood on her combatant's breath and, for some reason, that only fueled her anger.

The sounds of Eric's battle intermingled with her own grunts and growls as she came down hard on the snow-covered ground. The air rushed out of Sable's lungs as the other female pressed down hard on her body. *She's strong, damn strong. Keep your head in the game, girl, or this may be your last hurrah.* Twisting her hips, Sable tried to flip the female off her, but Minx hung on like a bull rider. The vampiress wrapped her hands around Sable's throat and started to squeeze.

Trying the twisting thing again, Sable frantically tried to buck the female. A panic started to build up as Minx's grip tightened, cutting off all of Sable's air supply. Vampire or not, she needed to breathe and she was starting to see stars from the hypoxia. Her sai had been knocked out of her hands and she reached blindly out for them, only coming in contact with gravel and wet snow. The edges of her vision started to get black and Sable felt her hold on consciousness start to slip away.



Even though she was a vampire and harder to kill, Minx's own supernatural strength was getting the job done.

*Crap, I'm going to get killed by the biggest slut in vampire society. That will be a great note to my eulogy.* Just as she was closing her eyes, a whistling sound made her open them again. Just in time to see a two-by-four board hit Minx in the side of the head. The vampiress was thrown off her and she went flying three feet away. Holding a hand to her bruised throat, Sable looked up at her savior, expecting it to be Eric.

It was the human.

How he managed to stand, let alone fight, Sable had no idea. If she'd thought her throat was in bad shape, it was a mosquito bite compared to his. Open and ragged, it was still pouring blood and, judging by the guy's pasty complexion, he didn't have much blood left to give. She moved forward to help him, but Minx beat her, jumping on the man and driving him to the ground.

"No!" Sable yelled as a protective urge went through her. This human had saved her, the least she could do is protect him. Spying the two-by-four on the ground, Sable ran over and grabbed it.

Two handed the thing, she brought it back and hit Minx again and again. If the vampire had been a human, it would have killed her, instead it just caused her to stagger back. Not willing to wait for

a better opportunity, Sable grabbed her dropped weapons, lunged forward and sank one of her sai deep into the heart of the female.

Giving the blade a sharp twist, she pulled it out and planted her foot into the female's chest, pushing her as far away from the human as possible. A sharp flash briefly illuminated the dark alley as a fireball consumed the female from the inside out. Another light warmed the side of her face as Eric finished off the male. After the fires had died out, the only things remaining were a couple piles of ash. As Sable bent over to catch her breath, she noticed the harsh winter wind was already stirring up the ashes in slow lazy circles.

"You okay?" Eric's voice sounded raw, like the frigid air was burning it.

Sable nodded. "How about you?"

"The bastard kicked me in the nuts."

Sable darted a glance her partner's way. He was crouched down, taking deep heaving breaths. His blond head was bent down, but she knew his blue eyes were probably filled with tears. She'd kicked in enough balls in the past to know that was the typical male reaction.

Giving him both time and space to sooth his wounded pride, she walked to the human and turned him over. His eyes were closed and she knew that he wouldn't be opening them in the future. The fact that he had managed to help her

earlier was nothing short of a miracle. Humans were not known for their resilience. Her stomach rolled at the carnage the vampire had visited upon this poor man. His throat looked like a pack of hungry dogs had feasted on it. She had seen some pretty serious stuff in her years in the Vampire Regulation Force, but this was among the top ten.

"You poor thing," she whispered. "You never had a chance. But you still managed to save me." His dark hair was wet and matted with both blood and snow. She gently brushed it back out of his face.

"I'll call the cleanup crew," Eric volunteered as he got up on wobbly feet.

Sable opened her mouth to answer him, but something caught her attention and made her pause. Both Eric and her were making puffs in the air every time they breathed because of the arctic air. Now small ones were coming from the human's lips. Given the condition of his neck, the guy shouldn't be breathing at all. She peered closer and saw the ragged flesh was slowly beginning to heal over. The soft thudding of his heart stuttering back to life drifted to her supersensitive vampire ears. Which could mean only one thing. Suddenly, the answer to how he managed to get up and fight Minx came to her like a punch to the gut. "You better tell the crew to haul ass," she commanded. "He's turning."

Eric was so startled, he almost dropped the cell phone he'd pulled out of his pocket. "How? The only way to make a vampire is to have a complete blood exchange?"

"We can worry about the *how* later. Right now we need to focus on this. If we don't give him blood soon, he'll only go part way through the turn and then he'll go feral."

One way vampires could go feral if they were not guided through the transition completely. The result was an unquenchable need for blood that made them more animal than anything else. Driven mad with need, they murdered anyone or anything that came into their path. The suffering only ended when the vampire was killed.

"See if you can figure out who he is," Eric ordered. "The VRF is going to want to know how connected he is in the human world so they can clean up this fucking mess."

Sable reached into the human's pocket and pulled out his wallet. Looking quickly at his driver's license, she was able to determine he was a local and his name was Ryan. She purposely refused to look at his picture. Not wanting to see him in happier times in case she was forced to eliminate him. The name clicked in her head and she let out a gasp. "Oh my God. This is Ryan Ervin. He used to be the starting goalie for Ferris State."

Eric gave her an annoyed look, "So?"

"So?" she echoed, outraged by his ignorance. "He holds the record for the longest amount of minutes for a shut-out. Before he was injured, he was supposed to be the best goaltender to come around since Patrick Roy."

Eric made the whoopie-doo gesture with his finger. "Is that supposed to impress me?"

A small growl erupted from the back of her throat. "You are such a loser. No wonder nobody else would be your partner."

"I'm not the one that's acting like a crazed stalker fan, drooling all over some human."

She took in a breath of indignation and realized instantly that was a mistake. Even with the smell of blood and booze that coming from Ryan, she was still struck by his warm, spicy scent. *What is it about this male that is so attractive to me? Get a grip, here. You're probably going to have to kill him, the last thing you need to do is get attached.* Aloud she said, "Please, if I was going to go all fan-girlie on a hockey player it would be a center, not a goalie. I don't think we should eliminate him yet. He's already strong, once he goes through the conversion he would make for a good soldier for our side."

"We don't need to get our soldiers that way. Why are you petting him like that?" Eric's brow crinkled in confusion. "You're not getting attached

to him are you?"

Sable realized her free hand was stroking Ryan's hair. *Ryan, such a nice name.* She pulled her hand back and tried to act casual, but one quick look at her partner's face told her she hadn't fooled him for one second. The attraction couldn't be helped though. Ryan had saved her, even at the cost of his own survival. The least she owed him was his life back. Even though it was going to put her in a world of trouble, both with Eric and the VRF.

Ryan's eyelids fluttered open, revealing the warmest pair of brown eyes she'd ever seen. Unable to tear her gaze from him, she bent herself even more protectively over his body, ignoring the snort of disgust from Eric. Ryan's mouth opened and closed like he was trying to talk, but couldn't because his ruined throat wouldn't allow it. Fear danced across his face as his eyes grew wide and he tried to touch his wounds.

She grabbed his hands before leaning down to whisper, "It's okay, Ryan. You're safe now and I'll make you better." There was a few tense seconds where it didn't seem like he was going to believe her. Then he gave a slight nod of his head before he lowered his hands. Wow, he trusted her. No one did that. All the other vampires tended to look at her with a jaded eye, either because she had once belonged to Corbin or because she was so

unvampire like. He had to know she was a vampire just like his attackers. He knew what she was, yet he still let her touch and comfort him. She knew then she was making the right decision to save this male, even if it meant going against the Vampire Regulation Force. Bringing her wrist up, she opened her mouth, preparing to score her vein with her fangs.

Eric lunged over and jerked her hand down. "What in the hell are you doing?" his voice sounded harsh, like he had been kicked in the nuts again.

"I'm going to see him through his transition," she replied simply, like it was something that she did every day.

"It's against regulation. You know what we're supposed to do."

A tick appeared in her partner's jaw. There wasn't a night they had worked together she hadn't gotten that reaction from him yet. He may be overprotective of her, but her disregard for rules still drove him batty. Must be his military background. "I know what we are *supposed* to do and I'm not doing it." Standing orders were to kill anyone they found in the process of transition

"Then I'll do it," Eric declared, already taking out his claymore out.

"No!" Sable threw herself over the human, protecting him. She didn't know who was more

shocked by her actions, her, Eric or the human.

After several tense moments, Eric sighed and lowered his weapon.

Sable breathed in relief as she sat up, though she did keep one hand on the human's chest in a protective manner.

"You know what can happen to you if the VRF finds out you did this?" he asked in a resigned tone.

"Yes, and I don't care." She looked into Ryan's scared eyes as she made her declaration.

"Think before you do this," Eric urged. "If you finish the transition with your blood, you will become his sire. That means you will be connected to him forever. You will have to initiate him in our ways, then make sure that he finds a place in our world. You will be the *master* to his *grasshopper*."

"I know." She caressed Ryan's cheek.

Eric's face screwed up. "Oh God, I was right. You are attached to him."

"So what if I am?"

Eric's expression softened. "You do this and there is no going back."

"I understand and I'm willing to pay that price."

"If you are that hell bent on saving him, then let me give him blood."

Sable was touched by Eric's offer, but another part of her felt an irrational wave of jealousy. Ryan



was hers and hers alone. No other vampire would be allowed to touch him. She kept her gaze down, lest her partner read her inner dilemma. "No, I'm the one who he saved so he is my responsibility, not yours. If you want to help, then call for the cleanup crew."

"You're going to actually have to drink from the vein to turn him," Eric cocked one brow in a mocking manner. "Do you think you can bring yourself to do that? You haven't gone fang on anyone since you came to our clan."

Sable blushed, suddenly the thought of biting someone didn't skeeve her. In fact, the thought of caressing his neck with her lips before she sank in her fangs, made her ache and grow wet between her thighs. Fighting hard to keep her face neutral, she replied, "I think I can manage it this once."

This time when she brought her wrist to her lips, Eric made no move to stop her. Sinking her fangs into the tender flesh, she winced slightly at the sharp pain. Once the blood started to flow, she put it to Ryan's mouth.

Giving her a look that was equal parts fear and confusion, he tried to pull back.

"Dink," she pleaded. "Trust me." She knew the instant that his vampire instinct became stronger than his human side when she felt his velvet tongue caress her flesh a few times before he sucked in a mouthful of her blood. She closed her

eyes as waves of pleasure rolled over her body. The act of blood drinking had always been sensual, but nothing like this. This was so intimate, as if he were taking in her blood, body and soul. She shuddered and prayed to God that Eric wouldn't notice her lapse of control. If she had an orgasm just from having a fledging drink from her, her partner would never let her live it down. "I need to bite you, Ryan." When his eyes widened in panic, she hastened to add. "I promise it will be gentle this time. I will never hurt you."

Eric groaned. "Get it over with all ready. All this sweet talk is going to send me into a diabetic coma."

Sable started to lean down to bite, but Ryan grabbed her wrist with both of his hands.

He mouthed *no*.

She let out a growl of frustration. "You don't understand. If we don't have a full blood exchange, then you will never fully go through the transition."

This time he mouthed, *so?*

Eric laughed and Sable waved at him with her hand in a silent order to shut his trap. That made her partner laugh even more. Sable ignored him and tried again, "If you don't let me aid you through your transition, then you will become a crazed killer."

Ryan gave a half shrug, *okay*.

“I changed my mind, you should change him just for the pure entertainment he provides.” Eric was laughing so hard he could barely get the words out.

Sable tossed a dirty look over her shoulder before returning her attention to the jackass that was lying under her. “So you’re a wimp then?” She hoped Ryan was like every other male she’d ever known—question their masculinity and they would do anything to prove you wrong. “Are you afraid of one little girl, like me?”

*Hey!* A wounded look accompanied his soundless declaration.

It worked though, this time when she bent forward, he flinched, but didn’t fight her. She inched his shirt down so an undamaged area of flesh was showing. There was a brief moment of doubt. By doing this, her life—his life—would never be the same again. Then she breathed in deep, taking in his earthy male scent and she knew she had to do it.

Unable to resist, she gave him a gentle kiss right before she sank her fangs into his flesh. As soon as his blood hit her tongue, Sable knew she was in trouble. It was the sweetest, most potent thing she’d ever tasted in her life and afterlife and there was no way she would ever get enough of it. A shudder danced down her spine as she felt his essence enter her bloodstream and course through

her body. A dull ache started to build up between her thighs and her nipples grew tight.

Despite all that, she only allowed herself a sip before she reluctantly pulled away. With all the blood he'd already lost, she didn't dare take more than what was necessary to complete the exchange. It was enough though, she could still feel his life going through her veins. Closing her eyes, she relished the almost orgasmic sensation of his blood bonding with hers.

So lost was she in the moment, she didn't realize Ryan had moved into a crouching position. When he hissed, she snapped her head into his direction. He was bearing his teeth and the canines were starting to elongate, the sharp points gleaming in the moonlight. He was caught up in the transformation, more animal than man, and he was going to attack the nearest food source, which happened to be her.

Eric moved forward to help, but Ryan's arm lashed out and backhanded the vampire. Flying across the street, Eric slammed into a nearby building. Her partner was unconscious before he even hit the ground. Ryan turned and attacked her next, pinning her flat on her back. She caught only the briefest glance of fang right before he bit deep into her jugular.

\* \* \* \*

“Move this vehicle quicker before we lose them both!”

“I need two more bags of blood, STAT!”

“Damn, what was she thinking? He almost killed her.”

The distant voices, though unfamiliar called to Ryan as he floated in his fog and he clung to them. He tried to open his eyes, but he didn't have the strength to. His whole world had become a red haze of pain and fear. Gentle rocking, interrupted by bumps and turns, told him he was in a vehicle, but that was the only clue he had to where he was. The voices cued him in that he was injured and someone had hurt a female.

Snapshots of his attack came back at him in fragmented flashbacks. He could recall the fight, the way the female had bit him in the throat, then he could remember lying on the cold ground, dying. Then another image came to him, this one was a different female. One with gentle blue eyes, dark hair and finely arched cheekbones. Her touch had been so gentle and then she had got mad at him for something. Although for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it had been. All he did know was that she had looked cute mad, her pink lips had pursed and those eyes of hers had snapped at him.

She was still near though, he could tell by the

subtle scent of jasmine lingering in the air. He could also feel her presence in his body, almost as if he was tuned into her very existence. An overwhelming need to touch her slammed into his body and he started to reach out with his hand and blindly grab for her.

“Hold him still! He’s going to rip out the IV’s.”

“I’m trying, but he’s fighting me and he’s strong for a fledging. What’s he grabbing for?”

“He’s searching for Sable. She’s his sire.”

Something was slipped into his searching fingers. He knew, even without being able to see, that it was her hand. He clasped at it like it was a lifeline for several seconds before he realized that it was limp and cold.

“That didn’t stop him from draining her nearly dry,” another voiced chipped in.

This was a harsh male one and it brought forth the image of a clean cut blond. Ryan strained his brain to remember more, he had been with Sable and she’d called him Eric.

Then another memory came back and this one filled him with horror and dread. He had been the one that hurt Sable. He had attacked her and bit her like Minx bit him. He had made her bleed. “What the fuck have I done?”

The heavy silence in the vehicle showed they were just as stunned as he was by his sudden outburst. He tried to open his eyes so he could

look at them while he apologized for what he'd done, but another wave of pain punched into his stomach. The last thing he heard before he slipped into unconsciousness again was his scream. Strange – it didn't even sound human anymore.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Rule Number 986: Henceforth, all Drones will be required to live in communal clans. This will diminish further contamination to the race. Punishment for failing to comply will be forcible interment in one of our prisons.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

The next time Ryan awoke, he was in a soft bed, that wasn't bouncing around. There was a soothing silence surrounding him and the medicinal smell that marked all hospitals. He strained his ears to see if anyone was around, but all he was able to pick up was the clicking of an IV pump, a hissing of air as oxygen was pushed through tubing and the footsteps of a bug scuttling across a windowsill.

Cracking open his lids, he winced as the light seemed to burn a hole in his retinas. Bright and



stark, it gave him an instant headache. Damn what were they using, 1000 watt? After blinking several times, his eyes finally adjusted, though the headache remained. It beat in time to his heart and he brought up a hand to massage the area above his eyes as he looked around.

He was in some small hospital or infirmary of sorts. It was obviously a private medical center and not the large trauma center that was thirty minutes from his hometown. Only a half dozen beds lined either side of the sterile white room. Even though it appeared deserted, he knew that wasn't true. Although he couldn't see any staff walking around, he knew they were near because he could smell the blood running through their veins.

The smell reminded him of the fact he had lost a lot of blood recently. He brought his hand to his neck, expecting to come into contact with bandages. When he met with his own healed flesh, his heart pounded in confusion and apprehension. How in the hell did he heal so fast? There wasn't even a bump to indicate scarring. Even if he'd been out for a month, there was no way that he humanly should have been able to mend that fast.

*Unless I'm not human anymore.* He shook his head, no all those freaky memories where just a result of hallucinations from shock. *Right?* The bug started to scuttle again and he cocked his

head in its direction. Even though it was across the room, he could see every intricate detail of the insect, right down to the hairs on its legs. Ryan blinked stupidly as he took in several harsh breaths, shock tingling through him. What in the hell was going on? How was it he could hear a bug's footsteps all of the sudden? And since when did he smell the blood in someone else's veins. He tentatively darted his tongue out to touch his teeth.

"Oh sweet fuck, I have fangs," he all but shouted. With a dexterity that he had never been able to manage, even when he was still playing hockey, he jumped out bed and started to pace. "No, not possible." He let out a bark of laughter, aware that it bordered on hysterical. "Vampires don't exist. I don't believe in Santa Clause, the Tooth Fairy, ghosts and I sure as hell don't believe in vampires."

"You better start believing," a soft voice said from behind him. "In vampires that is. There really is no such thing as Santa Clause. Although I have seen ghosts and the occasional fairy."

Even though Ryan didn't turn around, he knew it was Sable. The soft scent of jasmine gave her away. Taking in a deep breath, he closed his eyes and savored her smell, a low growl rumbling in his chest. Despite the fact his world was crumbling down around him, his body immediately reacted

to her presence. He was glad the gray pair of sweats someone had dressed him in were loose in the front. Then he remembered she had fed him her blood right before she drank his and that sent Mr. Happy into quick retreat. He spun around to face her. "What in the hell have you done to me?"

Sable had changed her clothes and was now wearing a hooded black sweatshirt and jeans. Her dark hair was held back by clip in a sloppy bun and several curls had stayed out, giving her an almost innocent appearance. *Vampire? Right.* This gal looked more like a college coed than a creature of the night.

"I saved your life." She seemed unfazed by everything.

But then again she wasn't the one who had been bitch slapped by vampire reality. *Don't forget those ghosts and fairies, too. Details like that are so important when you find yourself smack dab in the middle of a comic book come to life.* Deciding not to let his sarcasm loose quite yet, he tapped it down and instead asked, "How did you save my life?"

"Minx had started your transformation. If I hadn't finished it, then it would have been necessary to eliminate you."

A flare of anger burned through him at the mention of the female who had lured him into this mess in the first place. "What happened to Minx?"

"I killed her."

At her declaration, Ryan searched her face for any sign of remorse or guilt, but there was none. Those beautiful blue eyes of hers remained as cool as ice. A shiver of apprehension caused his heart to skip. It wasn't lost on him that she'd casually mentioned his own averted execution just seconds earlier. This was one cold lady. Not at all like the one who had stroked his head and whispered words of comfort into his ear.

"Look," he reasoned, all of the sudden feeling real cooperative. No sense in making her think he needed *eliminated* again. "Just undo whatever it is you've done and I'll go home and forget any of this happened. No one would believe me anyway. They'd call me crazy and put me in the loony bin with Grandpa Jack and that's the last place I want to be. He cheats at checkers."

The corner of her mouth twitched like she was about to smile, before she pursed her lips together. "I can't undo it. Believe me, if I could I would. But the transformation is a one-way ticket. There's no going back."

"Fine, then just give me a ride back home. I need to get to work, unless this little episode has cost me my job."

She gave a slight shake of her head. "I can't do that."

Anger started to overcome fear as he felt himself helpless and out of control. The fangs in

his mouth seemed to grow and a growl bubbled in his chest. "Sure you can. You just go fetch your car, we get in it and you drive. It's really quite easy."

For the first time, she showed some real emotion. Her brow wrinkled and he caught a flash of fang as she worried her bottom lip. "No, it's not that easy."

He took a threatening step closer. "And why not?"

"You're not the same person you were before. You're one of us, a vampire. We can't go out at day, we need to drink blood to survive, worse we have a whole slew of enemies that would love nothing more than to kill one of our kind. You're not you anymore, Ryan. You're something different, some would say a monster."

"So?" he retorted. The S came out in a hiss and he pulled back in surprise before recovering. "My family will still accept me. They'll understand."

She let out a little growl of frustration. "Will they still understand when you attack one of them because you're starved for blood?"

"Sure, it'll be just like another Thanksgiving Day dinner for us."

She gave a frustrated stomp of her foot and he couldn't help but notice how cute she was when she was angry. She was obviously very passionate and he wondered if she carried that fervor over

into the bedroom. That thought helped cool some of his anger and he took several deep breaths.

She did the same. "Ryan," she was obviously trying hard to keep her voice even. "By giving you my blood and finishing the transformation, I made you my responsibility. It's my job to teach you how to survive in this new world."

"What if I don't want to belong to this life?" he asked harshly.

"Then you will die, this time permanently. If you don't get killed by the vampire hunters or the VRF, then the blood lust will destroy you," she replied grimly.

"What about my mom and brother? I just can't leave them."

She reached out and grabbed both of his hands with hers. "You have to stay away from them in order to protect them, both from yourself and our enemies."

He jerked away from her. "I need to get home to them. They're probably worried about me. How long have I been out of it?"

"Only one day and night."

He fingered his throat. It seemed like he should have been out for a lot longer.

As if reading his thoughts she added, "Vampires heal at a much faster rate than humans."

Ryan started to argue there were no such things

as vampires again, but his tongue brushing against his fang, quelled that argument. "Look, I'm really grateful you saved my life and I'm really sorry I attacked you. I can't stay though. I have family, responsibilities. I just can't turn my back on them."

Stalking out of the room, he started looking for an escape route. The sound of her footsteps told him she was following him. It both annoyed and amused him.

"You can't leave," she called.

"Why not?" he tossed back, never breaking stride. He was now in a long hallway, the walls and floor were bright white and completely deserted. Several doors dotted the sides, but they were all tightly closed. He could sense there were other people *or was it the PC thing to call them vamps* in the rooms. "I'm not a prisoner here am I?"

"Of course not," her voice sounded hurt. "We're Drones here, we believe in freedom, unlike The Pure Ones."

He rounded the corner and found...another long hallway. "I don't suppose you could clue me into what a Drone or a Pure One is."

"The Pure Ones were born vampires. Their parents are both vampire and they can usually trace their bloodlines back several generations. They are considered the most pure of our kind,

hence the name. If you're Drone that means you were human once before you were transformed."

For fun, he stopped and tried one of the doors. It was locked so he continued down the hall. He was beginning to feel like a mouse in a maze, all that was missing was the damn cheese at the end. "So what do you have against The Pure Ones?"

"It's not what we have against them, it's what they have against *us*. They consider us a blemish on their perfection"

He darted a look her way. She didn't even seem winded by their fast jaunt. The only thing out of place was the drawstring on her hoodie. One end was hanging lower than the other and he found himself wanting to fix it for her. He knew better than to reach out and do that, because if he touched her, then he might pull her closer. Right before he pinned her to wall and kissed her senseless. He looked away before she saw the lust in his eyes. *Whoa buddy, get back on topic here. You have just become a creature of the night and all you can think about is your dick?* "So they're snobs eh?"

She hurried up so she was walking beside him.

That jasmine sent followed her and his fangs stated to get long again. Only this time it wasn't out of anger.

A scowl came over her face as she explained, "They're more than that. They have harsh rules and regulations against us. We can only hold



certain jobs, live in specific areas, we're not even allowed to have children."

"Great, so now I find out that not only am I a walking Halloween costume, but I'm a second class citizen to boot. This is just my luck lately."

He rounded a third corner and almost did a victory dance. There was a door leading out. It was night, too, so he didn't have to worry about that pesky sun. Now he just needed to figure out where he was and find a way home.

Touching his arm gently, she pleaded, "Don't go. You need me to teach you how to feed, what to watch out for."

The soft concern on her face took away the last of his anger, but not his resolve. "I'll be okay. I can take care of myself."

Her hand was still on his arm and he could hear her heartbeat pick up in pace. Was it remotely possible she could be attracted to him? Or did all sires feel this protective of their charges? Maybe he should test the waters a bit. What's the worst that could happen? He'd already been killed once the weekend.

One arm reached out and hooked around her lower back, hauling her closer to his aching cock. She let out a little gasp of surprise, but she didn't pull back. Instead, she gripped his other arm so she as holding him close, too. Ryan inched his lips to hers slowly, giving her time to protest or shove

him away. She did neither, instead she licked her luscious mouth in anticipation.

Finally he was close enough to capture her mouth into a tender kiss. Even though he really wanted to kiss her, then ravish her right on the tile floor, he kept himself in check. He didn't want to blow things by going too fast. But it was hard. She tasted so sweet and decadent. Her slender arms wrapped around his neck as she let out a little sigh.

Unable to resist, he slipped his tongue in to taste her even better. This time when his tongue came into contact with fangs, it didn't gross him out because they were hers. Instead it made him even harder as he imagined her using them on him. Her soft warm body swayed closer to his, her taunt stomach pressing into his erection and it was all he could do not to moan out loud.

Never taking his mouth off her, he started to kiss her cheek, jaw line than neck. She threw her head back so he had better access. He was drawn to her fluttering pulse like a magnet. Darting his tongue out, he licked at it again and again. The skin there so satiny, so soft, so tender. It would only take the littlest bit of pressure and his fangs could be inside her, her blood gliding over his tongue.

Before he could come to his senses and stop, he bit her with the same gentleness he'd used while

kissing her. She did the opposite. Roughly gripping his arms tighter, she thrust her hips against him, creating a wonderful friction. That wasn't the reaction he'd been expecting. Part of him had expected her to slap him across the face, right before she planted a foot on his ass and kicked him to the curb. Holy hell though, she was acting as if she liked this as much as he did. Her blood was trickling down his throat, a mixture of sweetness and spices. Instantly addicted to the stuff, he greedily swallowed another mouthful. Realization slammed into him like a punch to the gut. What was he doing? He pulled away from her so quickly, they both had to stumble to keep from falling. "Oh shit"

Taking another step back, she brought her hand up to her neck, trying to stop the blood from flowing from the two pinpricks that were now there. "It's all right. Your natural instincts just kicked in."

He gestured at the wound. "*Natural instincts?* There is nothing natural about this."

"I didn't mind, really," her voice had a wistful edge to it.

He didn't respond directly to her statement because he was too busy having a sissy fit. Bent over at the waist, hands on his knees, he started chanting, "Oh shit. Oh, shit. Ohshitohshitohshit ohshitohshit..."

Straightening up and scooping up the last visages of masculinity, he made for the door. Slamming it open with far more force than was necessary. *Thank you, new vampire super-strength.* He escaped into the night. Hoping to himself the darkness would cover his fears.

\* \* \* \*

Sable flinched as the door shut with a loud bang. Part of her wanted to go out, kick him in the can and drag his ungrateful ass back. The other part wanted to go back to her room with a pint of ice cream and cry. Not only had he left her after kissing and biting her, but he had acted disgusted with himself for doing those things in the first place. She knew she wasn't sex vixen like Minx, but she wasn't that bad, was she?

Corbin's past complaints rang through her head. *You're nothing special. No other male would ever want you. I could replace you within an hour and never have a regret.*

Bringing her fingers up to her mouth, thinking back to the kiss she'd shared with Ryan, a slow shiver went through her body. There had never been a male before that affected her that way. Her entire body hummed with pleasure as soon as he embraced her. Once his mouth had touched her, she lost all control. Then he had pushed her away

and acted freaked out by the whole thing. *Ouch!*

“You’re just going to let him leave like that?” Eric demanded from behind Sable.

She winced both from the angry edge on his voice and because she was wondering just how much he’d seen and overheard. “Ryan needs time to come to terms with what has happened to him. He’ll be back.”

Eric walked in front of her so he could eyeball her. “What if he doesn’t come back? When the blood lust gets to him and he loses control, then attacks a human what are you going to do? Or worse, what will he do when the VRF show up at his door and forcibly removes him? If your fledging doesn’t agree to live in a Drone community, then they will throw him in prison. If he thought human prisons were bad, then he will be in for one hell of a shock when he finds himself in a supernatural one.”

He was talking down to her and she knew it was because he thought she’d been reckless in letting Ryan leave. An ache built up in the back of her throat as she grew angry at Eric for being right, Ryan for being a stubborn ass and herself for being too soft. One kiss from Ryan and she’d been ready to give him anything that he asked for.

No male, human, vampire or otherwise, had ever affected her that way. It wasn’t because she was Ryan’s sire either. It was something else and it

scared the hell out of her. The mere thought that a male could control her emotions that much again left her feeling weak and vulnerable.

“Hello!” Eric snapped his fingers under her nose, waking her up from her musings. “Can you try and focus for one damn second here. Ever since we stumbled across Brain you have been operating on one brain cell.”

“His name is *Ryan*,” she snapped, pushing away his hand. “Why don’t you lay off me?”

If it had been any other male, she might have thought Eric was jealous, but she knew better. The reason he was acting this way was because he thought it was his responsibility to smother her like an older brother would a sister.

“I just got a call from the VRF,” he shot back.

His eyes grew stormy as his jaw clenched. He might be yelling at her, but Sable had known her partner long enough to know whenever he got that look on his face it was because he was worried.

“They already know you turned someone and they want to see you at headquarters.”

Sable felt like the coyote in the cartoon that all of the sudden had a huge anvil fall on his head. Except she didn’t have a ton of steel falling on her, it was ton of bureaucratic trouble, which was ten times worse. “Oh?” she squeaked.

“Oh,” Eric mocked. “We need to get your

fledging under control before he attracts even more attention from the VFR and to us. If they find out what we've been doing here, we're all going to end up in one of their prisons."

"I'm sorry, I never meant to put the group in any danger. I'll get ready and go to headquarters now." Feeling numb from her head to her toes, she spun on her heels and started for her quarters. The last vampire that she'd known that had been called to headquarters never returned. Fact was, *none* of the vampires that had been called to headquarters had returned.

She stopped and asked, "Could you please look out for Ryan? Just watch over him for a few days until he comes back." She didn't turn around because she couldn't look at her friend right now. If she saw the look of remorse and worry she knew he was wearing it would make it that much harder for her.

"Of course I will," his voice cracked. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you."

She shook her head. "You have Misty and the rest of the clan to think about. They would be lost without you."

"But—"

Spinning around, she cut off his argument with a slash of her hand. "I know you think that this is going to be a one way trip, but you may be wrong. You forget Corbin is head of the VRF now."

“That might not mean anything.”

She gave a smile that she didn't feel. “Oh, I'm sure my sire still has soft feelings for me. I did serve him for ten years after all.”



## CHAPTER SIX

*Rule Number 1026: All Drones will be branded from this date forward. Failure to report to the VRF for this procedure will lead to imprisonment. A fee of \$1,000.00 will be due at the time of branding.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

Ryan pressed his cheek to the door of his bedroom and breathed in deep. *Blood, so near and tempting. Must resist. It's your brother, you could kill him. But it smells so good and I bet it would taste even better.* "Snap out of it, jackass," he whispered. "You will not attack Matt. That would be wrong." *It would be yummy and fun.*

He could both sense and hear Matt moving around the house. When his brother paused in front of the closed door, the fangs in Ryan's mouth got huge and his fingers tips grew a nice set of claws. The urge to throw open the door and get at his next meal was so strong he was leaving deep

scratch marks in the wood.

“Ryan, you okay in there?”

Even though, he had known that his brother was right there, Ryan still jumped a mile. “I’m fine.” *No, I’m not. I’m hungry and you will feed me just nicely, thank you.* “I’m still hung over.”

“Are you sure?” Doubt coated Matt’s words. “Your voice sounds kinds of garbled.”

*It’s that way because my fangs are huge and wanting to sink themselves into your jugular. Back the fuck off.* “I’m fine. Just got cotton mouth.”

“You sure? I could stay home from work today.”

The call for Matt’s blood became so strong that Ryan barred his fangs and hissed. *Shit, again with the hissing. Am I a vampire or a King Cobra?* His claws dug in deeper into the wood and he was surprised that they didn’t punch all the way through to the other side. “Just go to work, I’ll be fine.”

There was a pause and Ryan knew that his brother’s eyes were narrowed in concern. They were so much alike the two, with their brown hair and eyes, just like Dad. Not so anymore though, now Ryan had a set of canines that would make a Doberman jealous and blood lust.

“Are you really okay?” Matt persisted.

The handle to the door turned and Ryan pushed all of his weight against it.

“What in the hell is going on with you?”

“Just go the fuck away.” Ryan was fighting both the bloodlust and Matt’s intrusion so much that each word came out as a ragged punch. “I made it this far without your help. I don’t need you now.” He knew that he was being mean and hateful, but he needed to get Matt away from him STAT. Now he understood what Sable had meant when she had warned him that he would be a danger to his own family.

There was a heavy silence and Matt stopped pushing on the door. Ryan could still sense him out there. More than that, he could hear Matt’s heart beating, calling to him. Biting his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood, Ryan sucked away some of the precious liquid. Maybe any blood, even his own, would be enough to make it so he didn’t rip open that door, grab Matt and drink him dry.

“How long is this pity party going to last?” Matt finally asked. “I know you’ve had it hard these past few months, but you can’t keep living in the past.”

There was one last tap on the door before Ryan could hear his brother’s footsteps receding. He still didn’t relax until he heard the front door close and Matt’s truck start up. Dropping to his knees, he rested his forehead against the door and tried to get his act together.

There was no way that he could deny everything and try to stay in his former life. What was he going to do? Then the answer came to him. Sable. He would go back to her, she had already promised to help him.

Just thinking about her brought on a new set of hunger pains. The problem was it wasn't for food or blood. The ache in his stomach had nothing to do with a desire for pizza or burgers, it was all for a certain female vampire with curly brown hair, freckles and snapping blue eyes. Ever since he had left the compound, he had been fighting the overwhelming urge to run back to her. After a couple of miles of walking down a dirt road, he had managed to hitch a ride with a kid driving a truck. Twice during the ten-mile drive back to town, Ryan had to stop himself from asking the kid to turn around so he could go back to Sable and apologize.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he groaned. What in the hell had she done to him by taking his blood? He had never felt this drawn to a female before. So busy with hockey, his love life had basically been one hook up after another. He was the love-'em-and leave-'em type and he had never felt guilty about it before. With Sable though, he felt guilt and then some. Not only had he never properly thanked her for saving him, but he had almost killed her. Then he had run away like some

girl after their kiss. He had seen the hurt that had danced across her features and it cut him deep that he'd caused her even one second of discomfort. He dreaded facing her again.

With a heavy sigh, he scrubbed his face with his hand and scrambled to his feet. Venturing out into the hallway, he stumbled down the stairs and wandered into the kitchen. The numerous windows in that room had all the shades opened and he marched right in there. Big mistake. As soon as the sunlight touched his skin, it started to burn. He hissed in pain as the smell of burning flesh saturated the air. Running faster than an Olympic sprinter, he dashed around the room jerking them shut so the room was nice and dark.

Going to the sink, he turned on the cold water and ran it over his arm, the area of his body that was burned the worst. He was relieved to see it was only red and warm to the touch. Watching the water cascade over his flesh, he was reminded of how dry his mouth felt. Surely one little sip wouldn't hurt? His stomach didn't feel half as queasy as it did last night. He filled a glass and had just started to bring it up to a mouth.

A vaguely familiar voice commanded, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Ryan jumped a county mile, spilling water all over Sable's vampire buddy, Eric, in the process. The brooding male didn't look amused. The

disgusted grimace on his face as he looked down at his soaked black shirt would have scared the piss out of Ryan if he weren't so dehydrated.

"Jeez O fricking Pete's!" Ryan exclaimed as he juggled with both hands to keep the glass from falling to the ground. "Didn't you ever hear of knocking or is against vampire etiquette?"

Eric grabbed a towel off the counter and started to mop himself off. "I would have been polite and waited outside for you to come out, but the sun is out. I didn't think your brother would appreciate having to step over a steaming pile of goo on his way out to work."

Ryan screwed up his face. "Gross! Real nice visual there, pal."

"Yeah, we'll welcome to our world. Goo piles, stakings and beheadings are common topics for us."

Ryan wasn't used to being on the receiving end of sarcasm before and he now understood how annoying it could be. "Where is Sable?" He had to work too hard for that question to come out nonchalant, the knowing smirk that came across Eric's face told him that he hadn't pulled it off. An unwanted surge of jealousy spiked its way through Ryan's body as he thought about what the relationship between Eric and Sable might be.

Eric threw the towel to the side and ran his hand through his hair. "Sable would be here if she

could. Believe me I wish she were here, too. I don't like having to spend all this time away from my Misty."

*Misty? That was a female's name, which means the fang boy had a wife or girlfriend.* The fact that Eric had a female in his life made Ryan way too happy. "I don't need a babysitter, you can go back any time you want to."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Eric leaned his hip against the counter. "Kid, I can't think of anyone that needs a babysitter more than you. Besides, I already told you, the sun is out. So like it or not, you're stuck with me until night."

Ryan was about to suggest he use the sunscreen Mom always kept in the bathroom cabinet when a wave of pain twisted his stomach. He dropped to his knees like a ton of bricks, ashamed he had a witness to his moment of weakness. Eric stayed across the room and didn't comfort Ryan and for that, he could have kissed the vampire. At least he was letting him keep a shred of his dignity.

After the worst of the pain had receded, Ryan planted his ass on the ground and took several deep breaths. "What now? Do I have to start sleeping in a coffin? Avoiding pizza and crosses? Move to New Orleans? Start giving interviews?"

Eric smirked before going to the small plastic cooler that was sitting on the counter. Pulling out a bag of blood, he tossed it to Ryan who caught it

easily with one hand. "We don't sleep in coffins, I've never been to Mardi Gras and I happen to love pizza. Although I would recommend that you stick to a liquid diet for the next few weeks until your body gets used to all the changes. Don't worry, we have a manual for all fledglings. I'll get you a copy once we get back to the clan."

Ryan started to smirk before he realized the vampire was dead serious. "You guys honestly have a learner's manual for new vampires?"

"Of course, how else are you fledglings supposed to learn all the rules? Your sires can only teach you so much. Now, drink up. You look like hell. All new vampires need a lot of blood their first few weeks."

Ryan fingered the bag of blood. It felt cold to the touch and he could only imagine how good it would taste going down. Revolted by that thought, he almost tossed it the side, but the clawing hunger inside of him stopped him. Before he even realized what he was doing, he had the bag in his mouth and his fangs had grown to twice their size as they pierced the plastic. A sigh of relief escaped his lips as the fluid filled his mouth.

Eric cocked a brow. "I was going to recommend a cup, but if you want to be a barbarian about it, okay."

Ryan gave a half shrug in response. Now that he had started to drink, he wasn't going to stop for



even long enough to pull away and tell the vampire where he could shove his cup. Eric sat on the ground next to him and fixed him with a hard stare.

“Since your mouth is full and you can’t shoot it off to me, I need to tell you a few things,” the vampire’s tone was friendly enough, but his eyes remained troubled. “The reason Sable isn’t here is because she had to go answer for what she did for you.”

Ryan tried to ask what that might be, but all that came out was a muffled garble.

Eric still answered, “The council has made it illegal to make anymore Drone vampires.”

The bag was finally empty so Ryan brought it down. “But it wasn’t her fault. I was already starting to turn. If they’re mad at anyone, it should be the recently departed Minx.”

Eric gave a rueful shake of his head. “The last the council wants is more of our kind. As far as they are concerned, she disobeyed a direct command.”

“So what was she supposed to do?”

“The standing order is to kill all half turned ferals,” Eric supplied blandly, but the hard look on his face showed how he truly felt about that.

Ryan realized that his mouth was opened in shock and he quickly clamped it shut. “You’re kidding right? This is some prank you guys play

on all the newbies.”

“I wish I was, kid. You just got thrown into a whole new world and it’s brutal. It’s just not the council that you have to worry about. There are weres, elves, harpies and demons that would love nothing more than to add you to their kill list.”

Ryan clenched his fist tighter around the nearly empty bag. It made a wet squishing sound. “Why do they hate us?”

Eric gave a shrug. “Who knows? Maybe a vampire pissed in their pool years ago. It really doesn’t matter *why* anymore. We just need to keep our heads down and survive.”

“That’s another reason why Sable said that I would have to leave my family behind,” Ryan whispered more to himself. “If I stay, then those things will be drawn to them because of me.” A heavy feeling of despair settled like a lead ball in his stomach. Then he gave a disbelieving shake of his head as the meaning of Eric’s words caught up with him. “Did you just say weres? As in werewolves?”

Eric snorted. “Of course not.”

Ryan sighed in relief.

The vampire continued, “The wolves are our allies, well at least as far as Drones are concerned. They hate The Pure Ones almost as much as we do. It’s the jackals you have to worry about, they despise all vampires.”

That was the straw that broke the camel's back. Ryan started to laugh and it wasn't your everyday ordinary chuckle, it was a manic high-pitched thing that showed he had truly lost it. In between peals, fragmented sentences escaped him. "...fucking vampires...I drank her blood... werewolves..."

Eric's brow creased in a worried expression. "Ah, hey, kid..."

Ryan went right on babbling, "I realized something this morning. My knee is better. The best doctors in the country couldn't fix it, but one hot female vampire and her teeth managed just fine. My first thought was, *great now I can go play hockey again. I have my life back.* Then I realized that wouldn't fly because the first day game my team would be without a goalie because the sun would have made him a big pile of goo."

Eric sliced the air with an impatient gesture of his hand. "You need to get it together. If Sable comes back, I need at least one of you in the right frame of mind."

Ryan sobered immediately. "What do you mean *if*? Is Sable in danger?"

"Yeah." Eric gave the classic *duh* look. "Have you been listening to me talk about the VRF?"

"I thought they would give her a ticket or something." Ryan scrambled to his feet. "What are we doing just sitting here? We have to go help

her.”

Eric gestured toward the windows. “We can’t leave. The sun will do us in before we even get three steps outside.”

Letting out a growl of frustration, Ryan punched the door. “So what are we supposed to do? We can’t just sit here and do nothing. How could you let her go?”

“You don’t get it,” Eric snapped. “You’re not part of a democracy any longer. The minute you became a vampire, you became subject to the VRF’s whims and laws. The same goes for me. If I had tried to stop Sable, the VRF would have executed me and I can’t leave Misty unprotected.”

“You’re stupid Vampire Regulation Force can’t get away acting like this way. This is still America.” Ryan was fighting the insane urge to go tearing out of the house to find Sable despite the fact he knew Eric was right about the sun. An almost primal need to protect the female was ruling all of his emotions. It was so strong his hands shook with fury.

“The VRF predates America. Shit, kid, some of the members predate America.” He placed a comforting hand on Ryan’s shoulder. “As soon as the sun sets, we’ll go back to our compound. If I know Sable, she’ll already be there.”

“She better be,” Ryan promised darkly. “Or they’ll rue the day I was created.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Rule Number 134: Drones are forbidden from reproducing. The Pure Race will not tolerate another generation of inferiority. Failure to comply will result in five years of imprisonment for both the male and female and forced sterilization.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

After what seemed like an endless day of pacing and mindless conversations, the sun finally set and the males were able to go back to the Drone compound. As soon as Ryan saw the old warehouse that they had converted, he knew that Sable was inside. Whatever bond made it impossible to be apart from her, obviously made it so he sensed whenever she was near, too. He, also knew that she was hurt. With a growl, he snapped his fangs at the thought of anyone touching her. Deep down, he knew it was completely irrational

to be this emotional over someone he'd just met, but the primal need to protect her wouldn't be denied.

Jumping out of the car before it even came to a complete stop, he ignored Eric's protests. So intent on getting to Sable, he didn't even notice someone was there until they were on him. A couple pair of strong hands slammed him down onto the hard ground. Looking up, Ryan saw two males with black SWAT style gear and dark sunglasses on. One smiled, showing off a set of fangs.

"Not again. Is that all you vampire do? Attack each other," he grouched, fighting to no avail. To the left of him, he could hear Eric cursing and spitting as he was pinned to the wall by another set of vampires.

"You don't have to eliminate him," Eric pleaded as he stopped his struggles. "We have him contained and there is no risk of exposure."

"Don't worry about your little fledging," one of the goons smirked. "Corbin decided that he can live because Sable paid the price."

"If you hurt her, I kill you," Ryan threatened. A red haze blurred his vision and his voice had taken on a deep gravelly edge. Fury surged through his body, making him more monster than human and he found he wanted to cling to the darker side of himself. He needed to make these males pay for touching what belonged to him.

A boot snapped out and slammed hard on his wrist, pinning his arm to the dirt. So overcome with rage, he barely felt it at first, then the owner stomped again, this time harder and with the sharp edge of his heel. Ryan gritted his teeth to keep from crying out in pain. He refused to give the bastards the pleasure. The one that had been doing all the talking pulled something out of his pocket. It resembled a car cigarette lighter and something told Ryan he wasn't getting it out to take a smoke break.

"You didn't have to come out here for this," Eric stared, speaking in even tones, like he was trying to diffuse the whole situation.

"What's going on?" Ryan asked. It was hard, but he kept the fear and rage out of his voice.

The goon answered, "We are just marking the trash. All Drones are required to wear the mark. Go ahead and fight us. The punishment is death and I would love to rid the world of another parasite."

Shock slammed its way through Ryan's body. These bloodthirsty bastards were actually planning on branding him like he was their cattle. While he was terrified of what they were going to do, he would die again before he let them know that. Ryan looked him dead in the eyes. "Just get the marking over with. All this talk is boring me." He was surprised to find he really didn't care

what happened to him next. All he cared about was getting to Sable because he could feel her needing him.

The vampire placed the device against Ryan's pinned wrist and he was glad that they were still holding him down because his body arched up in agony. Okay this stung a bit. Shit, it more than stung, it was the worst pain he'd ever experienced in his life, short of the other night when he was changed.

Biting the inside of his cheek so hard he tasted blood, Ryan was able to stop himself from crying out. He didn't even so much as grunt, not wanting to give them even that. After all Sable and Eric had done for him, he wasn't about to let them down by looking weak in front of these vampires.

The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils, mixing in with the scents of his sweat and the dirt that he was on. Finally, the bastard moved the device and they got off him. One took the time to kick Ryan in the head as they got up, another gave him a sharp kick to the ribs. Ryan didn't even take time to lick his wounds, he staggered right to his feet and leveled a glare at the group of vampires. A snarl erupted from his chest as he crouched into a fighting position in case they decided to attack again. Agitated, angry and scared he now knew what a cornered tiger felt like.

Eric came over and placed a hand on his



shoulder, whether it was to comfort him or stop him from attacking, Ryan wasn't for sure. Not that there was any danger of him going ninja on anyone's ass right now. He was feeling too lightheaded and nauseated from his ordeal. The fangs and snarls were more for show. That didn't mean he wouldn't use them if they tried to take Sable away again.

Lucky for him, the vampires were done with them. They all got into a pair a waiting Hummers, the talker tossing over his shoulder, "By the way, Eric, Corbin says to tell Misty hello."

A low growl rumbled from Eric's chest, but otherwise he kept his mouth shut and showed no reaction. The two watched the vehicles pull away, leaving the parking lot so fast that their tires spit gravel and dirt. Only then did Ryan allow himself to sag against the wall, his hand wrapped protectively around his wrist. Working up the courage to look at his wound, he uncurled his fingers. A capital *D* had been branded into him, the red flesh stark against the white letter.

"Sorry, kid," Eric said. "They do that to all the Drones so we can't try and pass ourselves as Pure. It hurts like a bitch when they do it to because vampires heal so quickly, they have to make the brand extra hot."

"No kidding," Ryan grunted. "It doesn't matter. I just want to go find Sable."

Eric nodded, then pulled the door open to the warehouse. Ryan tore inside, not waiting for the other male. He didn't head for the infirmary, but instead went deeper into the compound because that was where his gut was telling him Sable was.

Gradually, as he negotiated more hallways, the walls switched from white to gray. He encountered various vampires on the way, some male, some female, all surprised to see him hauling ass past them. He didn't give any of them a second glance. He just needed to get to *his female*. Even when he passed a small group of children playing, he didn't pause, although they seemed strangely out of place, in such an institutionalized setting. Sable was all that mattered.

His heart was telling him the connection that he was feeling for Sable went beyond the normal sire, fledging bond. This was stronger, almost primal. She was his and he would destroy anyone that came between them. Even though that thought would have normally made him run the other way, it made him run *toward* her. What's more, he knew once he got her, he would never be able to let go.

He finally came to a doorway and went in, finding a small room that had a bed in the center. Sable was lying on it on her stomach and a tall female with a doctor's smock was standing over her. The strange female's brown hair was in a

severe bun that matched the look her gray eyes were shooting his way.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I'm Ryan," he replied, craning his neck to get a better glimpse of Sable, but the other female was too tall.

"*Her* Ryan? The one that I've been hearing so much about?" She crossed her arms over her slender frame and still didn't budge.

Even though he wanted to physically toss the female out of his way, Ryan maintained his cool. "Yes, I'm *her* Ryan."

The female looked him up and down, assessing his injuries. Besides the branding, the vampires had banged him up pretty good. "You're hurt."

Ryan took a step closer to the bed, but the female stepped to the side, grabbed his arm and started to examine the brand mark. "Are you a doctor?" he asked, somewhat sarcastically. Given the way The Pure Ones looked down on Drones, he didn't see them taking the time and money to train one of them to be a physician.

"As a matter of fact, I am." His surprise must have shown on his face because she explained, "I became one while I was still human. Now, sit down. I need to put something on this burn. It probably hurts like hell."

It did hurt like hell, but he could care less about himself right now. When he continued to try to

look past the doctor to see Sable, she finally sighed and dropped his arm. Stepping to the side, she said, "There she is. She's hurt, but alive. Now will you let me treat you?"

Ryan couldn't answer her because the sight of Sable's back had made all talking impossible. A shredded, bloodstained shirt was tossed to the side of the room. A lump formed in the back of his throat when he recognized it was the hoodie from the night before. Those bastards had flogged her like she was some common criminal from the turn of the century. Her back was a mass of welts and cuts that crisscrossed the entire length from the nape of her neck to her backside. Groaning low in his throat, he sank to his knees by the bed. He raised a shaking hand to touch her, but brought it back, fearful he would hurt her even more. Her eyelids stayed closed and she gave no indication if she knew he was there or not. "Who did this to her?" he asked harshly

"The Vampire Regulation Force," the doctor replied crisply. "More specifically, Corbin."

"Where will I find this Corbin?" A red-hot anger started to burn within Ryan.

"Going out there and getting yourself killed isn't going to solve anything,"

"I don't care if I die so long as I take the bastard out with me." The last declaration was punctuated with a snarl and he could feel his canines growing

longer. It was the second time in less than an hour he had this reaction and he realized he truly was a predator now. *Good, the better prepared I'll be when it comes time to rip this Corbin's throat out.* He jumped to his feet and headed for the door. "Forget it, I'll find him on my own."

Ryan dimly realized he was no longer near human, his fury had made him something else. Something dangerous and primal and he didn't care. All that mattered was avenging what had been done to his woman. Someone grabbed him around the waist and held him back. He snarled again, this time relishing that it sounded so menacing.

"You go out there and get yourself killed, kid, and what Sable sacrificed for you will mean nothing," a voice soothed into his ear. Eric. It was Eric that was holding him, trying to bring him back from the brink.

Ryan still was fighting against the monster part of him though and wasn't quite ready to listen to reason, although he did stop fighting Eric's hold. "Mine," he rasped. "He touched her and she's mine."

Eric held his gaze.

Ryan was further calmed by the understanding he saw in the other vampire's eyes.

"Yes, she is yours and someday you will have your vengeance. Just not today."

“Promise?”

Giving a slow nod, Eric vowed, “Promise.”

The next thing he heard finally brought him out of his rage. It was Sable, her voice was weak and reedy, but it was there and that was all that mattered. “Ryan, is that you?”

Eric let go of him and Ryan raced back to the bed. Going back to his knees, he grabbed Sable’s fingers with one hand and used the other to stroke her soft hair. Her eyes were full of tears and he didn’t know if it was from pain or from the fact that he had walked out on her after she had risked everything for him.

“You came back,” she breathed.

Her skin was pale and there were dark circles under her eyes. He noticed she had the lightest bit of dusting of freckles on the bridge of her pert nose. “Of course I did and I’m back to stay this time,” he promised as he kissed her fingertips. He continued to stroke her hair, stopping to play with a particular piece that curled around her face.

“It’s better that way. Everyone will be safer.” Her words were labored, like it hurt to talk. “What did you tell your family?”

He was touched to see the genuine concern for him in her question. In his gut, he knew she really was worried that he would miss his mother and brother. “Before I moved back here, I was offered a coaching job in Canada. I’ll just tell them I took it

and have to leave the States.” Even though it would hurt to What’s more, he knew it would be nothing compared to the pain he would feel if he lost his mind and attacked her or Matt.

Her lips curled into a ghost of a smile before her brow crinkled in concern and she frowned. “I am sorry you can’t be with them anymore. It hurts to be jerked away from your loved ones and I know you didn’t ask for any of this.”

“I can call them if I get too homesick.” He pressed his mouth to hers, he couldn’t help but touch her. Even though he knew he had no right after what he’d done to her the night before, he couldn’t stop from tasting those lips again. A small thrill of victory went through him when she didn’t resist, she even parted her mouth so he could slip his tongue in. Closing his eyes, he relished the feeling of her scent and her touch. It didn’t even matter that Eric and the doctor were still watching them. Hell, it was only by reminding himself she was hurt that he didn’t climb into bed with her for some heavy spooning action. Regretfully pulling away, he gave the tip of her nose a soft kiss. “Go back to sleep. You look too pale.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she murmured. “Vampires heal fast. By tomorrow, the marks on my back will be all gone.”

“Just quite arguing with me, female.” He

smiled to take the sting from his command. "I'll be here waiting for you when you wake up."

With a content sigh, she closed her eyes.

He didn't look up at the others until her face had relaxed and she was taking in slow regular breaths. "I'm sorry I was too busy acting like an idiot to get your name earlier," he addressed the doctor.

"It's Dahlia," she responded as she came up and grabbed his arm again.

As she rubbed an ointment on it, the pain from the branding receded. Ryan took the opportunity to study her. She was a tall classic beauty that carried herself with a slightly cool manner. That used to be the type of woman that he went for before he found out that he liked brown curls, freckles and black hoodies with crooked drawstrings. After a lifetime of Gingers, he found he suddenly wanted Maryanne.

"Thank you for taking care of her, Dahlia," he said after she had finished. "Was she telling the truth about being better in the morning?"

"Yes, she will be completely healed in a matter of hours and there won't be any scars. She'll need quite a bit of blood though."

"She can take all she needs from me." Ryan leveled his gaze at Eric. The male was leaning against the doorframe, taking in the whole scene with a natural face. "This can't be allowed to



happen again. We can't stand back and watch them abuse our females like this."

Eric smirked. "We? So you're one of us now?"

"Well I was going to join the Scientology sect down the road, but I failed the free personality test," Ryan shot back. "So they banned me from their premises."

Dahlia laughed. "I like you. There are not many that would dare tease Eric. He is a grumpy bastard on his best days."

"And on his worst days?" Ryan chuckled.

"He could scare a horny sea hag back into her den," Dahlia responded cheekily, a teasing glint in her eyes.

"Your words of love touch me," Eric drawled.

Dahlia snorted. "You know I admire and respect you. All of us do here. Why else would we continue to follow you around? My question to you as our leader, is what do you plan do about how they hurt Sable?"

Eric let out a tired sigh. "Don't start on me again, female. It isn't the right time yet."

"When will it be? When Misty comes home like this?"

The doctor's voice had grown thick with emotion and Ryan was stunned to see tears in her eyes.

She gestured angrily toward Sable. "Do you know while Sable was serving Corbin, he had her

forcibly sterilized? Most of the Drone females I've examined have undergone the same procedure. They'll do the same to your daughter and that will just be a start."

They both sucked in a breath at her words and gave worried looks Ryan's way. He gave a slight shake of his head. Then he remembered the small group of children that he had passed on his way to Sable's room and realization slowly dawned on him. No wonder Eric had reacted so violently when those goons had mentioned Misty. "I thought Drones couldn't have children."

"We can physically have them. We are just not allowed to reproduce by VRF law," Eric replied bitterly. "They put my wife, Eva, and I in prison for defying their order. She died in there five years ago."

Ryan started to say *I'm sorry* but stopped, realizing how hollow the words would sound. Even though he'd only known Sable a couple of days, the thought of ever losing her made his heart seize in fear. He could only imagine the torment that Eric had to be going through. "You could avenge her," he offered instead. "I would stand by your side and fight with you."

Eric gave a bitter laugh. "The two of us against the VRF? We would have a better chance of living if we walked down the beach hand-in-hand watching the sunrise."

"I wouldn't go that far in my support of you, but if you want to stand up to those bastards and stop letting them push us Drones around, then I'm all for it."

"Now I know for sure I like him." Dahlia folded her arms over her chest and smirked at Eric. "I think you should tell him about the back half of the compound, Eric."

"Not yet." Eric clenched his teeth and sent a warning glare toward the doctor. "He just entered our fold. We don't know if we can trust him yet. He already left once."

"And he came back." She let out an exasperated breath.

"How do we know he won't leave again? Worse, how do we know that he won't tell the VRF everything that he sees?"

"Something tells me that we won't have to worry about that," Dahlia replied. Her gaze drifted to Ryan and softened. "You care for her, don't you, fledging?"

"I honestly don't know what this is." Ryan gripped Sable's limp fingers tightly. "All I know is I'm going to kill whoever did this to her, with or without your help."

There was a pregnant pause as they waited for Eric's response. The vampire rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "I'll consider it. Now get the hell off my back, Dahlia."

Storming out of the room, Eric left them before anyone could comment.

Dahlia let out a sigh. "Well that's a start. I think you're softening him up, fledging."

"Just out of curiosity, how long are you guys going to call me *fledging*?" The nickname was really starting to annoy the hell out of him.

"We usually call the new ones fledging for their first five years." Dahlia seemed to delight in delivering that tidbit.

Ryan groaned. "Just tell me how I should give her blood and leave me to wallow in my low self-worth."

Dahlia ruffled his hair.

She actually frigging ruffled his hair like he was some kid who had made a cute comment.

"The rest of the clan is going to love you."

"Great, I'll be voted Miss Congeniality by a group of vampires. Ma will be so proud."

Dahlia laughed. "Do you always have a smartass comment in your back pocket?"

"Funny, that was exactly the same thing Mrs. Grimmins asked."

"Who's Mrs. Gimmins?" She raised one finely arched brow.

"My high school principle. I spent a lot of time in her office." He studied Sable's back. Maybe he was imaging things, but it appeared some of the flesh was healing a bit.

“Why doesn’t it surprise me you were a juvenile delinquent?” Throwing some unused bandages into a black medical bag, she snapped it shut. “So are you always this sarcastic or are you using it a way to cope with all this?”

“Both,” Ryan admitted with a sigh. “I thought my life was fucked up before, but now it seems like nothing compared to everything that’s happened the past few days. Not that I’m ungrateful for Sable or anything. It’s just a lot to take in.”

“It is scary at first,” Dahlia admitted, her voice soft with compassion. “When I was changed it took me forever to adjust, but I didn’t have a good sire. You have Sable and she’ll take care of you.”

“Has she ever done it before?”

“I’m going to let you in a little secret, fledging, and you better not let on to Sable that I even breathed a word of this.” Dahlia darted a worried look over to make sure the other female was still sleeping. “You’re the first human Sable’s ever transformed. In fact, you’re the first one she’s ever willing fed from the vein on. Before now she’s always used the bagged stuff.”

Ryan’s head reeled with that revelation. The fact he was Sable’s first both humbled him and gave him an alpha rush. It also scared him a bit because that must mean she was feeling the same overwhelming connection he was. Still, he found

himself insecure enough to ask, "Why do you think she did that?"

"I suspect because she likes you. You must have done something awful good to impress her."

"Not much, unless you call lying around bleeding spectacular." A bitter laugh slipped from his lips.

"It was more than that, even though I've seen for myself you bleed most manly. Do you know that you were the first thing she asked about when Corbin's goons dragged her back here? Even though she was so hurt she was barely conscious, you were her main concern. Sable hasn't let her guard down enough to let anyone in like that since she was turned."

"Great." At that moment Ryan felt like such an ass he was tempted to slam his head into the nearest brick wall until he beat some sense into his thick skull. "I repaid that trust by running out on her."

"Don't get that guilty look on your face," Dahlia chided softly. "You just found out you were a vampire. It's a lot for anyone to take in. We all freaked out. Sable didn't blame you at all."

"I was a real jerk though." Ryan wasn't about to let himself off the hook that easily. "I bit her and freaked out about it. That must have made her feel like a million bucks. God, she should hate me, not be worrying about my lame ass."

"She doesn't hate you. Far from it. There is a real bond between you two." Dahlia gave a pointed look.

Ryan realized his fingers were absently stroking Sable's arm. Even though he knew he was adding fuel to her argument, he didn't move his hand, not willing to give up the comfort he gained from caressing her warm, silky skin. "Do all sires feel that protective of their charges?" A lock of her curly hair was tempting it as it draped over the white pillow and it was all he could do not to bring it up to his face and breathe in.

"No, some sire may feel protective, but it's not often there is an instant connection like with you and Sable. Then you have the sires that treat their fledgling like chattel and abuse them. That's what Sable had."

"Who was her sire?" Ryan's free hand clenched at the edge of the mattress as he thought about anyone harming her.

"Corbin."

The way Dahlia spat out the name showed there was no love lost between her and the asshole. "The same Corbin who whipped her?"

"The same one. That was just the latest thing he's done to her, too. For years he controlled her and forced her to be nothing more than a slave to him."

A low growl rumbled in Ryan's throat.

She threw him a harsh glare. "Calm down. I didn't tell you that so you would go all macho on me again. I'm sharing this with you so you can better understand Sable. She'd going to fight this thing that's going on between you two because she'd going to be terrified on letting herself become vulnerable again."

"So what do you suggest I do to help her, short of bringing her Corbin's head on a spike." He smiled and he knew it was predatory, but he didn't give a damn. It was only by touching Sable and breathing in her scent that he was able to keep himself centered enough not to go off into the deep end.

"Be patient with her. When she pushes you away, don't give up on her."

Dahlia locked gazes with him and Ryan was shocked at the depth of emotion there. The doc was worried about Sable and it wasn't because of the wounds on her back, it was the ones on Sable's soul that were tearing her up.

"Promise me."

"I promise." He was surprised when the words came out choked.

"Thank you." Dahlia sniffed.

If he'd known her better, Ryan would have accused her of become teary eyed.

"I'm going to leave now so you can let her feed. It's a rather intimate act and I was never the



voyeur type.”

“Wait.” Ryan panicked. “You never told me how to do it.”

“The first couple of times you will have to bite your wrist yourself.” She held up the inside of her own wrist to demonstrate and flashed her fangs. “After that, she will be healthy enough to take your vein herself.”

The thought of Sable’s lips sucking any part of his body made him hard as a rock. He shifted uncomfortably, hoping Dahlia wouldn’t think he was some sicko pervert who lusted over unconscious girls. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to notice, she scooped up her bag and walked out, her high heels making sharp clicking sounds on the tile. Her no nonsense gray skirt sashayed over her calves and the white coat billowed out a bit behind her.

“You might want to lock the door when she takes your vein,” she called back in a lilting tone. “Like I said, it can get intimate. You wouldn’t want the whole clan to see you two macking.”

“Real professional bedside manner you got there, Doc,” he called back, amused by her teasing. It was nice to know there were at least a few vampires that knew how to joke around. The door clicked softly behind her and Ryan found himself alone with Sable.

Sable muttered restlessly, drawing his attention

back to her. Bringing his wrist to his mouth, he bit into the flesh quick before he had a chance to dwell about what he was doing. It didn't hurt too much because his concern for her overrode his own personal needs. He sucked a few times until the blood was flowing freely before he pressed it to her lips.

At first he was afraid she wasn't going to drink. Maybe because he was a fledgling his blood wasn't strong enough for her. Worse, what if she found him lacking? Then he saw her tongue dart out and tentatively lap up some of the liquid. He shuddered, aroused, it was so soft and velvet feeling, almost like a hot whisper. Then her lips pressed against him and she started to take in weak sucks.

Closing his eyes, Ryan tried to get control of the desire raging through his body. His cock reacted to each suck she took, throbbing with the need to bury itself deep inside her. If this is how he reacted now, how was it going to be when she was wide awake feeding off his neck? Her eyelids fluttered open and he found himself locked in her gaze.

He could see the need and desire in her eyes as she drank. Even in her weak state, she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Her tongue swirled against him and he bit back a moan. Thinking back to their encounter in the hallway, he

remembered how good her tight body had felt pressed against him. When she started to pull away, he put a gentle hand to the side of her head to stop her. "Take more," he urged. "I need you better so I can finish what we started in that hall."

She gave him a shy smile before resuming to feed. After several minutes, she swept her tongue across his wound to stop the bleeding before giving a satisfied sigh. Ryan was anything but satisfied. He was still so aroused he was about ready to tear something apart, but so long as she was taken care of that was all that mattered.

"Will you lie down with me?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied in a tightly even as his inner voice screamed, *God, no!* The last thing his cock need was to be even closer to her. What he needed to do was leave the room, find the closest cold shower and spend about three hours in it. Maybe then he would have some control over the disobedient thing. But she needed his comfort so he would suffer, for her. Climbing into bed with Sable, he made sure to stay on top of the covers so he didn't feel the soft inviting heat of her body so much. He moved carefully, both because of her injuries and because he didn't want her to come into contact with his erection.

Lacing her fingers into his, she commanded, "Now, go to sleep. If you're going to insist on being the one that feeds me, then you need your

rest.”

Surprisingly, he found himself wanting to obey her. His eyelids were beginning to get heavy and a sense of comfort came over him. It was nice lying next to Sable. He wondered briefly about how nice it would be to wake up next to her every morning. He had never felt that way about a female before and it was kind of nice.

The sense of comfort left him as soon as he noticed what was hanging on her walls. There were numerous hockey posters and damn if every one of was of a forward. He looked everywhere, but there was not one single goalie present.

“I’m insulted,” he grunted, but she didn’t hear him because she had gone back to sleep. Her lips were curled in a satisfied smile that tugged at his heart. Even though she was a fan of forwards and thus a traitor in his book, he knew he was head over heels in love with her. He was so in trouble.

Kissing the tip of her pert nose, he let himself go to sleep. Every time he took in a breath, he could smell her and, despite the fact he had to leave his family and he’d been attacked yet again by vampires and that he was just a fledgling, he couldn’t help but be content.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Rule Number 754: Drones are discouraged from fraternizing with other paranormal species. This includes witches, werewolves, ghouls, zombies, elves, harpies, gargoyles, kubolds, demons and gnomes.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

The sweet sensation of someone caressing his back woke him up. Ryan cracked his lids open and was greeted by the sight of Sable's face inches from his. The color was back into her cheeks, making them rosy and her full lips were slightly parted. There was a strange look in her eyes and he hoped that it was desire, or at the very least, interest.

"How are you feeling tonight?" he asked, pleased she continued to rub his back. It was a good thing he was on his stomach because his cock had woke up, too, and it obviously decided it

wanted to be stroked as well.

“Wonderful, thanks to you.” Her gaze settled on the numerous bite marks on his arms. During the day, he had got up and gave her blood several times. “Those wounds should have closed over by now. You gave me too much.”

“Dahlia said you would need to feed several times in order to heal.”

“You should have called someone in to help donate.”

“No!” He winced at the harshness in his voice. For a second, a wave of jealousy and rage had surged through him before he was able to damper it. The mere thought of her taking from someone else’s vein made him feel possessive. *She’s mine and nobody else will touch her.* He blinked, surprised at his reaction. Since when had he become the alpha caveman type?

Sable stopped stroking his back and gave him a wary look. “Just because I’m your sire, doesn’t mean you have to serve me like a slave. It’s not like how those stupid horror movies always made it out to be. You’re not my Renfield.”

Ryan had to work hard to keep himself from gaping at her. Didn’t she realize how alluring she was? He thought back to the awkward way she sometimes carried herself and to the times he had seen the feelings self-doubt mar her perfect features. What had Corbin done to her in the past

to make her blind to the fact she was perfect?

“I did it because I couldn’t stand the thought of another male’s blood being inside you. It’s not because I feel indebted to you either. It’s because if another guy so much as touches you, I’m going to want to tear him apart.” His gut tightened as soon as those words tumbled out of his pie-hole. Great, she was probably going to run from the room shrieking because the newbie had developed an unwanted stalker attitude toward her.

Her lips parted as her eyes grew wide. “Really?”

“When I saw what that fucker had done to you, they had to hold me down.” He reached out and stoked her back, remembering the wounds that had been there the previous night. His heart soared with pleasure when she didn’t stiffen or pull away from him.

A small impish smile came across her face. “No male has ever wanted to protect my honor. I could get used to it. Be careful or else you’ll spoil me.”

With a chuckle, he sat up so he could see how her wounds were healing. The flesh was smooth and unblemished, there wasn’t even a red mark left to hint at her whipping. The white sheet was still over pulled up to her waist and he sucked in a breath, remembering she was nude and just inches from him. He continued to run his fingers slowly up and down her spine, but this time it wasn’t to

check her wounds, it was because the feeling of her satin skin was irrespirable.

Thanks to his new heightened senses, he could smell the desire coming from her and that gave him the courage to ask, "Can I kiss you?"

\* \* \* \*

Sable's heart hammered in her chest at his question. She wanted to respond with something witty and sexy, but her mouth felt like it was glued shut. So she did the next best thing. Gave him a dumb nod of her head. He responded with a crooked smile and her stomach did a girlish flip. God, he could stop traffic with that grin of his.

Titling her face up slightly, she closed her eyes and waited for him to press his lips to hers. She almost jumped from the bed when she felt his tongue caressing her back. Her mouth opened as she started to protest, but a low moan came out instead. His tongue felt so soft and hot at the same time and each velvet caress sent shivers of pleasure through her body. Holy crap and a bagel, he was getting close to her bottom and all that was covering her was a sheet. What if he pulled it down?

Then his fingers slowly trailed up her ribcage, lightly brushing the side of her breast and she didn't give a damn that she was nude. In fact, she



was suddenly glad. He shifted and she could feel his erection pressing against her hip. He hadn't been lying, he did want her. Just as bad as she wanted him.

"You taste so good," he rasped. "I want to eat every inch of you."

The sheet was tugged down and his fingers danced over her ass before slipping in between her thighs.

"You're so wet, so tight," he observed.

She flushed.

"Dear God female, you're driving me crazy. I've never wanted anyone more than I want you right now."

One finger slid inside her and she arched her back as her hands clawed into the mattress. Casting a nervous glance at the door, she was reminded there were a couple dozen more vampires milling around. Any one of them could come bursting in at any moment and catch them.

Ryan caught her looking and assured, "I locked the door last night. I didn't want anyone coming in while we slept and seeing you vulnerable."

He had protected her. Taken care of her. She couldn't recall the last time someone had done that for her. The finger withdrew from her before he replaced it with two. A long gasp erupted from her lips as her body stretched to accommodate his touch. Hot breath tickled her ear as he leaned

down to give her a light nip.

“Turn over for me,” he whispered.

Knowing that would make her even more exposed and vulnerable to him, she balked for a moment. Then his tongue made another path down her spine as his fingers thrust into her again. That made her interested in knowing what he would do to the front of him. Rolling over, she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for his reaction.

Her only other lover, Corbin, had always gone out of his way to tell her how lacking her figure was. Her breasts were too small, her butt flat, her skin too pale, the list had gone on and on. A good-looking jock like Ryan probably had been with countless females and she knew she couldn't hold a candle to any of them.

His finger traced her stomach. “You are so beautiful.”

Her eyelids snapped open in shock. He gazed down at her, his brown eyes dark with desire and the sincerity she saw in them couldn't be faked. Her heart flipped with joy when she realized he really meant it. Tugging at the front of his black t-shirt, she brought him down for a kiss. There were so many words she wanted to say, but didn't dare. She tried to express them with the kiss instead, praying the entire time she wasn't getting her hopes up all for nothing. The last time she had

fallen this hard for someone had been Corbin and he had betrayed her in every way possible. She didn't think she could live if Ryan did the same thing to her.

He made lazy circles on her ribcage, stopping just short of her breasts. After a few passes, she couldn't stand the torment anymore. She arched her back in a silent plea and he had mercy on her. Cupping her breast, he gently squeezed the soft flesh before he rolled her nipple between his fingers.

Whimpering into his mouth, her kisses became more frantic. She bit his bottom lip and sucked in the blood that oozed out. With a loud moan, he shifted his body so he was even more on top of her. One of his legs settled between her thighs, the denim jean material rubbed against her already aroused flesh. Unable to resist, she undulated her hips against him, the frictions sending waves of pleasure throughout her body.

He broke the kiss and started to work his way across her jaw line and to her neck. When he got to her pulse, he stopped and licked at it a few times, his lips hovering, teasing. She tensed with anticipation, waiting for him to bite her. In the end, all he did was scrape her with the edge of one of his fangs before he started working his way down her collarbone.

"You can bite me. I don't mind really. It

feels...oh!" He'd started sucking one of her nipples in the middle of her speech, making it impossible for her to finish.

After a few swirls of his tongue, he started working his way down her body again, his lips blazing a burning path the entire way. By the time he reached in between her thighs, she was a quivering mess. A couple sobs came out of her throat and she bit her lip to stop herself from screaming. Just because she was inexperienced didn't mean she had to make a fool of herself in front of him. She was determined to keep some control over herself. She could do this, honest.

As soon as his tongue touched her, she knew that wasn't going to happen. A shriek of pleasure came out before she could stop it. Then he took her clit between his teeth and gently sucked and she didn't care what she sounded like anymore. Stars in heaven, it had never been like this before.

"How did you get so good at this?" she asked as she grabbed his hair with both hands and held him closer. "Wait! I don't think I want to know the answer to that one. Just don't stop."

With a low chuckle, he obeyed her, working not one but two orgasms from her.

At end of the second one, she screamed so loud every vampire in the compound probably heard her, but she didn't give damn. Clawing at his shirt, she demanded, "Take off your clothes."

He gave her a crooked smile as he got up on his knees. "Is that a direct command from my sire?"

"Yes, it is. Obey me now."

Standing up, he stripped at an amazing speed. When he was nude, he stood at the end of the bed so she could look her fill. Her gaze traveled over his strong chest to his tight abdomen before settling on his large cock. There was a droplet of moisture forming at the tip and she couldn't resist. Crawling to the end of the bed, she went up on all fours so she could reach forward and lick it away. The salty taste of him teased her senses and her womb clenched in response. Wanting seconds, she flicked her tongue out again for another taste, sweeping the head of his cock. When he hissed and put a hand in her hair, she tensed, expecting him to jerk her forward and force himself into her mouth. Instead, he gave her the softest of caress and made no move, letting her take the lead. A sense of heady power went through her, making her lightheaded with excitement as she realized that for once she would be taking the lead in a sexual encounter. That gave her the courage to part her lips and take his erection fully into her mouth.

Sable hummed in pleasure at the taste of him. His cock was warm and slick from both his precum and her lips and it slid easily in and out of her mouth. Ryan's breath hitched and he muttered

something under his breath that would have made a shy female blush. With her, it made the dampness between her thighs build up even more as she imagined how it would be for him to utter the same words into her ear as he thrust into her body.

After a few seconds, he pulled back and looked down at her. The emotion shining in his eyes was so raw there was no way he could be faking it. "If you don't stop, I'm not going to make it and when I come, I want to be inside you."

He waited until she nodded her acceptance before he climbed on the bed with her until he was in front of her. Gently, he guided her so she was lying on her back and he covered her with his body. Sable sensed he moved slowly so she wouldn't feel like any movement any moment of this encounter was forced. Bittersweet pain squeezed her heart when she realized he was holding back so she could still be in control. Never breaking eye contact, he separated her legs with his thigh then entered her in one smooth thrust. Throwing his head back with a hiss of pleasure, he filled her completely as she took in every inch of him. Pulling back, he entered her again and they moaned in unison.

"More, please," she begged as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Lots more, I promise."

He fulfilled that promise, too. The pace he set was slow and sweet at first, then harder as they both got closer to the edge. Sweat made their bodies slippery and the smell of their lovemaking filled the room. Just when she knew that he was close to the edge, she tilted her head to the side, exposing her neck. She'd never wanted anyone to feed from her, but with him, she desired it with every fiber of her being. He took the invitation, sinking his fangs into her as he continued to thrust into her. As soon as her blood filled his mouth, they both came together. He moaned against her throat, continuing to drink her in as his semen filled her body.

The strongest orgasm she'd ever experienced slammed into her body. Cupping the back of his head, she held him close as he continued to feed. Each time he sucked in another aftershock of pleasure went through her body. Just when she thought she could take no more, she slowly drifted back from her sexual high. Ryan continued to keep his teeth in her even though he was no longer feeding, almost as if he was reluctant to break contact. After a few seconds, he closed the wound with a sweep of his tongue and went up on his elbows so he could look into her face. The tenderness in his expression did strange things to her stomach.

"I can't believe what I've just done," he

proclaimed.

It felt like someone had punched her in the gut. He had regrets. Of course he had regrets. What had she expected, flowers and poetry? She'd been an idiot to think any male could see past her flaws. "I'm sorry," she whispered, shame making her voice harsh. "We don't have to do this again. I'll still train you and we can keep our relationship professional."

"That's not what I meant." He kissed the tip of her nose and gave her that grin again. "What I can't believe is that I've gone and fallen in love with you and I've only known you for a few days."

Her breath hitched. "You don't mean that." But even as she told herself not to get her hopes up, she couldn't help but notice he was wearing that same adoring look he had earlier. Even though she'd seen other males look at their mates the same way before, she'd never thought in a million years someone would toss one her way.

"God help both of us, but yes I do." Ryan ducked his head. "You probably just think that I'm some dorky fledging that has a bad case of puppy love."

"I don't think you're a dork." She stopped short of expressing her true feelings for him. The heavy silence from her undeclared announcement hung awkwardly in the air. At that moment she realized



she could easily fall in love him and it scared the hell out of her a male had that much power over her.

A slight flush appeared on his face. "Look, it's okay if you don't feel the same way about me. I'm probably feeling like this because you're my sire." He got up and started to get dressed in short jerky movements. "It must happen all the time with new vampires."

Clutching the sheet to her chest, she watched him with a building panic. She wanted to tell him how she really felt, but the words seemed to be stuck in the lump that had formed in the back of her throat. *You stupid idiot!* A voice screamed in her head. *You're blowing it. How long do you think before another female vampire snaps him up? Don't let him get away.*

But he was already opening the door and leaving, pausing only long enough to call over his shoulder, "Don't worry about training me. Eric already told me that he would take me under his wing. I'll stay out of your way." His face was a cold, expressionless mask and her stomach clenched at the sight. She would have rather he railed at her. Anger she could handle, this whole aloof act was another matter.

Even though he didn't slam the door on his way out, she still winced as if he had. The sound of it closing was so final. Curling up on her side,

she pulled a pillow up to her chest. It smelled like him and, even though she knew she should push it away, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, she held it closer so she could breathe in his scent even more. Then she did something that she hadn't done in ten years. She cried.

She didn't cry for herself though. She cried because she knew that she'd hurt him and because of the bond that they now shared, she had felt his pain and knew it was genuine. He really did love her. That scared the hell out of her, too.

\* \* \* \*

*Great way to be all patient and understanding, you stupid idiot. One blow to your pride and all of Dahlia's advice just slid out from your thick skull. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!*

"My daddy said that I was supposed to give this to you."

Ryan looked up from his musing, both annoyed and relieved to be interrupted. He had been sitting in the large cafeteria, thinking about Sable and how he had truly fucked things up with her. Anything to distract him from his one-man pity party was welcomed. A small girl held a heavy book out for him, the thing dwarfing her slender arms.

When he made no move to take the book, the

girl started to tap her foot impatiently. She appeared to be around seven years old and had a riot of brown hair that went down past her waist. Tangled and knotted, it looked as if it hadn't been brushed in weeks. While her clothes looked clean, the red top was completely mismatched with a pair of pink shorts. She had a smudge of dirt on her pudgy cheek and a faint punch stain on her upper lip. It was obvious that, while she was well taken care of, there was no female touch to her upbringing. This must be Eric's Misty. Instantly overcome by her aren't-I-the-cutest-darn-thing-that-you've-ever-seen appeal, he couldn't help but smile at her, despite his bad mood.

Misty smiled back, showing off a dainty pair of fangs and a set of dimples. Ryan was more than a little proud that something like a pair of sharp canines in the mouth of an otherwise innocent looking little girl didn't jar him.

"What's it about?" he asked as he took it.

She clambered up into the seat next to him, brushing a hunk of her bohemian hair out of her face. "It's the rule book," she replied simply, like she was talking to an idiot. "All of us have to learn it."

Ryan glanced down at the hardback. The jacket was black and written in red was, *So Now You're A Vampire. A quick instructional manual for the fledging.* He read the title a few times to make sure

his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. He even thumbed through a few of the pages. It was the real deal. Giving a slight shake of his head, he wondered silently if there was going to be a test afterward. "I can't believe that this was real," he muttered to himself.

"Oh, there are lots of things that are real people don't know about." Misty's brown eyes grew wide with excitement. "Did you know there is a Loch Ness Monster that lives in the Detroit River?"

Ryan looked up from the book, his mouth half-open in shock. Recovering, he asked, "If it lives here and not in Scotland, then wouldn't it be called the Detroit River Monster?"

"No." Misty made a face that showed how much of a moron she thought he was. "Her name is Snuggles."

"Snuggles," he repeated, dumbly. "Of course, what else would you call her?" A sea monster in the Detroit River? Surely, Misty was pulling a prank on him. Still, after all he'd seen and heard in the past couple days, anything was possible. Ryan dismissed that with a shake of his head. Vampires and werewolves were one thing, a living, breathing dinosaur was another.

Ryan returned to the manual. Maybe something in it would help him make sense of everything that happened to him. Misty stayed by his side, leaving only long enough to get a coloring book

and crayons. They sat together, enjoying a comfortable silence.

After a half-hour, Sable came quietly up and stood behind Ryan. Her hand brushed against the back of his neck and he had to force himself to keep looking down. It was hard, the instant she touched him, sparks of desire shot threw his body.

Misty jumped up and threw her arms around the female's waist. "Sable! I wanted to come see you earlier, but Daddy said you were sleeping."

"I see you have a new friend," Sable replied.

"His name is Ryan and I think he's cute," Misty shot back with a bluntness only a seven-year-old could master.

He felt a slight flush come to his face, but he still refused to look up. Not able to look Sable in the eyes after making a fool of himself, he decided the stupid manual was the most interesting thing he'd ever seen. Never mind the fact, he'd been re-reading the same sentence again and again.

"I think he's cute, too," Sable confessed in a loud stage whisper. The two shared a giggle before she added, "Now, go get a brush so I can tame your mane."

Misty went scampering off and Sable took the seat she'd vacated.

Every nerve ending in his body called to him to turn to her, embrace her, take her, but he ignored them. Her scent drifted toward him, adding to his

torture. Damn it, did she realize how much she was affecting him? Probably, which is why she was here to let him down easy. *Not going to happen, sweetie. I'm not letting you push me away again.*

"Ryan—"

He cut her off before she could get the pity words out. "Is there really a sea monster in the Detroit River?"

She let out a frustrated sigh. "Will you look at me? Please."

Reluctantly, he raised his gaze. She had changed and was wearing a pink hoodie this time. It didn't have drawstrings, but a zipper in the front instead. It was unzipped enough so her black sports bra showed underneath. One shoulder was peeking out, the skin creamy white and his mouth watered as he was reminded how good her flesh tasted.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she said.

"Don't be," he replied flatly. "This fledging got the message, loud and clear. You don't feel the same way about me as I do about you."

"Damn it, I do have feelings for you. It's just not as easy for me to admit to it as you."

He sat back and finally looked her full in the face. Her cheeks were slightly pink and her eyes were full with fear. Unable to help himself, he reached out and cupped her cheek. When she leaned into his touch instead of pulling away, he

let himself feel some hope. The cafeteria was full and they were probably attracting attention, but he didn't give a damn. All that mattered was Sable. "What made you so afraid to love?" he asked softly, worried that if he talked too loudly he would break the spell. For several tense seconds, he thought that she wasn't going to answer.

She blurted, "My sire, Corbin."

A burst of anger went through him. "The bastard who whipped you?" Even though Dahlia had already confided this with him, hearing it come from Sable's lips still made him see red.

"Yes." She rubbed her cheek against his hand, like she was seeking comfort from his touch. "I meet him two months before he turned me. I had no idea of what he really was. I was just a dumb college kid who was flattered that an older man acted interested in me. I should have known he was using me. I was just a small town hick, why would a man like him want with me?"

"I can think of a lot of reasons." Using his thumb, he wiped away a tear that escaped her eye.

"I followed him like a puppy dog, even after he turned me. It wasn't until he had me branded and sterilized I realized what a monster he really was. I never meant anything to him, I was just another conquest, another female he could claim to control."

Ryan's gut tightened as he remembered the first time she'd seen him, he had been following Minx out of the bar in hopes of a hook up. No wonder she didn't trust him. She probably thought he was a man-whore like this Corbin. Which wouldn't be far from the truth. Until Sable, he had never been interested in anything long term. The fact she was shooting him down was ironic and probably what he deserved. "If you want, I'll leave you alone for now," he offered in a shaky voice. "I'm willing to wait for as long as it takes to convince you what I'm feeling for you is the real thing."

"I do need time, but I don't want you to leave me alone." She gave him a sly smile. "There is no reason why I shouldn't enjoy your body while I'm deciding about my feelings for you."

He should have been insulted at the thought of her using him just for his body, but it excited the hell out of him instead. He would take the time to show her they were meant for each other and they could have lots of hot monkey sex in the mean time. He hadn't felt this giddy since he'd shut out Michigan State in the finals. An urgent need to touch her overcame him and, with a growl, he pulled her into his lap. Her eyes grew wide as her backside came into contact with his throbbing cock.

Her lips parted in a surprised gasp and he couldn't resist them. He brought her in even closer



so he could claim her mouth in a scorching kiss. When she didn't pull away, he felt a sense of alpha pride go through him. Grabbing two fistfuls of his hair, she returned his passion, her tongue going in and stoking his fangs. The action made his cock jerk and he couldn't resist thrusting up so he could rub against her ass even more.

Someone let out the classic wolf whistle.

Another yelled, "Hot Damn!"

Neither one of them stopped.

"What if Misty comes back?" he asked between kisses.

"I sent her after a hairbrush," she giggled. "Misty won't come back for hours, she hates having her hair combed."

They made out like pair of horny teenagers for several minutes before he pulled back. "Let's go back to your room. I want you naked and on your back. I'm going to spread you legs apart so I can look at you, *all of you*." She shivered at his words and he continued, "I want to see you all wet and hot for me. Those juices of yours tasted so good, I might have to go in for seconds. Then I'm going to bite, lick and suck every inch of you until you are screaming my name. Then and only then will I have mercy on you and fuck your brains out."

A small whimper came from her as she ran her finger lightly down the bridge of his nose. Her lips were swollen from his kisses and her hair was

mussed from him running his hands through it. She didn't have it tied back like usual. Instead, it was down and wild and he could just see how sexy it would look spread out over a pillow. "

"Maybe I will take *you* back to the room," she countered, breathlessly. "I'll strip off all your clothes, making sure to kiss each area that I bare. Then I throw you on your back, straddle your hips and take you inside me. I'll ride you so long and hard that you won't even remember your name when I'm done."

Getting up so quickly he nearly dumped her onto the floor, he jerked her by the arm and almost ran to the door. She let out a husky laugh that was so sexual, his toes almost curled. Just as they made it to the doorway, Eric seemed to appear out of nowhere and blocked their way. Stopping so abruptly, Sable ran into his back, he let out a snarl of impatience that didn't go unnoticed by the male vampire.

Eric cocked a brow before he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe. Acting like he didn't have a care in the world, he wore a bored look on his face. "Have you been studying the manual?" he asked casually.

"Yes, I've been a good little fledging." Ryan tried hard to keep the frantic edge out of his voice. "Can you let us pass now? Sable has to show me the thing."

"The *thing*?" Eric echoed with a knowing smirk, he looked around Ryan to Sable. "Tell me, Sable, what exactly is the *thing*?"

She growled low in her throat. "You know what it is. Now let us go so we can thing our brains out."

"I'm afraid that's going to have to wait a while. I need to borrow your fledging for a few minutes."

Ryan gave the vampire a cool stare. "So does this mean you're going to finally take me to the back part of the compound and show me the weapons and training center?"

Eric's eyes narrowed, suspiciously. "How did you know about that? Did Sable tell you?"

"I may be a fledging, but I'm not stupid," Ryan retorted tartly. "Sable didn't have to say anything. I was able to figure it out from the conversation you and the doc had."

Sable moved forward and put her body between the two males. Glaring up at Eric, she thumped a finger on his chest. "Last time I checked, I was Ryan's sire and I don't think he's ready for your training yet. He just got through his transformation and he's weak from it. He's still on a liquid diet."

"Gee thanks," Ryan drawled. "You sure know how to strip away a guy's masculinity."

She shot him a dirty look. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into. They won't hold

back just because you're new."

"I don't want them to. I need to make sure that I'm ready to make those bastards pay for what they did to you."

"Didn't you hear what I said?" she spat. "Eric has been training those Drones for three years. They will wipe the floor with you and that will only be the warm up."

"If that makes it so I can fight better, then so be it," he countered. He stared her down, showing that he wasn't willing to budge.

Her eyes flared with anger before she slapped his hands away. "Fine, go get yourself killed. See if I care." She stormed away, muttering something about stupid male pride.

Ryan let out a tired sigh as he watched her go. There was going to be hell to pay later on. Rubbing a hand over his face, he turned to Eric. "Okay, let's get started."

Eric led him through a long hallway that went to the back of the compound. At the end of it was a set of double doors. A pair of dark-haired males stood, on either side guarding the entrance. Both of them were tall and built like brick houses. They were armed to the gills, too. They had a set of guns on either hip and several knives and daggers tucked into various pockets. If those were the weapons that he could see, Ryan could only imagine what they had hidden away.

“This here is Micah,” Eric pointed to one of the giants. Now that they were closer, Ryan could see that this one had ice-cold blue eyes that seemed to miss nothing. They narrowed a bit as he looked closer at Ryan. Not wanting to show any weakness, Ryan returned the scrutiny.

“And this one is Zeke,” Eric waved at the other guard. His brown eyes were half-closed as if the whole situation was one big bore. Ryan knew it was all an act though. The male’s body was tense, like he was on high alert and ready to spring into action on a moment’s notice.

When neither male moved away from the doors, Eric asked, “Are you going to let us in or would you rather keep gawking at Sable’s boy here?”

A lazy smile formed on Micah’s face, revealing a huge set of fangs. “We’ll let you through on one condition. We have a game against the wolves tomorrow and our goalie quit. I used to watch Ryan play while he was still human and he was great. We could really use him.”

Eric’s nose wrinkled up like he had stepped into something foul. “First Sable and now you. Is every vampire in here a hockey fan?”

Ryan was shocked, too. He blurted, “You guys have a team?”

“Sure,” Micah shrugged. “Vampires play hockey, too.”

"It's true," Zeke added. His voice was deep and gravely, like he rarely used it. "We just have to do night games."

"Sure, I'll play for you guys," Ryan promised hastily. Anything to get away from the strange duo and get down to training. He paused as a horrifying thought came to him. "Wolves isn't a team name, is it? They're really giant dogs." Both the males gave shit eating grins and Ryan groaned.

"They fight in human form," Micah supplied. "There is no way they could find skates small enough to go on their paws."

For some reason Micah and Zeke thought that was the funniest thing ever uttered. The two of them started cackling like a pair of magpies.

Eric rolled his eyes before he shoved his way through them. "Idiots," he breathed. Eric pushed open the doors and revealed a state of the art training facility.

Ryan gapped, he had never imagined it would be this advanced. One side the floor was lined with mats. Various weapons hung on the wall and several dozen Drones were paired off sparing. Their tennis shoes made squeaking noises on the mats and there was an occasional grunt as a fist found its way into someone's gut, groin or face.

Muffled gunshots told him there was a shooting range on the other side of the thick white wall that

was off to the other side. He could detect the order of gunpowder mixing in with sweat. Another group was sitting in bleachers, listening to a male that was writing on a chalkboard. Ryan wasn't for sure, but it looked like a tactical meeting.

He smiled. When he had played hockey, he would get an adrenaline rush so intense it was almost a high. That feeling was going through him now, more so in fact. Right now, he felt like he could take on the world.

"Read to start?" Eric seemed amused at Ryan's excitement.

Ryan smiled and he knew it was wolfish. "I can't wait."

## CHAPTER NINE

*Rule Number 1879: If any Drone is caught accumulating weapons for the purposes of treason, their entire clan will be eliminated. There will be no trial, no appeals, no warning. Every male, female and child will be shot and the compound burned to the ground.*

*-So Now You're a Vampire. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging.*

*Three months later.*

He was finally home. Sable smiled to herself as she nervously patted down her hair. Ryan had only been gone a few hours, but it had seemed like an eternity. Since he was now officially a part of the Drone hockey team, he was out two or three nights a week and she was coming to hate those times, especially when she was pulling guard duty and unable to go watch the games. Fiddling with the zipper to her hoodie, she tried hard not to



dwell on how much he had come to mean to her.

“Waiting for your fledging?”

Sable jumped a foot, her hand going to the butt of her gun, before recognized the voice. “Damn it, Dahlia! How many times do I have to tell you not to do that sneaking up crap on me?” When the doctor smiled and lounged against the wall, Sable sighed. It looked like her friend was going to stay and annoy.

“Maybe, you need to pay better attention to your surroundings instead of mooning over your life mate.”

“He’s not my life mate,” she countered automatically. She’d had this argument so many times with herself and Dahlia in the past months that she went into autopilot whenever it came up. Deny, deny, deny and then maybe, just maybe it might be true.

“I see.” Dahlia’s tone suggested she didn’t really see at all. “What was it that turned you off about him? The way that he’s trained twice as hard as any of Eric’s soldiers so he’s now one of his top ranking fighters?”

Sable turned away so her friend couldn’t read her expression. “No.”

“Was it the fact he learned how to braid, simply because he’s the only one Misty allows to brush her hair?”

Sable looked across the room to the young

vampire who was playing with a group of kids. Although her braid was lumpy and crooked, it had been done with great care. "No."

"Then it must be the way he's always the first to volunteer for any job for our clan, no matter how dirty or lowly it is. I swear that boy must get by on three hours of sleep a night. It must be his undying devotion to us and you that's the real buzz kill. You're right. He is a jerk. Whatever was I thinking?"

Sable wrapped her arms around herself and threw a dark look her friend's way. "You wouldn't understand."

"Wouldn't I?" Dahlia grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her around. There was a spark of anger in her eyes. "I was there with you while you served Corbin. I treated you after all those times he hurt you. Do you know I still see those injuries in my sleep at night? To this day when I smell burning flesh, I think of all those times he put cigars out on you." The normally composed doctor looked away quickly as if her brief loss of control was embarrassing.

Sable's anger melted away. She'd always known Dahlia cared about her, but not this much. The doctor's aloof ways and snarky comments had a way of holding others at a distance. "I'm sorry," Sable said. "I had no idea."

"I helped you escape that tyrant," Dahlia's

voice was shaky. "But you won't truly be free of him until you learn to trust again. Don't lose Ryan over this, then Corbin will have won."

The hockey team came bursting through the double doors, breaking up the moment. Dahlia wiped her cheeks in short jerky motions and plastered a smile on her face. "Looks like the Hanson Brothers are back."

Sable was stunned for the second time in a matter of minutes. "I didn't know you watched Slap Shot."

"Are you kidding? It's a classic. I better go see if any of them are hurt."

Sable gave her a half-wave, too busy looking for Ryan in the group to give her friend any more mind. He finally came in last, his huge bag slung over one shoulder, his goalie pads over the other. He laughed at something Micah said and her heart flipped at the site of his breathtaking grin. They must have won because the whole team seemed to be in good spirits and there was a lot of backslapping.

Ryan didn't notice she was there so she continued to study him unabashed. The way he shot off comments and insults with the guys showed how tight he was with them, but then he managed to worm his way into the entire clan's good graces. More than a few of the females standing around were giving him admiring looks

and one had even walked up and was talking to him.

Sable felt a rumble of jealousy go through as her fangs grew, ready for battle. *Mine, touch him again and you'll lose a hand.* Oh, Dahlia was right. She did need to claim Ryan and quick. Not just keep him in her bed like she had been for the past three months, but truly claim him. Put her scent all over him and bite him so deeply in the neck that every female that came in contact with him would know he was taken.

The bitch was still manhandling her male. Cheap and trampy, she wore black leather pants that were so tight everyone knew that she wore a thong underneath. Sable had never been able to master the thong, feeling like she had a permanent wedgie whenever she'd tried one on. Her skin tight red top wasn't Sable's style either—it was cropped so short that most of her stomach was out. Sable would have been afraid that if she wore something like that she would accidentally flash her bra if she moved the wrong way. Even the female's hair was anti-Sable. It was long and a deep red, looking like flames. She wore it loose and those tresses were now brushing against Ryan.

The other female was beautiful, sexy and eager.

Sable was plain, dowdy and scared to make a commitment.

She held her breath, waiting to see how Ryan would react to the neon sex dancing in front of him. Giving the female a polite smile, he moved her hand and walked away from her, toward the quarters he shared with Sable. He only stopped long enough to give one final wave to the team.

Releasing a breath that she didn't know she was holding, Sable smiled to herself. She started to follow after him, but stopped once she got to the female. "Touch him again, and live to regret it."

Unimpressed, the female smirked at her. "Everyone knows that you haven't claimed him yet. It's time you shared that boy-toy of yours."

Letting out a growl, Sable moved to attack her. She was going to pull the bitch's red hair out and use it to strangle her with.

Micah stepped in between them, facing the female. "Hey, Terin," he cooed in a flirtatious voice. "I'm really hungry after that game, if you know what I mean. You want to come to my room and help me out with that?"

The female instantly lost interest in Sable. Her lips curled into a seductive smile. "You know I do."

The pair linked arms and left, Micah shooting a you-owe-me look over his shoulder. Sable nodded her thanks before she stared after Ryan again. Once she got to their room, she couldn't help but smile. Ryan's clothes were scatted around the

room and the shower was going in the adjacent bathroom. Stretching out on the bed, she waited for him to finish. It still surprised her how quickly she had gotten used to his constant presence. In fact, she had grown to rely on his arms being around her as she fell asleep and the warmth of his body pressing into hers. Each morning, right before they would drift off to sleep, he would murmur, "I love you."

He never failed to tell her that, even though it had never been returned. She had been too chicken shit to admit it out loud. Instead, she tried to show him how she felt in other ways. She always made sure he was satisfied in bed, she made sure he was well fed and she touched and caressed him whenever he was near.

Despite her early resolve, some small irrational piece of her still remained and it made her worry Ryan would laugh at her the way Corbin had. Which was stupid, Ryan was nothing like her sire. Ryan was worthy, honorable, strong, he was—perfect. She pressed a hand to her nervous stomach. No, she had to tell him. She owed both of them that much.

The water turned off and a few minutes later, Ryan came out of the bathroom. A white towel was wrapped around his lean hips and his dark hair was slicked back. Sable rolled onto her tummy so she could admire him even more. Small

droplets of water still clung to his powerful chest and she licked her lips in appreciation.

“How was your hockey game?” she asked in a husky voice. Despite her nervousness, an ache was building up inside her and she could feel herself getting wet for him. They made love at least twice a day and she still couldn’t get enough of him.

“We played the goblins.” He grimaced. “One of them slimed me in the face with its snot. I was just washing it off.”

A small giggle escaped before she could stop it. “If it was that bad, why didn’t you shower at the rink?”

“I did, but that crap is hard to get off. That goblin was one foul bastard.”

Getting off the bed, she slinked her way over to him. When his gaze grew heated, she felt a flutter of delight dance through her stomach. His dark eyes glinted with passion as his fangs grew so long they protruded over his bottom lip. A shiver danced over her spine. Even when that other female had thrown herself at him, he had never looked at her that way. Putting her arms around his neck, she pressed her fully clothed body against him. She could feel his erection pressing against the towel. “Did you win?” she whispered in his ear. When he shuddered a bit, she felt another thrill of victory.

He flashed a cocky grin. “Of course we won.

Zeke even got a hat trick.”

Arching her back so more of her body made contact with his, she swiveled her hips against his cock. *Quit stalling and tell him already.* “How about my goalie? Did he play a good game?”

A low moan rumbled from his chest, right before he grabbed her ass with both hands and jerked her even closer. He had been pushing himself hard during Eric’s training sessions, harder than any other soldier in the Drone ranks. Thanks to that, his body was even more muscular than when he’d first come to live with them. *Okay, there’s no reason why I can’t tell him during some hot sweaty sex is there? Who could resist a body this rock hard?*

“I had a really good game,” he boasted before he nipped lightly on her bottom lip. “I only let in one goal and that was when that bastard slimed me. Does that mean I get a reward?”

She reached between them and pulled the towel off. Trailing her fingers down his stomach, reveling in the hardness of his new muscles, she teased him for a few seconds before she grabbed his cock and gave it a gentle squeeze. Ryan closed his eyes and jacked his hips forward to give her better access. “I think you most definitely deserve a reward.” She gave him another squeeze before leaning forward and licking his right pectoral muscle.



With a sexy giggle, she licked her way down his body, going lower and lower until she was forced to go to her knees. His cock was right in front of her face and she took advantage of that position, taking all of it in her mouth. She moaned at the salty taste of him. She had never enjoyed this act with Corbin, only doing it when forced to. But with Ryan, she loved it and could never seem to get enough of it. Ryan never seemed to get enough of it either, imagine that.

Pulling back, she ran her tongue along the tender underside of him, got another groan of approval from him. He smelled woodsy from the soap, but she also detected the unique spicy scent that marked him. The one that would let her decipher him from any other male, even if she had been blindfolded.

*Mine!* The word of ownership shot through her brain so firmly it was as if someone had shouted it in her ear. At that moment, she knew Ryan was hers and not because she had sired him, but because she loved him. Surprisingly, that thought didn't terrify her anymore. Over the past weeks she had grown to know him, she had seen the way he had worked hard to be a good soldier, the patience he'd shown with Misty, the way he was always the first to volunteer for the community. More than that, she had seen the tenderness in his brown eyes whenever he'd looked at her, tasted

the desire in his blood, taken comfort in his arms each and every night.

He loved her and that was never going to change. She knew that now.

Giving his cock one last parting kiss, she stood up so she could look into his eyes. "I love you," she spoke the words low, afraid that if she said them too loud she would break the spell.

He didn't respond, his face remained flat and emotionless. Her heart pounded with fear, each beat counting off another millisecond of silence. What if she had waited too long? What if she had been wrong and he did fall out of love with her? What if he had been toying with her all this time? She thought she was going to die from dread.

"There's no changing your mind after this."

He took a few steps, forcing her to walk back. Her heart started pounding again, only this time it was from sexual excitement. The way he was looking at her was primal, like a predator about to conquer its prey, and dear heaven, she was so glad that she was that prey. "I know there is no going back."

He kept walking forward, she kept walking back. He the stalker, she the stalked. Soon she was up against the wall. He placed a hand on either side of her head and leaned down toward her neck. Scrapping a fang against her tender flesh, he earned a shiver from her.

“Once I claim you as mine, you will belong to me forever.”

He pinned her against the wall, then ripped her hoodie down her arms and threw it off to the side. Her nipples strained against the thin tank top and bra she was wearing, her body yearning to touch his. Grabbing the hem of her top, he pulled it over her head, exposing her black lace bra. Half expecting him to fire off one of his smartass comments, she closed her eyes and waited. When she felt his tongue start to lave at the top of her breasts in slow lazy paths, she opened them in surprise.

Cold air suddenly brushed her nipples and she realized that he had somehow managed to get her bra undone and he was already slipping it off her. Before she could even ask him how, he was sucking on one of her nipples. Surprise gave way to bone numbing desire as his tongue laved at her tender flesh. Grabbing two handfuls of his hair, she arched her back so he could take more of her. His hand slid down her belly and into the front of her pants. Brushing his fingers against her throbbing clit, he teased for a second before he thrust one inside her pussy.

Biting back a sob, she rocked against him. The things he could do with his hands and mouth should be illegal. He started an easy rhythm, his finger pumping in and out of her, while he

continued to bite, lick and suck her breasts. After the three months that they had been lovers, he knew exactly what pace, how much pressure to apply and when to hold back. It didn't take him long to work an orgasm from her. Giving her breast one last kiss, he lifted his head so he could look at her.

"I will live and die for you," he vowed, right before he jerked her sweatpants down.

His eyes flared at the sight of her black lace panties. While she still couldn't bring herself to wear a thong, she had bought several racy pairs of regular panties. Slipping his hands down the back of them, he palmed her ass. The flesh-on-flesh contact was so arousing that she couldn't stop from gyrating her hips against his cock. That wasn't enough for her. She needed all of her to touch all him. Hooking her thumbs under the sides of her panties, she shimmied so they went all the way to the ground.

Ryan moved back long enough for her to kick them to the side before he pinned her to the wall again. Grabbing her leg, he hooked it around his waist so her wet core pressed against his erection. She tried to thrust against him, but he grabbed her by the hip and stilled her. A growl of frustration erupted from her until she got a gander at the look in his eyes. The intense love she saw there both humbled and thrilled her.

“Every moment of my life from now on, will be for you,” he declared right before capturing her mouth in a blazing kiss.

Oh gods, if she hadn't been wet for him before, she would have been now. The tensing of his muscles was the only warning she got before he entered her at the same time he bit her. The bite was savage and hard, it would leave a permanent mark on her. One that would send a warning sign off to anyone that came into contact with her. She wrapped her legs around his waist to help support her weight, even though he didn't need her aid. He was more than strong enough to hold her up.

Snarling against her throat, he pounded into her hard and fast. The vampire part of them had taken over, the urge to bond so strong that neither one of them was being gentle. Her fingernails clawed into his back, drawing blood and her fangs grew at the scent. Eyeing up his shoulder hungrily, she licked her lips before she could no longer resist. When she bit into him, he let out a strangled cry and came. Her bite was just as hard and vicious as his had been. She could feel his hot semen shooting inside of her as she drank in his blood, her own orgasm washing over her.

“That's it baby,” he whispered into her ear. “Take it all in.”

Running her tongue over the puncture site, she gave the spot a lingering kiss. He was still inside

her and neither one of them moved. She never wanted the moment to end. A dull throbbing pain was coming from the spot where he had bit into her, but she relished in it because it bound her to him forever. There was no fear now that the deed had been done, just a satisfied bliss.

He finally moved back and let her body slide down. Cupping her face in his hands, he gave her nose a tender kiss. "You didn't have to do this."

"I know I didn't." Heavy footsteps pounded outside the hallway, but she ignored them. "I meant what I said, I love you."

A crooked smile came over his face. "I have waited so long to hear that."

"I know and I'm so sorry."

"Don't be, you're worth the wait."

The footsteps got closer, followed by a fist pounding on the door. "We have a visitor from the VRF," Eric called, "and I want both of you there. Be in my office in five."

Trepidation slinked down Sable's spine. An unannounced visit from the VRF was never a good thing. The dark look in Ryan's eyes showed he was thinking the same thing. They quickly dressed in silence and made their way to Eric's office.

\* \* \* \*

Ryan followed Sable down the hallway, the taste of her sweet blood still lingering in his mouth. Bringing a hand up to his neck, he winced. The bite she'd given him was deep, but then so was the one he'd given her. A satisfied feeling filled his chest. He'd been feeling the vampire part of him calling out to him to bite her like that since the first time they'd been together. He'd always resisted though, more so once Eric had explained to him how vampires bonded. Not willing to do something to Sable against her will, he had held back, waiting until she'd let it be known that she was ready.

By picking up pieces of conversations and listening to her mumbles during her nightmares, he'd pretty much figured out what had happened to her before she'd managed to part ways with Corbin. Clenching his hands in tight fists, he repressed the angry roar that was building up in at the thought of anyone hurting his female. Blood dripped from his hands as claws grew from his fingertips.

Throwing a concerned look over her shoulder, Sable stopped and faced him. "Calm down, we don't even know what the VRF agent has to say."

Not wanting to let her know the true cause for his vampire temper tantrum, he forced himself to relax. Thanks to her guidance and Eric's grueling training, he had learned how to control the

vampire side of himself. "I'm cool."

"No you're not," Eric called from the opposite end of the hallway.

Though there was a carefree smile pasted on his face, Ryan knew the male well enough to see that he was nervous. "You are still as dorky as ever. I don't think I will ever be able to beat that out of you."

"Fuck you," Ryan counted, plastering a fake smile of his own on.

"Not going to happen no matter how drunk I get. Speaking of which." He turned and addressed Sable, "Did your male tell you he found out the hard way the other night that vampires can still get as drunk as humans? It seemed Zeke and Micah took him to the bar and decided to demonstrate that fact to him."

"When he came stumbling to our room and started to sing the Brady Bunch theme song, I kind of figured it out," Sable responded dryly.

They were now at the door to Eric's office, but no one made a move to open it.

Eric took a deep breath, his gaze locked on the door. "If they take me away, please make sure Misty is okay."

"They won't take you away," Ryan responded firmly. "We already decided if they ever came for you, we would all fight them down to our last clan member. You're our leader, not because you're the



strongest or the most popular, but because we all care and respect you. This group couldn't survive without you."

Snapping his head up, Eric finally met his gaze.

Ryan was humbled by the gratitude in the male's eyes.

"I couldn't survive without the clan either," Eric declared in a gruff voice. Giving a shake of his head, like the sentimental moment was way too heavy for him, he reached for the door handle. "When we get in there, try to let me do most of the talking. We'll probably be outnumbered, but they won't be expecting us to fight back. As far as they know, we are still under-trained Regulation Drones. We can use that to our advantage."

He waited for them to nod their consent before he opened the door and went in. Sable and Ryan followed, flanking his sides. Expecting a large crowd, Ryan was surprised to see only one female sitting behind Eric's desk. Slender in build, the female had long blonde hair that was pulled back tightly in a ponytail. She was beautiful, with rounded cheekbones and an almost baby doll kind of face. In his old life, Ryan would have desired her and he was sure there were plenty of guys that did. Her light blue eyes were expressionless, but her lips were pursed tightly together, expressing her anger. Or was that fear? Looking closer, Ryan was able to make out the fine sheen of sweat that

was building up on her forehead.

"Toni," Sable gasped, already disobeying Eric's order to let him do all the talking. Looking like someone had bitch slapped her, Sable's face was pale, her eyes wide with confusion.

"You know her?" Ryan asked, breaking the no-talking rule, too.

"Yes, she was my replacement after I left Corbin."

"Oh." He didn't know whether to fear the female or pity her.

Eric shot them a look that clearly said, *I'm so glad to see that you two can follow orders.*

Up until that moment, Ryan had never known glares could project sarcasm. Shutting his trap, he straightened up and tried to assume his best warrior's stance.

"Why are you here, Toni?" Eric asked the female. He pulled up a chair and sat opposite of her.

Even though he was giving her a menacing glare, Toni refused to break eye contact with Eric.

Ryan couldn't help but admire her gumption, not very many could stand up to Eric.

"First of all," she replied, a steely edge to her voice, "nobody from the VRF can ever know that I came here. If Corbin were to find out, he would eliminate me."

Eric's lips curled into a wolfish smile, his fangs

flashing menacingly. "Really? Last time I checked, you didn't wipe that fine ass of yours without old Corbie's permission."

A bright flush appeared on Toni's cheeks, but that was the only outward response she gave to Eric's blunt remark. "Just because I have to be in Corbin's bed whenever he calls for me, doesn't mean he's dear to me. He has a way of getting what he wants, no matter how he has to do it. Sable should have told you that."

Now it was Eric who flushed. He clenched his jaw together and stole a quick glance at Sable. She was too busy studying Toni to notice. Ryan grew concerned when he noticed that Sable's breaths were coming in rapid and shallow and she was working hard to keep it under control. Seeing Toni must have been bringing back bad memories. Although, he wanted nothing more than to go over and comfort her, Ryan resisted the urge.

"You still work side-by-side with him," Eric fired back. "How could you? You're a Drone like us."

"Up until recently, my desire to live outweighed my desire to do what was right."

When she went to brush a hand over her face, Ryan noticed she was shaking.

"And we're supposed to believe that suddenly changed?" Eric scoffed.

"Yes," she hissed.

Unmoved, Eric asked, "Why?"

"Because my life is no longer worth living." Finally a bit of emotion went through her ice-cold eyes and it was shame. "I'm done, finished, I can't take it anymore and I figured I may as well do some good before it's over."

Sable took a step forward. "You don't mean that, Toni. You could leave him like I did. Come stay with us."

Toni gave a harsh laugh. "Corbin told me he wasn't going to let another female walk away from him like you did. He promised if I tried the same thing, he would not only kill me, but everyone that tries to help me."

"We could find a way," Sable said in soothing tones.

"No." Toni shook her head violently. "I'm ready for it to end. After everything that he's done to me, I have no desire to live with the pain, the nightmares, the shame. There's nothing left for him to take from me. I just want to do one good thing before I die. So I came here to warn you."

"To warn us about what?" Eric asked, although this time his tone was much more gentle than earlier.

The female started to worry her hands together. "Corbin knows you are training your clan for a revolt. He plans on coming here and eliminating everyone."

A heavy silence filled the room as they took in her bombshell. Ryan found himself shaking his head. Surely they wouldn't just come and slaughter a whole clan? One look at Eric's face told him that they would. Their leader was scared, damn scared. A serpent of dread slithered through Ryan's body.

"When?" Eric finally croaked.

Tears gathered up in Toni's eyes. "Within the next six hours."

"My God," Eric whispered. "How are we going to evacuate the compound by then?"

Toni shook her head sadly. "I'm so sorry. I tried to get here sooner, but I couldn't sneak away. I know that it isn't enough, but it was the best I could do." Taking in a deep shuddering breath, she seemed on the verge of tears.

Somehow, Ryan knew that was uncharacteristic of her. To have survived for as long as she had under Corbin's heavy hand, she had to be one tough cookie.

Sable ran forward and grabbed Toni's hand, giving it a gently squeeze. "You did just fine. Our clan is in your debt."

"I never wanted to be with him," Toni confessed raggedly. Her haunted gaze never left Sable's face. "When you left, he made me your replacement. I hated you for so long for that. Will you ever forgive me?"

Ryan looked down at his feet, suddenly feeling like an intruder. Eric must have felt the same way because he nervously cleared his throat before interrupting.

“Toni, I can’t let you go back to him. If he finds out what you did, he’ll kill you and not in a pleasant way.”

The small female stood and squared her shoulders. “I have to go back. If I don’t, he’ll figure out that I came here to warn you and attack sooner. Your group needs every minute they can get to evacuate and get far enough away so he can’t track you.”

“I can’t sit back and watch you sacrifice yourself,” Eric argued.

Toni walked around the desk and faced off against him. “He can’t kill me because I’m already dead. Let me do one good thing in my life. I know that there are children here. If I know that I helped them, then I can die happy.”

Looking away, Eric didn’t answer.

Toni grabbed his arm and whispered, “Please?”

After a few seconds, he finally gave his consent in one stiff nod, his gaze still directed at the ground.

Toni gave him a pat before she walked out the door, closing it quietly behind her.

Eric ran his hand over his face before barking, “Let’s get the clan mobilized. We have to get the

children as far away from the compound as possible so the VFR won't be able to follow them."

Ryan and Sable nodded before they followed their leader out of the room.

## CHAPTER TEN

Found written in the back of a copy of, *So Now You're a Vampire*. A quick instructional pamphlet for the fledging, left behind at the Hadley Drone Compound. *Fuck you and all your rules, you can stick them where the sun don't shine. Love and kisses, Ryan Ervin, once a fledging but not anymore.*

“You’re good to go!” Ryan yelled as he slapped the side of the renovated school bus. “Pull out!”

The vehicle was the first in the long convoy of buses that held the children and civilians of the clan. The armed guard sitting in the front seat gave a sharp wave, he was only one of a dozen vampires soldiers that was sent along for protection. Ryan slung his M16 rifle onto his back as he watched them leave. Micah and Zeke stood by his sides, both of the equally armed.

Misty’s head popped out of one the bus



windows. "Ryan," she called as she reached an arm out to him.

Ryan ran to catch up to the bus. Once he got to her side, he continued to run, keeping up with it. "What do you need?" he asked the small vampire. Her long hair was loose and tangled because he hadn't had time to do it up. *I really should have found the time to braid it. Now she is going, God knows where, and it's all messy.* The wind caught it and whipped it around her face.

"Take care of my daddy," she pleaded, reaching one arm out even further.

Ryan could see the *D* that was branded on the young flesh. *She's so young to have been abused like that. She's so young to have to be running for her life.* Her tiny features were pinched with worry.

"Don't let him die."

Ryan reached out his hand until their fingers touched for one brief, precious second. "I won't let anything happen to him. I promise you." He was no longer able to keep pace with the convoy and she was soon out of reach. Stopping so he could catch his breath, he watched her leave until her small face was no longer visible.

Zeke came up and stood next to him.

"I didn't do her hair for her," Ryan panted, still winded from his run.

"That's okay. I'm sure Misty didn't mind," Zeke reassured in that deep voice of his.

Ryan shook his head. "No, it's not. She's gone and I probably won't ever see her again and her hair isn't done."

Zeke clenched his jaw together and looked at the direction that the convoy had gone. All that remained was a cloud of dust. Everyone that had stayed behind knew that they probably weren't going to be meeting up with the rest of the clan. By staying behind and holding off the VRF for as long as possible, they were giving the others more time to get away, but there was going to be a terrible price paid. They all felt deep in their hearts that they weren't going to survive the attack.

Straightening up, Ryan composed himself. "Let's go. Eric wants us up on the roof with him."

Zeke gave the road one more lingering look, before he nodded and followed Ryan.

A screech from the other side of the building jerked them both into hyper alertness. It sounded like a car's tires and it sounded like it was coming from the north side of the building. Ryan beat feet that way, Zeke on his heels. Rounding the corner, he meet up with Eric and Sable, also on their way to investigate. They all had their guns out and ready.

"Do you think that they are attacking already?" Ryan asked.

"I don't think so," Eric replied. "It's just one car."

It was, too. The tan SVU skidded to a stop and a tall male came slowly out, his hands up in the air. The moonlight highlighted his sharp features and danced off his shaved head. A fine sheen of sweat dotted his dark skin and his brown eyes were full of apprehension. Even though he was wearing the dark uniform of a Drone Regulator, Ryan could see that it was covered in blood.

"Shit, he's freaking huge," Zeke whispered, ever the optimistic one.

"My name is Jonas," the strange male called out in a deep, booming voice. "I'm looking for Eric."

"You found him," the leader replied, taking one step forward. "What do you need?"

"Your help," the giant countered in a more hurried tone. He reached into the front seat and pulled out a small bundle.

After a few seconds, Ryan was able to see that he was carrying a female. One that was unconscious and, judging by the strong smell of blood coming from her, hurt bad. Just as Sable gasped in surprise, Ryan noticed the injured female's long blonde hair. It was Toni and Corbin had obviously found out she betrayed him. Eric nodded to Zeke and Ryan and the pair ran forward to help, although he and Sable still kept their guns aimed at Jonas.

"There's another injured Drone in the backseat." Jonas swayed a bit as Zeke relieved him

of Toni. Both her and the male were covered in various cuts, contusions and bite marks.

Ryan cautiously made his way to the vehicle and opened the back door. A small male was curled up in the corner, his eyes closed. His blond hair was spiked and matted with dried blood and more of the stuff was around the guy's mouth. Stretching across the seat, Ryan tried to shake the kid awake, but all he did was whimper and pull himself tighter into a ball. Taking a step back, he pinned Jonas with a glare. "What in the hell happened?"

"Corbin was waiting for Toni when she got back. He wasn't happy that she left without his permission and he decided she needed punished."

Ryan looked at the injured kid. Under all the blood, his hair was the same color as Toni's. His eyes were shut, but Ryan was willing to bet that they were baby blue, just like hers, too. Disgust and disbelief almost sickened him as he realized what Toni's punishment had been.

Jonas continued his tale in a choked voice, "Corbin kidnapped Toni's younger, human brother. Even though she hasn't seen him in ten years, she'd always kept tabs on him and she loves him dearly. That kid is all she has and Corbin knew it."

"Oh my God," Sable breathed. "Are you trying to tell us Corbin turned Toni's brother?"

“He tied her to a chair and made her watch while he started the process,” Jonas bit out angrily. “Then after the transformation started, he untied her and left the two of them alone in a locked room. Toni had no choice but finish the transformation with her blood so her brother, Brenden, wouldn’t become feral. The poor kid didn’t have control of himself and he took too much blood though. By the time I was able to get them out, she was like this.” He gestured at Toni, still limp in Zeke’s arms. “I didn’t know where else to take them. I know you have a doc on site.”

“How do we know this isn’t a trap?” Eric asked shrewdly.

“You don’t,” Jonas replied as he swayed again. It was obvious that he’d played blood donor to the kid, too. “Toni did come and warn you about the upcoming attack. I hope that makes you at least willing to treat her and Brenden. If you want, I’ll leave, just don’t turn them away.”

Dahlia shouldered her way through the crowd that had gathered and glared at Eric. “I’m taking them to my clinic now. All *three* of them. You have any problems with that, feel free to send a guard.”

Eric returned her glare for a few seconds before he nodded reluctantly.

Ryan reached back in and hauled Brenden out. The kid was light and so damn young, probably only eighteen or nineteen at most. As Ryan carried

him to the infirmary, he opened his eyes a crack.

"It wasn't a dream was it?" he whispered. "I really hurt her."

"Go back to sleep," Ryan urged. "It will be okay."

"Oh crap," the kid's voice was now borderline hysterical. "What the hell is happening to me?"

Talk about a *déjà vu* moment. They had arrived to the infirmary. Ryan set the kid down on the nearest cot. Zeke put Toni in the same bed as her brother. Now that the transformation was complete, he no longer posed a danger to her and her closeness would help comfort him. Dahlia urged Jonas on a bed to the right of the pair. The giant laid on his side so he was still facing Toni and Brenden, as if he still needed to keep watch over them.

Brenden studied his sister's face, his eyes full of awe. "Every since I was old enough, I've looked for her. I worked two jobs to afford all the private investigators. Everyone said it was a waste of time and that she was dead. But I knew. I knew she was alive. Is she going to be okay?"

"She needs some blood, but other than that, she will be fine," Dahlia soothed as she started gathering her medical supplies. "Go to sleep, fledging, I'll protect her for you."

Throwing an arm around her, Brenden let out a shuttering breath before he closed his eyes.

Ryan took it all in, a lump building up in his throat. He could only imagine the terror Toni must have felt watching her brother be turned. The entire clan owed the female so much. He turned to see how Sable was taking it all in. She was watching the pair and tears were rolling down her cheeks.

Knowing she would hate the fact that others had seen her crying, he put his arm around her shoulder and led her back to the roof and the cloak of darkness that the night provided.

Ryan shifted his weight and grimaced as the rough asphalt from the roof dug into his stomach. Eric, to the left of him, didn't seem to be suffering from any discomfort at all. The former Navy SEAL remained stock still, the only things moving, his eyes and his chest when he breathed. He reminded Ryan of a cobra right before it struck, poised yet deadly.

Sable came crawling up and situated herself on the other side of Ryan. "We just had contact with the convoy. They made it through the second checkpoint without incident."

The only reaction Eric gave was one curt nod.

Ryan had no clue where Misty and the rest of the civilian vamps were heading. None of the remaining Drones, save for Eric knew where the convoy was headed. They didn't want to take the

risk of one of them being captured alive and tortured for the information. *What a yummy thought that is*, Ryan thought to himself. *A year ago I was living in a dorm room and my biggest worry was what party I was going to attend that night. Now I am a soldier getting ready to sacrifice myself for others.* Then an image of Misty came to him and he knew it was worth it. Ryan's earpiece crackled alive as one of the sentries reported back to the group.

"The Pure Ones have been spotted. They're approaching on foot to the north."

Ryan looked in that direction. The area was heavily wooded, which is why the Pure Ones must have decided to attack that way. Due to his enhanced vampire vision, he was able to detect the group a few hundred yards away. There were at least forty of them and they were approaching stealthily, weapons out. Both sides carried military grade guns and ammo because, despite what myths said, vampires could very easily die from a gun wound. You just needed to make sure it was a headshot. *Yet another yummy thought.*

Eric didn't speak out loud, instead he nodded to the two snipers on the outer edges of the roof. The pair readied their rifles and waited for their shot. Tense seconds ticked by as they prepared for them to shoot. Despite the coolness of the night, Ryan felt sweat trickling down his back. The silence seemed to pierce his skull as he waited for



the action to begin. Finally two sharp cracks came from the rifles.

Ryan kept his attention on the attackers, waiting to see what would happen. The two Pure Ones leading the group dropped like a ton of bricks as a bullet pierced each of their skulls. Brief twin flashes illuminated the sky as the now dead vampires were vaporized to ash from the inside out. The rest of the Pure Ones raised their guns and frantically looked around for the source. Disembodied yells drifted from their direction.

Two more shots rang out. Two more vampires fell. Two more flashes of light. Now the voices were getting panicked as the Pure Ones continued to search for the source of the attack. The VRF had grossly underestimated their clan. Even with the ashes of their comrades at their feet, they still acted surprised. The Drones would use that to their advantage, too.

Two shots. Two bodies. Two flares of light. Now the attackers were getting themselves into a real lather. One of them even shot off random fire from his machine gun, shooting in the direction of some trees. Eric pointed to a trio of Drones that were armed with grenade launchers. They aimed and waited for Eric's command.

The attackers were spooked, but they continued to inch their way forward. Although now they were ducking for cover between quick jogs instead

of marching boldly toward the compound. Once they were within range, Eric signaled in their direction with two fingers. The trio of Drones nodded before they each launched a grenade.

Bright explosions illuminated the attackers as they found their mark. Screams of pain mixed in with the ones of fear. Ryan smiled, the inner predator in him approving. Between the snipers and the explosives, they had taken out over half of the attackers. The acrid smell of smoke, gunpowder and burning flesh filled the air. The woods behind the Pure Ones caught fire and the flames danced, adding a macabre backdrop to the carnage.

“Now!” Eric screamed as he stood. Raising his rifle, he began to shoot into the enemy crowd.

All the Drones followed his lead, leaping to their feet and shooting. Ryan spotted the VRF agent that had branded him. An image of Misty’s tiny marked arm came to his mind and it brought a need for even more vengeance. This wasn’t for him anymore, it was for the child and any other member of the clan this agent had hurt. Taking careful aim, Ryan took out the bastard with a headshot.

Sable took out another one and Ryan flashed her a grin. She returned it, her skin glowing in the firelight. There was a happiness coming from her and he knew it was because she was finally able to

give abuse back. Ryan didn't blame her, it felt good to shove the rules and laws up these jerks' asses.

His only regret was that Corbin wasn't in the group. Ryan would have liked to have shredded the vampire alive for all the things he'd done to Sable. Annoyed, but not deterred, Ryan forced himself to accept it. He still intended to be the one that killed the VRF leader. It would just have to wait for another time.

Only a handful of survivors were still running around down below and they weren't even attempting to fight back. Too horrified and stunned by the Drone assault, they were a disorganized mess. Finally one of them had the sense to call for a retreat and they ran for the cover of the woods and left.

The Drones stood around in a stunned silence for several seconds before it finally sank in they won this time. Then somebody whooped in joy and the rest joined in, cheering their victory. Sable threw herself in Ryan's arms and he accepted the warm comfort that her embrace offered. All around them, other vampires hugged and exchanged high fives.

"I love you so much." Sable hugged him even tighter.

"I'm never going to get sick of hearing that." He squeezed back. "I love you, too. Now let's get the

hell out of here.”

\* \* \* \*

Ryan was crammed in the back of a van, Sable sitting next to him, her head resting on his shoulder. Eric was there with them as well as Toni and Brenden. She held her brother in her lap and tenderly stroked his hair. An IV was still hooked to her arm, feeding her blood. The newly transformed vampire was sleeping peacefully, seeming to take comfort in his sister’s presence. Jonas was on her other side, his hand on the butt of his gun despite the fact his eyes were closed and he appeared to be resting.

“I was so wrong,” Toni confessed in a haggard voice.

“About what?” Ryan asked.

“I did have something to lose. “ She took in a deep shuddering breath. The agony in her eyes made her seem a hundred years old. “I never thought he would attack my family. It was a stupid mistake on my part and now I lost Brenden because of it.”

“You didn’t lose him.” Ryan pointed at the prodigal sib. “He’s right there in your arms.”

“But he’s vampire now and a Drone. What kind of life is that?”

Pulling Sable tighter into his side, he kissed her

on the top of her head. "I'm kind of attached to this life. I wouldn't change it for the world."

With a roll of her eyes, Toni snorted. "Are you guys always this sickening?"

"Yes they are," Eric drawled as he answered his cell phone.

"I know all this is overwhelming right now," Sable tried to console. "It will get easier over time."

A cold mask of fury locked onto Toni's face. "The only way things will ever get easier for me is when I kill Corbin. That fucker is going to pay for what he did to my brother. Even if I have to die in the process."

Okaaaaaay, warm and fuzzy was not this chick's style. She was so not getting a wedding invite. Which reminded him. "Hey, Sable," he asked before giving her a brief kiss. "Will you marry me?"

Sable's blue eyes grew wide as a small gasp passed through her lips. "Vampires don't get married."

"Since when do you give a damn about that? Do you or not?" Cupping his face between her hands, she gave him a look so full of love that he felt ten-feet tall.

"Of course I do. I love you, Ryan."

They shared a kiss that was so scorching it probably even thawed the ice vampiress.

"You guys are so disgusting," Toni remarked with a tone one might use when they found something foul on their shoe.

All right, maybe it wouldn't thaw her out.

Eric flipped his phone shut. "The convoy made it to safety. We can go join them now."

"What about my brother, Jonas and me?" Toni tightened her grip on Brenden.

"If it hadn't of been for your warning, my daughter would have been killed in the attack tonight. Our clan will forever be in your debt and I welcome all three of you to join us."

"Where's the clan going to live now?" Sable snuggled deeper into Ryan's side and laced her fingers through his.

"I have been in contact with a leader from another clan. They had a little incident tonight, too, and had to leave their home. We are going to ally with them and set up camp in a warehouse in Detroit."

"Detroit?" Ryan raised a skeptical brow. "That city is pretty crowded, don't you think there will be plenty of Pure Ones there. They'll be sure to notice us right away."

Eric shook his head. "Detroit is controlled by werewolves. The Pure Ones won't step foot in it because they know they aren't wanted nor welcome. It's the perfect place for us to hide out."

"The weres are going to be okay with this?"

A wry smile came over Toni's face. "The weres will love it because it will piss off The Pure Ones."

Ryan nodded. "I guess that makes sense. I do have one last question though. Is there really a sea monster in the Detroit River?"

He had to duck the boot Eric threw at him as the rest of the vampires laughed.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.