



Can art imitate death? Oh no, girlfriend. Don't even go there...

Ten years ago, the Human Hemovore Virus blazed through the world, and left the few victims who survived unable to eat, allergic to sunlight and craving the taste of blood.

Mark Jensen used to think V-positives were incredibly sexy with their pale, flawless skin and taut, lean bodies. Not anymore. Not since he's been stuck procuring under-the-counter feline blood for his control-freak boss, Jonathan Varga. Why cat blood? Mark has never dared to ask.

It's not as if he's usually at a loss for words. He can dish an insult and follow it with a snap as quick as you can say "Miss Thang". But one look at Jonathan's black-as-sin gypsy eyes, and Mark's objections drain away.

So he endures their strange, endless routine: Jonathan hiding in his studio, painting solid black canvases. Mark hurling insults as he buffs the office to a shine with antiviral wipes and maps out the mysterious "routes" he's required to drive.

Then a blurb in *Art in America* unleashes a chain of events neither of them saw coming. As secrets of Jonathan's past come to light, it becomes clear all his precautions weren't nearly enough.

Disclaimer: Be sure to schedule adequate breaks for food and sleep while reading this novel. The author will not be held liable for any missed workdays, low blood sugar headaches, or unfortunate bathroom accidents that may result from reading "just one more chapter".

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Hemovore
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Hemovore

Jordan Castillo Price

Dedication

For Peter, who gave up his drum studio so I could have an office.

Chapter One

The blood is the life.

So Hollywood's been telling us, and maybe it's true, but water is where the real money's being made. Water should be free—it falls from the sky, after all—but there it was on the shelf in slick, designer-looking bottles, selling for four, five bucks apiece. Water. It had become the fastest-growing, highest-grossing product on the market.

I felt vaguely guilty as I steered my shopping cart full of Lean Cuisines down the water aisle, but only vaguely. Jonathan had never forbidden me to shop in the water aisle—only the vampire aisle. Though you could argue that they were practically one and the same, especially since water now came in such flavors as Dew Kissed Pear Orchard and...Meatball Hoagie.

I did a double take. Yes indeed, I'd read the label correctly. Meatball Hoagie De-Lite. I rotated a bottle so I could read the label. The first ingredient was water. That was encouraging. A bunch of scientific-sounding words followed. Additives? Preservatives? Hard to say. All I knew was, that bottle of flavored water had more chemicals in it than my Aunt Trixie at the last ill-fated Hansen family Thanksgiving gathering.

The shelf had a bright orange tag dangling from the edge. Meatball Hoagie De-Lite was on sale, three for \$11—which was irritating, since eleven isn't readily divisible by three, and which, I suspected, was the very reason it had been priced that way. It couldn't hurt to try it, since it was on sale and all, but I wasn't about to put it on Jonathan's credit card with the rest of our food. Maybe he looked at the receipts, or maybe he shoved them all into a shoebox for his accountant to handle, but either way, I didn't want to be stuck explaining my sudden perverse desire to taste sandwich-flavored water.

Maybe I had some cash.

I slipped off my store glove to avoid contaminating my pocket and felt around for my money clip. Empty. But wait, there was a papery sort of rustling behind the foil-wrapped antiviral wipe. I plucked the paper out triumphantly, fully expecting it to be a five...and found a McDonald's receipt instead. For the record, I never eat at McDonald's. Not unless I'm fainting from low blood sugar, or I'm stuck at the apex of a particularly long and circuitous route.

I gazed fondly at the receipt. The Big Mac had been divine. And the fries were golden perfection. I hadn't been imagining money where it didn't exist—there really had been a five. However, that particular bit of currency now resided in the antimicrobial cash register beneath the Golden Arches.

Vampire water never tasted as good as I imagined it would, anyway. There was no heft to it. No calories. No fat. And the flavors either faded so fast that I couldn't be sure I'd even tasted them, or they lingered on as strange and intrusive aftertastes. It was just as well that I had no cash to waste on an outrageously priced bottle of water, especially since I still hadn't managed to calculate its exact cost.

I'd turned away from the display and was fully prepared to wheel my shopping cart away, and as I tried to stuff my hand back into my store glove, a thought occurred to me. Did the water taste like bread? It would have to, wouldn't it? Otherwise it would be bouillon. Clear, chemically replicated bouillon without any actual meat stock, but bouillon, nonetheless. What made this particular flavor of water taste like a hoagie?

It was while I was in this vulnerable state of confusion that the goth girl accosted me.

"Hiya!" She was up close and personal—and her hand slid into my poor, vulnerable bare hand before I even knew what hit me.

I jerked my hand back, and my elbow knocked several bottles of water off the shelf. Moist palm, fishy grip—I'd been expecting the worst as soon I realized I was actually getting an honest-to-goodness, old-fashioned handshake. The flesh-on-flesh contact had been mercifully brief, but she'd left a souvenir behind—a piece of paper.

I unfolded the sheet. It was a quarter-page flyer, hysterically pink, with a local phone number on it. Below that, it read:

V-Luvv

Support Group

For V-Negative Spouses and Partners

Of V-Positives

First and Third Mondays at 8:30 a.m.

"What is this?"

"Call that number whenever," she said. "I leave the machine on."

"And I would want to call you...why?"

She looked up through her mascara-clumped lashes and gave me a knowing smile. "It's tough, living side by side with the virus, worrying about catching it, day in, day out. It wears you down. We know."

"Which is why they invented gloves." And antiviral sprays, soaks and wipes. I pulled my right glove back on with a snap, even though I'd touched that damn piece of paper, so now the gloves would need to go in the autoclave.

Her smile went wispy. "Well, mainly we talk about safe sex. Like I said, call me whenever."

She turned and traipsed away. Her boot heels were as shoddy as her overcoat. She looked as if she might break into a joyous Julie Andrews skip at any moment.

I thought goths were supposed to act morose. Maybe she was emo.

“I’m not...sleeping with him,” I said. Because, oh no, girlfriend. You don’t even want to go there.

I stepped over the water bottles rolling around on the floor and propelled the cart away, all curiosity about the water’s hoagieness gone, replaced by the need to finish my shopping and get out of the store before anyone else saw me and pegged me for a...a what? A guy whose paycheck was signed by a vampire, who happened to do his grocery shopping? Because that’s all I was. Nothing less, nothing more.

I tossed a couple quarts of peanut oil into the basket and headed for the checkout line. Little Miss Handshake was reading the label on a bottle of synthesized blood when I marched past her with my cart, head held high, on my way to the checkout. She glanced at the peanut oil.

“I’m deep frying a turkey,” I informed her.

She raised a triple-pierced eyebrow, smiled, and went back to her comparison shopping.

~ * ~

Color me paranoid, but I was especially careful driving back to Varga Studio. I could have taken numerous routes—and I’m not talking about normal-person routes, such as, “Should I stay on Halsted, or would it be faster if I turned down Clark?” No, I mean Jonathan-routes, dozens of maze-like paths designed to thwart a would-be pursuer. Not that I ever actually believed someone was following me. It was more that I suspected Jonathan might be checking the odometer to make sure I had followed his instructions to the letter.

I chose route double-double-ess, as I called it in my head, since it had the most right turns, and therefore was the least likely formation to leave me flapping in the wind in the left turn lane.

I attempted a right on red, then stopped as a pedestrian wandered into the street, oblivious, talking on her cell phone. I could have tapped my horn, but what was the point? It wasn’t like I was in a hurry to get back to the studio. Not in the mood I was in.

Safe sex. As if. No sex with a vampire was safe sex. You couldn’t even dry-kiss without someday finding yourself on the long road to a permanent liquid diet...if you even survived all three hideous stages of the disease, which a majority of the people who contracted it didn’t.

Still, those two words nagged at me all the way back to the studio. Safe sex. Back before the hemovore virus, when all we had to worry about was HIV, my best friend Larry used to say, “Keep your fluids to yourself, and everything will be just fine.”

Just fine.

Except nowadays, a condom wasn’t enough. There were respiratory masks, and antiviral products for every surface known to man, and gloves. Dozens and dozens of gloves.

I disinfected my hands with gel, swapped out my car gloves with house gloves and let myself in with my key. The studio was more of a converted high-rise apartment than an actual place of business. Jonathan painted there, and slept there, and I took his calls and ran his errands, his ridiculous routes, and we did our best to avoid one another and acted like everything was just fi—

“What are you doing?” I said.

There he stood, in the center of the kitchen. My kitchen.

Well, okay, technically his kitchen, since it was his studio. He hovered there, midway between the autoclave and the trash compactor. He’d looked to be about twenty-five when I met him and he hadn’t visibly aged a day since. I’ve grown to think of him as a non-age, a vampire age. Which looked pretty much like twenty-five.

Even when he was doing nothing more telling than standing, he was light on the balls of his feet. It was nearly a pose—*contrapposto*, lean hip outthrust, arms loose. One side of his shoulder-length black hair was tucked carelessly behind his ear, and the other side dangled to his chin in uncombed waves. Black paint streaked one cheek, dotted his jaw, the bridge of his nose.

Did he look silly? No, of course not. He looked breathtaking. As usual.

His head turned and he looked at me. For just a moment, the overhead light in the hallway behind me refracted off his retinas, and his eyes glowed. But only for a moment. When he trained that gaze right on me, and I stood between him and the light source, all hulking six and a half feet of me, his eyes went practically black. Gypsy eyes.

“Mark.” He rolled the “r” when he said my name. Just like Count Dracula, or more accurately, Bela Lugosi—who’d been born in Hungary, like he had. “It is bad.”

I wondered if this was the point at which he’d tell me the goth chick in the supermarket was actually a secret shopper he’d hired to make sure I wasn’t cruising the vampire aisles. “Could you be somewhat more specific?”

He huffed and gestured toward the refrigerator.

“Great,” I said. “You touched it with your bare hands again. Do you realize how long it’ll take me to wipe it down?” I clucked my tongue and set the bags on the countertop. “I keep my lunch in there, y’know. I told you we should order a second fridge—”

“I was wearing the gloves.” He pronounced it, “I vas varink da glahvs,” by which I could tell he was exceptionally agitated. Because usually his accent wasn’t any more pronounced than the heavily rolled “r”, a few flat vowels and an overall lyrical lilt.

Chastised, but only slightly, I said, “Well, then what?”

He gestured at the fridge again. “It is bad.”

“Did the power go out?” I went around him and pulled open the door. Cool air wafted from the opening. I checked the readout on the separate thermometer we kept in addition to the built-in unit. Thirty-seven degrees. “The temperature’s fine. What do you mean, it’s bad?”

“It is...clotted.”

Oh. The refrigerator wasn’t the problem. It. He couldn’t even say the word “blood” in front of me, as if it were something shameful. “Are you sure?”

“Mark.”

Stupid question, right. But we’d used the same blood dealer for years, and never had a platelet problem before. “How many doses are left? Three? All of them are...?”

He gave me a look of exaggerated patience, crossed his arms and assumed a pose that was even more heartwrenchingly beautiful. Which I didn’t notice at all, given that he was my boss. And V-positive.

“Okay.” I pointedly ignored the way his clingy, long-sleeved T-shirt molded itself to his shoulders and pecs, and let the problem-solving portion of my mind click into gear. “I can’t get you more cat until Wednesday, so I’ll track down some synthetics to tide you over—”

“Please call Mrs. Jeffers and explain. I cannot take the synthetics.”

I needed to wrangle with the cat blood dealer like I needed to spray my gloves with Teflon. “She’s not going to bleed her cats twice in the same week. She can’t. And if I piss her off by asking—hell, she’ll probably fly into a tizzy if I even let her know she didn’t anticoagulate this batch right—she’s probably going to tell you to go find yourself another source. Do you have a backup? Because I don’t.”

“I have...a phone number.” He spun and walked out of the room, so graceful it looked like the move had been choreographed. I sighed, opened up the autoclave and rearranged the beakers and vials inside so that I could stuff in one more pair of gloves.

“Here.”

I hadn’t heard Jonathan return, but that was nothing new. I didn’t jump. I’d had plenty of practice quelling my startle reflex.

He held out the slip of paper. He had his gloves on, but I hesitated anyway.

“Take it. I copied down the number again.”

Okay, but was the notepad sterile? The ball point of the pen? I had my own gloves on, but still. Passing a tiny slip of paper seemed an awful lot like touching.

I took the phone number and told myself to stop being ridiculous.

I went into my office, gave my desk, chair and phone a once-over with a pop-up wipe, all the while rehearsing what I’d say. Be brief and to the point, I told myself. Businesslike. You could hardly take two steps after dark these days without tripping over a vampire, but even so, the whole blood trade was still the stuff of hush-hush, back-alley melodrama.

Immediately after I punched in the number, three discordant tones blasted through the receiver. “We’re sorry. The number you have called has been disconnected...”

I glanced up from the slip of paper. Jonathan stood in the hallway, arms crossed, watching me with his black gypsy-eyes.

According to the digital readout on my phone, I’d dialed correctly, but I tried again anyway. The same three tones pummeled my eardrum. I hung up.

“Call Mrs. Jeffers,” Jonathan said. “Please.”

I forced myself to shape my face into the expression I assumed passed for bland neutrality. *Please*. He’s scrupulously polite when he orders me around. But that single word—please—can so easily be turned into the soundtrack of a fantasy I had no business dreaming up.

“That was your backup?” I said, nastier than I had to. “One phone number.”

“Mrs. Jeffers had very good references. In four years, there has never been a problem.”

I flipped through my kitschy Rolodex and poked through the J section, and wondered what it would take to keep Jonathan from listening in, though I had the sneaking suspicion that his range outstripped the cordless phone’s.

I dialed. Mrs. Jeffers’ phone rang. And rang. And rang. “She’s not there. No machine either—”

“Hello?”

Dang. “Mark Hansen calling.”

No response. But I could hear her breathing.

“About this week’s supply. We’ve had some coagulation—”

“That’s impossible. I follow procedures.”

I closed my eyes and pretended Jonathan wasn’t hovering there in the hallway with his eyes trained on me. And that one of Mrs. Jeffers’ ridiculous cats was taking a dump inside her favorite pair of shoes. Even that didn’t make me feel better. I modulated my voice. Cool. Calm. Professional. “Of course. The quality, up to this point, has been pristine. I’m sure it’s some sort of fluke—but whatever the reason, it’s caused us to be three days’ short—”

“No refunds. You don’t like it? You find someone else to get you cat.”

When, exactly, I’d opened my eyes again, I wasn’t sure. I saw Jonathan fidget in my peripheral vision and wished I’d kept them shut. “I’m happy to pay you for the additional three days.” Jonathan motioned for me to go higher. “And another hundred dollars for your trouble.”

What I really wanted to do was threaten to report her to the Humane Society. But seeing Jonathan squirm like that forced me to quell the urge to give in to my petty impulse.

More breathing—nose-breathing. With a whistle. “I just bled ’em four days ago.”

Jonathan motioned for me to go higher still.

“Two hundred.”

She breathed. Ten seconds. Twenty. Finally, when I decided she'd probably slipped into a diabetic coma, she said, "Two hundred, and two cats. Big ones, socialized, no FIV or ear mites."

Where was I supposed to...? Jonathan was nodding vigorously.

"Three hundred?" I suggested.

"Two hundred and two cats. That's the best I can do. I just bled 'em."

"I heard you the first time."

Chapter Two

I should have offered that nasty old toad four hundred dollars, even five. It took me three hours—and a subscription to a fifty-dollar newsletter I neither wanted, nor intended to read—to adopt a pair of cats for my “poor aunt Trixie” without a twenty-four-hour waiting period. On one hand, it’s commendable that the Chicago Humane Society is dead set on making sure that the cats, dogs and ferrets that leave the confines of their ugly cinderblock sanctuary are actually going to end up as pets, and not a vampire’s dinner. On the other hand, the vampire I was working for needed dinner.

Besides, I wasn’t going to kill the cats. They’d be given a good home, albeit a crowded one, and only bled a very small amount each week.

Why it was legal to euthanize unwanted cats, but illegal to sell their blood to starving vampires, I’ll never know. I chalked it up to the myriad bass-ackward laws that the conservative right wings managed to tack onto other, perfectly logical, bills.

I set down the pair of corrugated cardboard cat carriers and took a few deep breaths, as if I could store the clean air inside my lungs against the musky ammonia smell that seeped through the door despite the fact that it was closed. An apartment that can’t be more than one and a half bedrooms housing a hundred or so cats? It reeks.

I squinted into the peephole and saw a distorted image of Mrs. Jeffers waddling through her multicolored sea of cats.

Mrs. Jeffers’ breath could singe the hairs from your nostrils, if you were unfortunate enough to catch wind of it over the smell of cat urine. I’m not sure why her oral hygiene was so poor. Other bodily odors I could understand, given the shortness of her arms relative to the size of her body. But it looked to me as if her hands should be able to reach her mouth just fine, especially since a toothbrush would add three, maybe four inches to her range.

She opened the door as far as her safety chain would allow, and looked me up and down. “You got ‘em?”

I gestured toward the carriers while imagining that I was Carol Merrill indicating door number three, but even that small fantasy didn’t cheer me up. I was sure the lovely Ms. Merrill never left the studio at the end of her tapings reeking of cat urine.

“What’re their names?”

I patted down the front of my overcoat and pulled out the folded carbonless forms. “Monty...and Snuggles.”

She unhooked the chain and hunkered herself down to drag in the carriers. It looked like the action cost her. The mere act of bending over made her cheeks flush. With one carrier gripped in either hand, she slammed the door with her hip and left me in the stinking hallway.

She hadn’t asked which one was Monty and which was Snuggles. I guess when you’re in tune with the feline mind, you just know these things.

The next time she opened the door, the chain was back in place.

“And the cash?”

I drew five hundred dollars, in twenties, from my pocket. The wad was too fat for my empty money clip—just one more way in which Mrs. Jeffers had Jonathan, and by extension me, wrapped around her pudgy little finger. She insisted that the local stores wouldn’t change anything higher than a twenty. So every week I had to stand there and wait while she triple-counted her gigantic roll of money.

The door shut again. I stared at the peephole and waited. After several long, fragrant moments, it opened again, as far as the chain would allow. “Three days,” she said. “That’s all I can get you right now. You’ll have to come back Wednesday for the rest.” No apologies for the clotting incident, not that I expected any.

It was tempting to try and drag one out of her, or an explanation at the very least, but even more tempting to get out of there and be able to breathe deeply again.

She passed the contraband through the door in an innocuous little cooler, the type of thing you’d send a kid to school with. “Did you hear?” she said, as my hand closed on the nylon and Velcro handle.

I hadn’t heard, but I could probably guess. What else would it be besides more sordid vampire tales? She kept ACN, the less-than-charitable All Christian Network, tuned in twenty-four hours a day. I thought I could hear a murmur of it coming from somewhere in her apartment even over the meows of a hundred cats.

“They found a dead man in the Sherman Brothers warehouse, the one that closed down last summer.” She nailed me with her beady eyes. One of those pregnant pauses of hers, like she’s gonna lay something on me that’ll really blow my mind. “Bit in fifteen different places. Fif-teen.”

Okay, so there’d been a feeding frenzy involving a whole gang of vampires. But in the same week, an eight-year-old had been shot four times on the way home from school because he’d walked through the middle of a drive-by, and a convenience store clerk had been tortured for half an hour under his own surveillance cameras before the sadistic robber finally put him out of his misery and made off with the cash register, a dozen cartons of cigarettes and every last scratch-off lottery ticket in the store. Crime happened. And sometimes it was initiated by V-negatives too.

She was looking for some kind of reaction from me every time she parroted off a vampire offense. Because I guess that people like me, the ones who did Vlad the Impaler's business during the daytime, were somehow responsible. I refused to give her the satisfaction. I could always roll my eyes once I got back to the car.

Still, it wore on me sometimes, taking care of Jonathan. Not the physicality of it, the blood, the shrouded windows and the careful climate control. Yes, all that vigilance took its toll, but the thing that really drained the life right out of me was the necessity of dealing with people like her.

If it'd been tempting before to bring up the clotting of her blood supply, it was doubly so now. Then I imagined Jonathan hovering in the doorway to my office, big-eyed and starving, and I told myself I was classier than that.

I beeped open the Audi and concealed the cooler in a locked compartment under the passenger seat. I pulled away from the curb, and did my best not to think about the fact that I'd need to come back in three more days. Very short days.

The radio was full of the same old crap. The same stocks. The same news. The same three top-40 dance hits that sound good the first dozen times you hear them, and then make you want to puncture your own eardrums on the hundredth or thousandth play. Sports radio—as if. ACN...I caught a snatch of their ridiculous jingle even though I'd done my best to switch stations as quickly as possible.

A-C-N!

A-C-N!

A-C-N—CAN!

Can what? I surely didn't want to know. I sighed and flicked the radio off, fantasizing about finding a new cat blood dealer, one who didn't take pleasure in acting so smug and vindictive, and siccing the Humane Society on Mrs. Jeffers myself.

I sketched out a quadrilateral route in my mind and set a course—albeit a roundabout one—for the studio. Once I'd secured the car in its specially numbered spot, I tucked the cooler bag that held the cat blood under my arm, climbed into the elevator and punched twenty-three. The car rose for a few seconds, then stopped at the first floor and opened up, which it was programmed to do whether or not anyone was actually in the lobby waiting for it. The doorman had to make visual contact with the occupant and then press a secret button before the elevator would proceed.

"Mister H," the night doorman called out.

He waved, and I waved back. "Hi, Phil."

Phil reminded me of my uncle Ollie, in a pale, Scandinavian sort of way. He always had a big, toothy smile on his face, and if he occasionally smelled of vodka, no one ever thought it was worth mentioning. Phil never forgot a name or a face, and was just as chatty with the big spenders as he was with the non-tippers. Phil also had a .22 in his pocket. He showed it to me once after his shift was over, and I'd found

him fortifying himself with a stiff belt in the underground parking garage before he made his way to the El station. In fact, I'd joined him. I believe it was my second week on the job, and I'd just realized that not only would I never get to third base with Jonathan Varga, but that I had no idea how to even approach the ballpark—and that I suck at baseball metaphors too.

Phil pushed the magic button, and the elevator whisked me up to the twenty-third floor.

Jonathan was no longer lurking around my side of the studio, lying in wait to startle me simply by standing there, or worse, touching things. I stopped at the red-on-red stained-glass double doors that led to his studio, the ones that I affectionately referred to as the “Gates of Hell”, though only to myself, and called, “I’m back.” Which, of course, he knew, given his preternatural hearing—but the act of announcing it made me feel more like a regular person. Whatever that is.

Two single-serving plastic vials were left in the refrigerator, both clotted, I assumed. I took them out, set them on the countertop and replaced them with the latest batch of cat blood. Jonathan had appeared, ninja-quiet, in the center of the room while my back had been turned. I didn’t jump. Instead, I removed one of the fresh vials from the refrigerator and set it on the counter.

“Maybe she was trying to reuse the vials,” I said.

“After all this time.” Jonathan shrugged. “I will monitor the quality more carefully now. We must find new sources. Three, at least. You can do this?”

I was supposed to be poking around for likely shows to submit slides to—not that slides of Jonathan’s paintings looked like much of anything, not to V-negative eyes—and sending out the annual third quarter email blast that would hopefully move a couple of the paintings he had at Beacon Gallery. It looked as if my to-do pile was going to keep on piling. “Fine. I’ll start looking.”

“But none of those powders.”

There was a whole shelf full of powdered synthetic blood at the grocery store, so it had to be palatable to somebody. Powdered *cat* blood was much iffier, of course—you had to order it online and wait for a mysterious package from Mexico to arrive on your doorstep—but I didn’t see what he had against trying it. “As a backup. That’s all.”

“If you found someone local who would take cash, then yes. Maybe. No mail, though. No credit cards.”

I could get a P.O. Box. I could sign up for one of those services that generates a new, single-use credit card number for online purchases.

And I could take my ideas and stick ’em where the sun don’t shine, apparently. Jonathan twirled and marched out of the kitchen before I could suggest a strategy that was even remotely borne of the twenty-first century.

I sidled over to the doorway and watched Jonathan stride toward the Gates of Hell with that odd bearing of his, the one where he lines his feet up like he's walking on a tightrope—effortlessly, of course—and his heels don't touch down until he comes to a full stop. A feline walk.

It's never been medically proven that the type of blood that vampires drink affects their physical characteristics...but come on. People don't walk like that. All the Jonathanisms hadn't added up to "cat blood" right away—not when I'd initially met him, but after he gave me the first assignment to visit the lovely Mrs. Jeffers—haltingly, and with an accent suddenly gone so thick I'd had to make him repeat himself—it made a lot of sense. Why cat blood? Plenty of V-positives didn't react well to bovine synthetics. But if that was the case, human blood would be the next logical choice, wouldn't it? Every V-positive can digest it, and it wouldn't have cost him any more. As an added bonus, it was a heck of a lot easier to obtain.

I hadn't asked. Blood was so difficult for him to talk about that he could barely stammer out the directions as it was.

I swabbed down the kitchen, nuked a Chicken Tetrizzini and a Beef and Pepper Stir-Fry, scarfed them down, decided I was still ravenous, and added a Grilled Veggie Flatbread Wrap.

Better.

Craigslist yielded a few possibilities, though the language of the blood trade was always so cryptic and roundabout that you'd swear I was trying to get someone to smuggle heroin in his rectum. I created a new Hotmail account, answered some ads, then rewarded myself with a pack of donut sticks that I didn't remember adding to the shopping cart. It probably meant I'd been stress-shopping, given the handshake and the knowing, goth-girl smile. They tasted incredible.

I made a small dent in my office work while I waited for some email replies. Three bounced, two more tried to funnel me into the type of websites that sold Viagra without a prescription, and one of them seemed to be from an actual, local person.

I replied, and suggested we meet.

Chapter Three

Synthetic blood is the margarine of the vampire world. Back when I first met him, when I still bothered asking questions, Jonathan told me—haltingly, and without meeting my eyes—that drinking the blood of a prey animal makes you slow and stupid. I wondered if cow blood was responsible for the general ennui of the lowest echelon of vampire society, or if those unfortunate V-positives would have been salesclerks, coat checks and DMV window tellers regardless of which type of blood they imbibed.

Synthetic blood was what the actual, local person I'd met on Craigslist had slipped me, at a thousand-percent markup of what I would have paid if I'd bought it from the convenience store on the corner.

I didn't think it was worth barging into Jonathan's studio and telling him that maybe he should be thankful that we'd been duped into buying synthetic blood instead of something a hell of a lot more dangerous. That maybe it should serve as a warning for him to find someone else to hook him up with blood dealers—someone whose connections were a little more reliable than Craigslist. I didn't say a word. The Gates of Hell were shut tight, and it was late, and there was just no arguing with him, anyway. I really didn't want to see synthetic blood making a reappearance, either.

It was long past quitting time. I made the walk of shame down to my car, the silver Corolla that had once seemed so shiny and new, but looked like the ugly stepsister next to Jonathan's sleek, black Audi coupe. I could have driven straight home since I was off the clock, but really, when was I ever off the clock anymore? I executed a stunning all-left turn pattern that I never would have dreamt of trying at anytime other than the middle of the night, and headed to Boystown, where I have a hack-job of an apartment that used to be a quarter of a lovely old Victorian. As I circled for parking, I watched the young men filter from the bars, some heading home, some stopping off for coffee at the all-night diner that was lit up bright and cheerful as daytime.

I could go inside. Have a cup of coffee. Or maybe hot chocolate, since chocolate makes everything better...at least until the flavor fades from your tongue and leaves you there, still alone, and on top of that, with filmy teeth. Of course, I didn't. I'd spent the evening touching things a V-positive had touched. I needed my nightly power shower.

"Hi, honey, I'm home," I called out to my empty apartment, which appreciated my wittiness at least as much as Jonathan did. My mailbox was full of junk mail, which I should probably sort for recycling—but who has the time? I turned on all the lights, plus the stereo and the TV. Then I remembered that my cable got cut off because I forgot to pay the bill three months in a row, so I shut the set off.

I had my nightly disinfecting ritual down to a routine. First the suit. It went into a bag hooked up to a fumigator that bombarded it with antimicrobials. The contraption looked a lot like a hairdryer that my cousin Nancy had back in the early seventies, but on a much larger scale. I went around in my underwear with a wipe and swabbed down the door and the handle on my trash compactor. My washables, shirt, shorts and socks, went into a regular laundry bag. And then I took a long, steamy shower, careful to scrub anything that had been exposed, especially my hands, with the latest and greatest in disinfectant soap.

I slipped into some pajama bottoms and wondered if I still had any Häagen-Dazs. Had I touched the freezer door and forgotten to disinfect it? I grabbed a swab from the pop-up container and wiped it down just to be safe. It turned out there was nothing in the freezer but a bag of frozen peas.

The usual “did I contaminate this?” mantra played through my head as I turned down my covers, but I reassured myself that I would not do anything so foolish as to climb into bed before I had scrubbed away all traces of the virus. Then I thought back, just to be safe...and determined that I was right. Probably.

On the bedside table, there’s a second remote that I only use after I’ve showered. I picked it up, turned on the TV, and remembered yet again that my cable was out.

I was bone-tired anyway, and needed to be back at Varga Studio in a mere seven hours to do all the various tasks that I was supposed to have done tonight, while instead I was wasting my time, spending a big stack of twenties on a piddly little bottle of store-bought blood. I juggled remotes and turned on my stereo instead. It had a 20-CD changer, but there was only one disc loaded. And it always put me to sleep without fail.

The smooth baritone voice of the language instructor washed over me in strange, musical Hungarian tones. It was nice to hear it. Familiar. Routine.

“Could you please write that down?”

“Leírná, kérem?”

I mouthed the words. Some of them were growing recognizable, but I’d never dared to speak them in front of Jonathan. I didn’t want to come off as a stalker.

“Could you please write that down?”

“Leírná, kérem?”

My friend the Hungarian instructor, with his terribly patient manner and his gently encouraging voice, was gone the next morning when my alarm jolted me into wakefulness. I’d programmed the stereo to play an oldies station that was far too fiscally conservative to run ads by the ACN or any of the more insidious anti-V groups. In fact, they were so cautious that they didn’t allow any speaking at all. Just endless repetition of “Stairway to Heaven”, “Freebird”, and on a daring day, “Purple Haze”.

“Don’t Fear the Reaper” serenaded me awake. I sat up and squinted at the sunlight, which knifed through my cheap vinyl blinds and illuminated a thick layer of dust that coated everything, but in particular,

anything horizontal, or anything electronic. Maybe my cable bill hadn't been the issue. Maybe I just couldn't see what was on television through all the dust.

At least my coffee maker wasn't dusty, though I noticed as I was making my daily half-pot that it was covered with hard water stains. When I carried the old, used filter to the trash can, I saw the junk mail sitting untouched, right on top, and I decided to earn some good karma by sorting it into the green recycling bin. I managed to juggle the soggy filter from hand to hand as I pulled on some latex gloves and rescued the mail from the landfill.

Since I was never sure whether those clear cellophane windows were recyclable or not, I spent time tearing the fronts off all the various invitations to subscribe to the dozens of magazines I'd never have time to read, anyway. I made time for one magazine only—*V Living*. And I didn't tell Jonathan, because undoubtedly he'd expect me to rent a P.O. Box in which to receive it, and wear a ridiculous disguise every time I picked it up.

Static electricity had stuck a slim postcard to one of the cellophane windows. There was actual human handwriting on one side and, when I turned it over, a campy beefcake illustration of a hunk of a cop aiming a gun, with "Missing You" printed below it in kitschy red script.

I turned it back over and read.

Hey Girlfriend,

You changed your phone number on me or what? I miss Chicago, I miss you, but I sure as sugar don't miss the snow. Call me sometime, bee-yotch.

Larry, of the keep-your-fluids-to-yourself, who'd moved to Arizona...dang. Three years ago. I'd had a sneaking suspicion that I didn't quite get the word out when I needed to switch cell carriers after a big check-bouncing debacle.

I immediately dug out my new cell phone and dialed the number on the postcard, but as I did, I totally blanked out on where he worked, and whether he'd be home midmorning, or even awake. I mean, when we were in school together, he'd worked at a frame shop. But that was...how many years ago? Oh, God. Twenty. Or more. Did he work a nine-to-five job now? Third shift? Jesus, I couldn't remember what my best friend did for a living.

"Hello?"

Was it him, or did he have a boyfriend—a live-in boyfriend? It sounded like him. At least, I thought it did. "Hi. Uh...Larry?"

"Mark, is that you?"

He recognized my voice. Yes. The world was all right. "You remembered my thing for buff cops."

"So you got the snail-mail, huh? I was worried that maybe you'd moved too."

In an attempt to prove that I wasn't nearly as neglectful as I actually was, I decided to ask about...the name slipped my mind. He had a boyfriend, I was sure of it. I'm not bad with names, at least when I'm dealing with clients. But with an out-of-state friend's boyfriend? No dice. "So. Are you still seeing...?"

"Greg? Oh, please, girl. What was I thinking?"

I poured some coffee and settled into a kitchen chair. "I dunno. What were you thinking?"

"Ohmigod. Like I was thinking anything at all. Greg was, like, so totally ripped. I mean, he had this six-pack to die for, and this really tight ass that looked amazing in boxer-briefs. He looked good all over, like a vam—"

I thought for a second his cordless phone had cut out. Then I realized he was just embarrassed. "Well, go on. Say it, Nellie."

"Fine. He had a hot little bod—like a vampire."

My travel mug creaked like the plastic shell was about to crack in half, and I forced my hand to relax. Because I did my best not to say those things. In fact, I did my best not to even think those things. I guess I should've had a comeback ready for him, but I didn't.

"Cat got your tongue?" he asked me. His joviality seemed a little forced, but at least he was trying.

And, shit. What a choice of words. I racked my brain, trying to remember if I'd ever told him about the cat blood—like maybe when I was new, before I bought into Jonathan's paranoia. "You just think vampires are all glamorous and hot, in your little pretend world where you work at the Macy's fragrance counter and Leif Garrett is your personal valet."

"Ohmigod. Him and David Cassidy, and I have lunch with Tina Turner every day. So, what? Are you still working for that artist guy?"

"Yeah."

"You still think he's hot?"

"Christ, Larry, he's my boss!"

"And is he hot?"

"Larry!"

"You're all in a snit. That means you'd do him."

"I don't even think he's gay."

"Come on, don't play dumb. If there's any doubt, he's queer. You know, and you won't admit it. 'Cos you don't wanna get sick."

That was a low blow. I probably deserved it for not giving him my new phone number. "That's not it. I don't think he's even got a sex drive."

"Sure, Mary. You tell yourself that. Although...I'm thinking the statute of limitations ran out a long, long time ago. You've been there how many years?"

"Four."

“Yeah, if something was gonna happen, it would’ve happened by now. So what about the whole blood thing? Does he bring people home and drink their blood?”

“My God. No. He never leaves the studio.”

“Maybe you go out and do his cruising for him.”

Larry was lucky he sounded like he was smiling, otherwise I would’ve hung up on him, regardless of how guilty I felt about being a terrible pen pal. “He doesn’t even drink human blood.”

“Well, that’s no fun. I take it you’re not seeing anyone at the moment, since you’re busy pining away for Mister Dark, Mysterious and Hungarian.”

I was not pining. But at least he’d gotten the nationality right.

It sounded like life was good for him—working as a paralegal, of all things. Night school. Single, but hopeful. It was refreshing to talk to someone who didn’t think I was betraying my humanity by working for a guy who happened to have a virus. Even though Larry thought I should seduce him already and be done with it.

As I headed toward work in my usual roundabout fashion, I did my best not to allow some of the ideas Larry had seeded in my brain to germinate, but they sprung up like dandelions, anyway. Me, out cruising for Jonathan. Like I even know how to cruise anymore. Even more disturbing, what if he wasn’t looking for blood? What if he was looking for a good time—and he sent me out into the world with an excruciatingly polite, “Please, Mark, you can do this.”

So I’d go out and find some vampire trick to come home and scratch his itch. While I watched. Because really, that was the only safe way to do anything with a V-positive. Watching. Ideally through a barrier, in case things get really festive and the fluids shoot farther than anyone foresees...

I switched my car gloves with my house gloves and let myself in, and hoped that there wasn’t some way for Jonathan to pick up on all the forbidden things that had been playing through my mind since my conversation with Larry.

The land line was ringing as I opened the door, and before I could even call out, “Hi, honey, I’m home,” Jonathan was at my elbow, looking perfectly ravishing in a clingy black T-shirt and low-slung jeans. “It has been doing that every five minutes for the past hour.”

“Right,” I said. “It does that when someone’s on the other end and they’d like to speak with you.”

Jonathan clucked his tongue.

The kitchen phone was closer than my office. I pulled a pop-up wipe from the adjacent tub. I had a feel for them. I always pulled out exactly one, and they were never torn.

“I did not touch it,” Jonathan said. I swabbed it anyway. Then I wadded up the papery cloth and jabbed at the speakerphone button with its moist surface before the ringing stopped. “Jonathan Varga Studio.”

“Mark.” The caller was breathy and dramatic. Nothing new. Murray, our contact at Beacon Gallery, always sounded like he was calling me from a game show with a twenty-thousand-dollar question hinging on my knowledge of obscure Chinese pottery.

“What can I do for you, Murray?”

“Mark, are you sitting down?”

There was nowhere to sit in the kitchenette.

“Yes,” I lied. “I’m sitting.”

“Okay. Right. Good.” I could practically see him mopping his brow with his tie. “I got a phone call from a vampire art collector, and he wants to see twenty Vargas.”

We kept ten paintings at the gallery. One in the window, two or three inside, the rest in storage. When we sold one, I replaced it within the week. “I’ll send some over now. Do you have a size preference?”

“Send the big ones. He said...he said he’d be willing to take them all.”

All.

Okay, for once Murray’s short-of-breath delivery had been warranted. I wished I did have somewhere to sit. “Twenty paintings.”

“Now I’ve got your attention,” Murray said. I let him gloat. Twenty paintings were as many as we usually sold in a year.

“All right.” I wondered what had put Jonathan Varga on this fabulously wealthy collector’s radar. There’d been a really small piece in *Art in America*—really small, since Jonathan’s all-black paintings don’t exactly photograph well. “I’ll send over the big ones.”

“Better wrap ’em up now. He’ll be here at seven.”

“Right. We’ll call the messenger.”

“And, Mark?”

I didn’t care for the casual way he threw that in, with a tone hinting that he had one last request, a small thing, nothing really. I knew it’d be a doozy. “Yes?”

“He wants to meet Jonathan.”

I sighed and glanced at Jonathan out of the corner of my eye. He was standing with his weight on one leg and his arms crossed, and his expression, as usual, told me nothing. “You know he doesn’t—”

“Come on, Mark. Twenty paintings. That’ll buy Jonathan a whole lot of alone time, you know what I mean?”

“One of the main reasons we work with you is the fact that you don’t expect him to—”

“I know, I know. But think about it, Mark. Twenty paintings. That’s a heck of a sale. A heck of a sale.”

“I’ll ask,” I told him.

“That’s all you can do,” said Murray. “That’s a good boy, Mark. You’re a good kid.”

I'd hardly call myself a kid. I'd just turned forty and looked every last day of it. Murray's children weren't all that much younger than me, so I supposed he could get away with it. Murray and I weren't actually close, it was just his inner salesman shining through. Still, I always wanted to go the extra mile for him after he waxed paternal on me.

I said goodbye to Murray and poked the speakerphone button with the antimicrobial wipe. "Okay. I'll wait about ten minutes before I call him back. He'll feel better if he thinks we've actually discussed the possibility."

A tiny furrow appeared between Jonathan's dramatic black eyebrows. "I think...I think I will go."

Cover me in red sequins and click me twice. I must be dreaming. "You're going."

"I am curious to see who wants all these paintings. You know?"

"I guess."

"I think, for once, I should go."

I stared at him for a moment. He was looking in the general direction of the light switch, but I think his gaze was trained somewhere no mere mortal could see. "Okay."

"Call the messenger. I will wrap the paintings."

He pronounced it "vill".

Chapter Four

I took my time dressing, because no card-carrying vampire would meet us at the studio before sundown, anyway. Even though suits were no longer the bastions of structure and padding they had once been, I jumped at the chance to wear my best Prada. Nowadays, they're cut much slimmer than they once were, back when I'd been fitted for my first hand-tailored pinstripe. The dwindling of roomy suits was probably precipitated by the hemovore virus, since it leaves its few lucky survivors slimmer than gastric bypass surgery. *Vogue* magazine claimed that menswear silhouettes had been growing sleeker throughout the end of the twentieth century even before the virus reared its fanged head. Maybe. I still say suits got skinny because of vampires.

Once the last tiny wrinkle was smoothed, and the last cuff was linked, I ventured toward the Gates of Hell, and I knocked softly before I entered.

There were lots of blank spaces on the studio walls. That was good.

Jonathan was a vision in black in the center of the room: black hair, black shirt, black trousers and shoes. He'd cleaned the paint smudges from his face, which was now about three inches away from a small black canvas. He saw detail. I saw a solid black square. "Oh, there you are." He shot a fleeting glance in my general direction, like he hadn't heard me come in. I didn't call him on it—it's just a harmless game we play. He ignores me and I pretend to ignore him ignoring me. Which he ignores.

"Are we bringing that?" I asked him.

"I am not so sure."

"This" and "that". That's what we call his work. He used to call the canvases "the cobalt one", or "the amber one", but eventually I came out and told him that I thought they all looked like plain old black to me. So now, they're "this" and "that".

"It is new," he said. I suspected he was talking about the smallish square. "More personal. Do you think?"

"I suppose."

"Maybe I shouldn't show it yet," he suggested. As if I'd suddenly develop an opinion about his paintings despite the fact that they didn't look like anything but identical black rectangles and squares to me.

"If that's what you think."

Jonathan nodded gravely at the canvas, and then glanced over his shoulder. “But this one...” He extended a hand to me as if he’d take me by the arm. His hand stopped well above my sleeve, hovering there like he was a faith healer trying to balance my energies. “I think it is ready.” He turned and gestured to another canvas. It was the same size as the one that we’d been looking at. Exactly. And like the one we’d been looking at, it was entirely black.

“Oh.” It was the best I could come up with.

Jonathan had a far-off look in his black-as-sin eyes, though, and it took him a second to realize that I had no idea what the big deal was. “This is very subtle.” He made a painting motion, and I had to refrain from telling him that although I was no vampire, that didn’t make me an idiot. “Difficult to see—you know? I think that only the older vampires will appreciate it.”

Vampires like him. As far as I knew, anyway.

“I think they’ll all wet themselves over it whether they understand it or not because you’ll be there in person to show it.”

Jonathan rolled his eyes, made a huffy little noise, plucked the second painting from the wall and walked away. It was probably for the best that he assumed I was being facetious.

~ * ~

“Oh my gawd, you actually came.”

You’ve gotta love Murray. He always sounds like a vaudeville comedian. Looks like one, too, or maybe a silver screen character actor. Big nose, bald on top, thick lips and a formidable jaw. But since it was real life, and not stage, Murray never quite got to the punch line.

“So, how’s the painting going?” Murray asked Jonathan. “I saw your story in *Art in America*.” Before the potential client had called, Murray had referred to the piece as a “little blurb”, to me, at least. Not that I could blame him, since that’s all it really was. A few lines of text and a rare photo of Jonathan gazing at something black while he clutched a black-encrusted paintbrush in his hand, looking tragically artistic. And hot.

Jonathan had thrown a fit when the photo ran. He didn’t know it’d been taken. He’d thought they were shooting his work...which, in retrospect, was silly. They may as well have run a black rectangle with the article and saved themselves the trouble of sending over a photographer. Once the story was out, there wasn’t much to be done for it. They couldn’t exactly take back fifty thousand copies.

“Would you like a water?” Murray asked.

Jonathan drifted past him and into the back room of Beacon Gallery, one foot in front of the other as if he were walking effortlessly across his invisible tightrope. He didn’t answer Murray, but at least he didn’t seem completely rude. It was obvious he was too busy staring at his paintings hanging on Murray’s walls to be bothered with the idle chatter of us mere mortals.

"I'd like a water," I said.

Murray's eyes were fixed on Jonathan as obsessively as Jonathan's were riveted to his paintings. "You know where the fridge is. Knock yourself out. Have a beer."

I didn't want to get myself a beer. I didn't want to get myself a water. I wanted someone else to get me something. I'd thought that by now I was higher up in the pecking order than that.

"Your light is very good," Jonathan said.

"You don't want to know how much each one of these light bulbs costs," said Murray. Which made me want to know exactly what they cost. But before Murray could tell me—and he probably knew, down to the last penny, with sales tax and shipping—a receptionist in a slim, fitted skirt suit poked her head into the back room and told Murray, "Your client is here."

"Well?" Murray clapped his hands and rubbed his palms together. "He's a little early. But I say we don't keep him waiting." He gave Jonathan a meaningful glance, which Jonathan ignored. He then looked to me.

We locked eyes. He and I were both wondering how much money we'd stand to make. Jonathan? Maybe he saw a new brushstroke in the field of solid black under Murray's excessively costly light bulbs.

The receptionist showed a man in and closed the doors behind him. I looked him over—shaved head, sunglasses at night—and my vamp radar dinged. Not that he was drinking blood at that very moment. But his skin had that celadon undertone that Estee Lauder hasn't yet managed to bottle, market and sell.

"How do you do? I'm Murray Weiss and we spoke on the phone?" Murray tends to make his statements sound like questions when he's nervous. His sentences just lilt up at the end.

The vampire art collector was busy thumbing in a text on his cell. He spared me half a glance as he passed, keyed a few more strokes, then tucked his phone into the breast pocket of his black leather blazer.

There was a little strut to his walk that could have been a result of whatever sort of blood he drank, or could have been sheer arrogance. Did he think he was intimidating? He didn't know how quick I was with a pop-up wipe. He was five-foot-eight. And completely bald. And wearing sunglasses that had never actually blocked any sun. I was so not intimidated. Though I did wish I'd gotten myself a water when I had the chance, because now I couldn't leave, for fear of missing something interesting.

"And...remind me again," Murray said. As if he'd forgotten the name of the collector whose purchase might buy him a new Volvo. "You are...?"

"Smith," the bald vamp replied, with an accent that sounded, if not like Jonathan's, at least somewhere eastern European. Not that I could really tell from just the one word, but it had sounded like, "Smeeth."

Murray stretched an arm out toward Jonathan. "Mr. Smith, this is Jonathan Varga." The two of them faced each other, slid their hands behind their backs and gave a little bow. Melodramatic? Maybe, but even vampires didn't shake hands with each other anymore, not in public. Too scary. Too intimate.

“You have been painting long?” Smith asked. His accent was definitely not Hungarian, but what it was, I had no idea. Also, he had to move his lips much more than I would’ve liked so that they could clear his big, gigantic fangs when he talked. I assumed they were natural...the fangs, not the lips. Though I hoped those were natural too. I couldn’t see anyone getting their canines capped so long on purpose.

“Many years,” Jonathan non-answered. “I have been showing at Beacon for five.”

Smith grunted and walked around the room, keeping his gloved hands clasped at the small of his back. His stride was regular, precise—and his upper body hardly moved, like it was floating. Definitely a vampire. Regular people just didn’t walk like that. I assume Smith was scanning Jonathan’s paintings, and not giving me a show of his preternatural gait. His glasses were so dark, I couldn’t tell where he was looking.

He didn’t look for very long.

Once he’d made his way back around to the doorway, he did a neat pivot so that he faced Jonathan once more, and then he ended his maneuver with a short, crisp bow. “Thank you very much for the viewing. I will be in touch with Mr. Weiss.” He pronounced it “Veiss”. He gave Murray a small nod, and didn’t acknowledge me at all, as if I was a six and a half foot tall coat rack.

Smith glided out the door. Murray looked at Jonathan. He looked at me.

“We scrambled all day to meet this guy for two minutes?” I said.

“Maybe he really will be in touch,” Murray said.

“Right. Sure. He seemed so enthused.”

Murray shrugged. “What can I say, Mark? You win some, you lose some. I’ll send the paintings back in the morning when the messengers stop billing at time and a half.”

Waste not, want not. Good old Murray.

“Well?” I asked Jonathan. “What was your take on him?”

Jonathan thought for a moment. “I think he is Slovak.”

“Is that still a country?” said Murray.

I didn’t know.

“It separated from the Czech Republic in 1993,” Jonathan said, but his eyes were on one of his paintings again, as he grazed the canvas with his gloved fingertips. I imagined his fingers beneath the fabric of the gloves, white, with black pigment ground into his fingernails, the creases of his knuckles, even the whorls of his fingerprints.

And I wondered where Jonathan had been living in 1993. Most of us, in calling out a date like that, would have added where we were when such news took place. I, myself, was probably drunk in a ditch after one too many whisky sours, hopped up on Bronski Beat.

Where had Jonathan been? What had he been like pre-HHV, back when he was just a regular person? Scratch that. Once upon a time, he didn’t have the virus, but I’m sure he’s never been a regular person.

I watched Jonathan staring at his painting until he turned to face me, his expression so neutral that you'd never know a six-figure deal had just slipped through his fingers.

"You never had your beer," he said. How odd. I hadn't known he could hear the other conversations that transpired while he was vacationing in Jonathan-land.

"It's fine," I said. "I don't want a beer. Let's go."

Chapter Five

The next day I set up a new email address and put my own ad on Craigslist, and was rewarded with a dozen threatening Van Helsing emails and an invitation to chat with someone named “Candi”.

Maybe she knew where I could get some cat blood.

I sighed, tipped back in my ergonomic chair and stared up at the ceiling. Now I was three days behind on my to-do list.

How different was cat blood from, say, cougar blood? Or lion blood? What if I cozied up to a vet at the Lincoln Park Zoo? I bet a big cat could spare as much blood as a hundred little kitties. If Jonathan could stomach it. If he didn’t laugh me right out of the room when I asked him.

But even if he did agree to it, it’d be one hell of an expensive experiment. If Jonathan was right, and blood did convey some sort of essence to the imbiber, then he wouldn’t be the only V-positive who wanted to take a sip from something big, sleek and predatory. There had to be more demand than there was supply. If I did locate a source, could I afford what they’d charge? I hadn’t sold a painting in nearly three months. And the new blood search wasn’t exactly helping me move the merchandise.

I supposed that meant I should arrange for the messenger to go get the paintings from Beacon, so that I had something to sell...so that Murray didn’t start charging us a storage fee. He’d already left me four messages to call him back, and with each one the urge to avoid him grew stronger. In hopes of distracting myself from my feeling of dread, I scanned the back of the Virusol tub while I punched Murray’s number on the speed dial. Grapefruit. Chemulite Labs actually thought the stuff smelled like grapefruit.

“Good afternoon,” sang a pleasant female voice. “Beacon Gallery. How may I direct your call?”

It was on the ripe end of afternoon, but most people didn’t say “Good evening” anymore unless they were being campy on purpose. It parsed too much like, “I don’t drink...wine.”

“Murray, please. Mark Hansen calling.”

“Right away, Mr. Hansen.”

A little experimental-meets-classical played as she put me on hold, and I determined from a blurb on the Virusol label that the “specially formulated emollients and skin conditioners” that some people actually wiped themselves with the stuff. As in, their bodies. What next, bleach baths?

“Mark.” I steeled myself for a tirade. “Mark. Oh, Mark.”

“Murray...”

“You’re like a son to me, Mark. You never call.”

“I have other duties, you know.” Like being abused by trolls from Craigslist.

“You wound me. Truly, you do. Listen, Mark. These paintings—”

“Pick out a messenger and send them back. I trust you to choose a service who won’t milk us for our last penny.”

“They’re not coming back.”

Wonderful, I thought. Something had happened. Fire. Flood. Robbery. Sure, Beacon Gallery was insured and we’d get the money for those paintings just as soon as we jumped through acres of red tape. But the loss of the paintings themselves would be hard on Jonathan. Just thinking of him gazing at those paintings under Murray’s special light bulbs choked me right up.

“What happened?” I asked him.

“A delivery guy showed up with a box truck and a whole suitcase full of cash money. The twenty Vargas are now part of the Smith Private Collection.”

I sighed and clasped the grapefruit-scented pop-up wipes to my chest like a newly won Oscar. “Oh, Auntie Em.”

~ * ~

Jonathan smiled when I told him, a big smile that actually flashed fang. His fangs were blunt—normal human eyeteeth grown long by the virus; he’d never had any spiffy vampire cosmetic dentistry. I have no idea why. It’s just another one of those things we don’t discuss.

“We should go celebrate,” he said.

“Who are you and what have you done with my boss?”

Jonathan was too busy gazing at the huge, empty spaces on the studio walls to let me get under his skin. “Phil told me about a bar that opened on the river. They serve flavored water in martini glasses. With fake olives and everything.”

Of course I wondered when he’d been fraternizing with the night doorman, but I didn’t ask. I was too baffled by the notion that he wanted to go out for a drink. With me.

“If that’s what you want to do.”

“You don’t look very happy. Smile—this is a good sale. I will go change my shirt.”

I pressed the back of my hand against my forehead, looking around to make sure the walls weren’t breathing and my Aunt Trixie hadn’t appeared in the hall closet wearing a sombrero and talking backwards. Because either I was having one of those flashbacks they’d told me about in health class, or I was dreaming.

But no, Jonathan emerged in a different black shirt, this one a matte silk that had a hand like fine cotton but a drape to die for.

I did need a drink. Badly.

“Shall we walk?” He gestured toward my coat.

“We’ll take the car,” I said, unable to wrap my brain around the thought of the two of us strolling along the river like a pair of starry-eyed lovers.

He pulled on his black wool coat and tucked his virus-barrier gloves into the pocket. “If you like. I can always drive us home if you have too much to drink.”

Us. Home. As if it were our home. Together. “I didn’t know you had a license.”

“There are many things you don’t know about me.”

Was that flirtatious? And if not, what the hell was it?

No, I decided, of course it wasn’t. I just had that phone conversation with Larry on the brain, was all. And maybe it was just a simple statement of fact. Of course there was plenty I didn’t know about him. Because he never told me squat about himself.

No doubt Jonathan was just happy he could now buy as much damn cat blood as he wanted. Lion blood, even. Or maybe he found it gratifying that someone else in this cold, wide world saw something other than black squares when they looked at his paintings.

It took us longer to wave goodbye to Phil and get out of the parking garage than it did to drive to the club. The high-rise that housed it was tall and slender, a graceful counterpoint to the Mercantile Exchange across the river. The El snaked by. Its bulbous 1950’s train looked shiny and retro in the glow of the streetlights, bumping and rattling along as it ferried people to their jobs—or whatever other haunts they were seeking.

I handed the keys to the valet while Jonathan craned his neck and watched as the train disappeared around a curve, its wheels throwing off a few halfhearted sparks.

“We should ride in that some time,” he said.

What? “You shot heroin in the bathroom while I was disinfecting the kitchen. Didn’t you?”

“Of course not.” He pulled on his gloves and led the way into the building. “I hatched from a pod and hid the real Jonathan under the floorboards.”

“You’re much less creepy when you’re pensive and focused. Just so you know.” Huge posters for “Crinoline” studded the lobby, featuring Elvira-looking women and drinks in fancy glasses. “Is this it?”

Jonathan walked up to one of the posters and stared Elvira in the cleavage. “Phil said to look for the one with ‘big melons’.”

I rolled my eyes. “Right. This is it. Let’s go, thirtieth floor.”

I couldn’t stay bitchy with Jonathan all night long, since he was practically luminescent in his joy. He didn’t tell me anything more about himself than I already knew, but seemed to be living in that moment with his full mind, body and spirit. He ordered water after water, trying each one on the list and describing to me what they tasted like, from sandalwood to soap. He gazed out over the Chicago River and told me

about the colors he saw iridescent there beneath the sodium vapor streetlamps. And when he was between novel experiences, he simply sat with me and was happy.

Me? I got pretty plowed. That bartender shook a mean martini.

All the other barflies seemed to float from the shadows in red, silver and black. Vampires drank water and everyone else drank liquor doctored to look like blood. There was a roller coaster ride masquerading as an elevator on the way down, and the night air was a frosty smack in the teeth.

“Would you mind if we left our car overnight?” I heard Jonathan asking the valet. A bill was pointed at him, likely of insanely large denomination.

The valet stepped back from the money, looking ill that he’d even seen it. “I wish I could, but there’s no parking on this street between six in the morning and five at night, ’cos this is where the office shuttles pull up.”

I stared up between the buildings at the stars. Gorgeous stars. Spinning a little. Or maybe the earth was spinning and the stars were actually quite still. That seemed more likely.

“Here, take it.” Jonathan tucked the money into the valet’s coat with his gloved hand. “I will be back before six, then. I need to help my friend walk it off and put him to bed.”

Jonathan looped his arm through mine and walked me to the river. His coat was touching my coat. I wasn’t sure I still knew how to breathe. I leaned into him, since the footing on the bridge was icy, and the wind was howling by, and there was a good chance I’d end up sprawled on my ass, and he was as surefooted as ever. At least that was what I was telling myself.

“I’ve never seen you laugh so much,” I said, annoyed that my words wanted to slur even though I was fully cognizant of what I wanted to say.

“And I have never seen you drink. So we are even.”

“That’s not true. At the Galliano opening—”

“They were serving wine from a box. I saw it when I went to the bathroom. I don’t think you can compare a few of those to eight Tanqueray martinis. They were practically all gin, with just a drop of vermouth.”

“And a twist,” I reminded him.

“You will be sick tomorrow. We say *masnapos* in Magyar. The bad head.”

Magyar—what Hungarians call Hungarian. I’d learned at least that much from the tape, if not the vernacular for hangover. The streetlights stretched out before us like the vertebrae of a great, glowing snake. I focused on the one above us and thought at first that moths were swarming it, but then I realized it was much too cold for moths. And that it was snowing.

“You called me...your friend.”

“What?”

“To the valet.”

“Just a few more blocks. Are you cold?”

“Nope. Feels good.” And if I leaned into him a little more as I said that, I’m sure it was by accident.

“You will stay here today,” he said as his building came into sight.

“You made that pretty clear when you were giving him that big old tip.”

“Oh, you noticed?”

“That tonight you’re spending money like it’s going out of style? I may be drunk. But I’m not...uh...what’s the word?”

Jonathan shored me up. “Do you want to walk around the block?”

What I wanted was to go up to the studio and get to the part where he peeled off my clothes. Because if it didn’t happen while I was totally blotto, it never would.

I leaned on him harder and paused just before my face pressed into his hair. My God, it smelled amazing. Jonathan tried to keep walking, but I’d stopped, and I had a few pounds on him. More than a few—and I was holding his arm really tightly.

His hair was so close. So painfully close. What would it feel like against my face, my lips?

“You won’t catch it that way,” he said, so quietly that I wondered if he’d even meant to say it aloud.

The hemovore virus.

And I knew that. Damn it, I knew it. My indoor gloves, and the swabbing and the scrubbing...they were props. Nothing more. Jonathan didn’t drool or weep or spooge in any of the parts of the studio where I worked. He knew better. And all the precautions I took inside my own apartment? Rituals I’d invented to keep my mind busy, so I didn’t have a chance to think about what was really eating me. Or not, as the case may be.

Unless I planted the big, wet kiss on Jonathan’s mouth that I was just dying to give him, unless we had sex and let our bodily fluids mingle—or unless we did something really outrageous, like share the same water glass—then I didn’t need to worry about the virus invading my bloodstream. And anything dry was fair game.

A strand of hair brushed my chin, and I wanted him like I’d never wanted anything before. Ever. “Let’s go up.”

“To your own bed. Your gin is talking for you.” He hauled me up the marble stairs and through the front doors. “Tomorrow you won’t...”

He just stopped there in the middle of the lobby while I waited for him to finish what he was saying, so I could object to it. But he just stood there, utterly frozen, while the elevator doors went in and out of focus for me.

“I won’t what?”

Jonathan pulled his shoulder out from under my armpit and grabbed me by the wrist. His grip was so hard, I heard something in my forearm crackle, and while it hurt, it probably would've hurt a lot more if it weren't for the eight martinis. He raised his other hand and put his forefinger to his lips. "Quiet."

I choked back a yelp and looked around, hoping to see what made Jonathan put the grip of death on me—without causing the room to spin too much. One of the elevators was just sitting there, partially open, with a pile of fur blocking the door. A dog? But dogs weren't allowed in the building.

"Where's Phil?" I said. Something had just soured the mood, though I couldn't seem to grasp exactly what that something was. "I thought Phil was gonna ask us how we liked Crinoline."

"Stay here," said Jonathan, poised to dash toward the elevators. "Wait, no. Go outside."

I swayed a little.

"Or...no, don't. Come with me. Stay very close."

That was more like it. He hauled me over to the elevators, and his rapid steps fell in a narrow line, as if he was trying to follow a seam in the marble, and he dragged me along behind him like a broken-down caboose. When we got to the elevators, I saw that the furry thing was actually an old woman in a fake fur coat. Mrs. Vogelman, from the second floor. I thought she'd gone to Florida for the winter. Why wasn't she in Florida? "We need to call an ambulance. Where's Phil? He has a phone. Wait. I have a phone."

"Keep your voice down," Jonathan said. His accent had gone thick. He jabbed the elevator button until the second set of doors opened. "I'm sure Phil is handling this."

"We should stay here. So the paramedics know where to go."

The whole world spun as I slammed into the second elevator, and my shoulder blades bounced off the back of the car. "Hey!"

And then Jonathan was pressed up against me, his retinas reflecting the fluorescent panel behind my head as he shoved his face into mine. "Stop talking. I mean it."

"But—"

Jonathan clamped his gloved hand over my mouth. The doors closed behind his head and the elevator gave a little lurch before it started to rise. "Mark, please. You must be quiet."

I nodded.

"Something is wrong. And I need to see—do you understand?"

I nodded again, my mood sobering, if not my body.

"Do not speak. Walk very quietly. And stay as close to the wall as you can. Will you do that?"

I reached up and gently pried his hand away, nodding.

The elevator stopped on the twenty-first floor, two short of Jonathan's studio, but he grabbed me by the wrist before I could press the right button. The shock of pain made me remember that I'd just promised him not to say anything. "We'll walk," he said.

We crept down the hall to the stairwell, both of us keeping against the wall as he'd told me. As I passed people's closed doors, I heard voices raising and lowering in conversation, and televisions playing sitcom themes, muffled, yet still familiar. Ahead of me, Jonathan seemed less substantial than smoke.

Jonathan opened the door to the stairwell soundlessly, easing the door open and straining to hear something. Or maybe smell something. It was dark, but for all I knew he could see something, too, if it were there to see. Maybe it was like seeing shapes in paintings that were totally black.

He motioned me forward with a tiny nod, and I followed him up two flights of stairs. I struggled with placing each step just so, glad that the steps were cement, so at least they didn't creak. Why did I have to have that last drink? I really could have stopped, maybe switched to grapefruit juice, toward the end there. But I didn't. Because I was just enjoying him too much. And hoping we could end up somewhere other than our same old routine.

Boy. I got that in spades.

Jonathan did a repeat of the world's slowest entrance on the twenty-third floor, while I fought back the gnawing urge to apologize to him for being so drunk. I hadn't had a bender practically since college, and now this. If I were just quiet enough, couldn't I tell him I was sorry?

He flung an arm across me like my mom used to do in the old Pontiac every time she made a sudden stop. "Do you hear that?" he said, his voice barely louder than a breath.

The Nortons' stereo was on, some insipid light jazz station, but even as plastered as I was, I didn't think that was what Jonathan meant. I did my best to focus, and I picked up on a familiar-sounding voice around the corner. Murray. His voice sounded tinny, broadcast through the speakerphone, but there was no mistaking it.

We eased forward.

"...and it's poor business to let your customers languish like this. I've been in business forty-five years, and I should know. So call me the minute you get my message and not a second later. There's something I've gotta tell you."

I scowled. Murray was happy with us at the moment, wasn't he? And then I realized, that was the fourth or fifth message he'd left on our voice mail before we'd met with him and Smith, when I was busy trying to find a blood dealer.

"That's not from today," I said. I still didn't get it. Our phone was possessed and broadcasting our old voice mails?

Jonathan gripped my arm and pain flared from the spot he kept grabbing. He inched me forward as slowly as he could make my body move. When we came to the point where the hallways crossed, he peeked around the corner and then quickly drew back.

"The front door is open," he whispered, "just a little. Let's go."

We were being robbed?

I patted down my pockets as carefully as I could, searching for my cell phone. It would only take the cops a few minutes to show up, and if we were lucky, they'd catch the robbers before they even got out. Except Jonathan was dragging me along faster than I could go and still be quiet and look for the cell phone at the same time.

The door to the stairwell creaked as he opened it, but he ignored the noise, hustled me through and steered me toward the stairs. He actually took my hand as he started hopping down two at a time. Even though the thought of skipping down stairs hand in hand with Jonathan was quite appealing, I couldn't seem to coordinate myself to him and nearly took us both down. He had to settle for matching my pace.

We broke into a run on the twenty-first floor. The elevator was still there—its doors slid open the moment Jonathan hit the down button. He dragged me inside and I proceeded to grope through my pockets. I had no idea where all the pockets in my coat had come from. "Can't find the phone."

"Forget the phone. We have to go."

"But your paintings—they'll steal your paintings."

"The paintings can be replaced." The elevator doors opened onto the lobby. Jonathan whisked me out and propelled me toward the door. He made a quick lunge behind the front desk, right around where a pair of rubber-soled black shoes were sticking out.

"Jonathan?"

"Keep going. Make sure no one's watching and take the alley to the dumpsters. Go!"

I stumbled out the front door and into the cold. The snow had picked up. It lay in a thin frosty coat over the parked cars. Those shoes—the doormen wore those shoes. That was Phil on the floor. What was going on? Carbon monoxide poisoning? I hadn't smelled anything—but I guess that's how it happens. I really needed to find my phone.

Jonathan swooped up behind me and hustled me forward. "We'll take the alleyways to the river and then pick up the car," he said.

My car was in the parking garage, but if there was a gas leak, or whatever it was, I suspected I'd rather not go back in. The crisp, snowy night looked quite different from the alleyway than it had from the streets. Impenetrable shadows lurked between the high buildings, and something, probably rats, rustled as we dashed by. The red bio-dumpsters loomed black in the moonlight and the smell of sour milk waxed and waned depending on our proximity to the back of a restaurant.

But finally we were on the river again, and the melted snow on the sidewalks had re-frozen on the bridge. My arms windmilled as I struggled to stay upright on the slippery metal treads, and Jonathan grabbed me by the hand again, now in full view of whatever few pedestrians were about, and half-dragged me back to the club.

"Act like nothing is wrong," he told me, abruptly slowing to a walk once we were within a block of Crinoline.

I was too busy catching my breath to think of a snappy comeback to that one.

“In fact...just act drunk.”

“I’ll do my best,” I gasped. I decided that maybe breathing was my best bet—deep, cleansing breaths that would oxygenate my blood and speed the alcohol’s process. Though I’d seen plenty a drunken friend fruitlessly panting, chugging energy drinks or downing multiple glasses of water in hopes of somehow ending the spins, when the chips were down and the only solution I could come up with was to breathe, I breathed.

Jonathan chatted amiably with the valet, which was my first clue that he wasn’t even being Jonathan. Not that I thought he was actually a pod person. But if he was being himself, he wouldn’t bother acting quite so charming.

The second valet was called over and more money changed hands. Pretty soon one of the kids pulled up in the Audi while the other one came out of the club looking shifty with a gallon of Wesson Oil in each hand.

It felt all wrong for me to get in on the passenger’s side, though since I’d just spent the entire night in Bizarro-world, it wouldn’t have surprised me if the steering wheel had moved over too. Fortunately for me, it hadn’t. Because Jonathan didn’t even need to tell me I was in no shape to drive.

The glove compartment stared at me from the spot the steering wheel normally occupied. And then it occurred to me where the phone was. I pulled it out and pressed the nine.

“Don’t.”

There was that tone. The one he used when he was telling me how to creep around the apartment building like a ninja. It stopped me from dialing the pair of ones I’d been going for.

“Mrs. Vogelman—”

“She’s dead, Mark. And so is Phil. We can’t help them now.”

I stared at the phone.

“Hang it up.”

I pressed the off button and the keypad went dark.

“Good. And now we need to find somewhere to wait out the day. We have an hour before dawn.”

“We’ll go to my place.”

“No! If he has found me, then you are in danger too. Pretend your apartment is...on vacation.”

He, who? Who was *he*? I ran a hand over my face. Either my cheeks were hot or my fingers were freezing. “If my apartment’s on vacation, is it going to come back with a tan, some cheap souvenirs and a bunch of boring photos?”

Jonathan sighed. “I hope so.”

Chapter Six

If anyone had told me I'd spend the night getting shitfaced with Jonathan, come home to find my neighbors dead on the floor, and proceed to a cheap motel off the Interstate, I would've assumed they were a few dancers short of a chorus line.

But there I was, staggering out of the car while Jonathan popped the trunk and rolled back the carpeting. He pulled a bundle of black fabric and a vinyl bag out of the spare tire well, and stacked it into my arms. "Take that to the room." He stuck the keycard between my fingers then proceeded to yank the carpeting back into place.

"What if I'd actually had a flat?" I wondered out loud as I wove my way to the door. I wasn't so much drunk anymore, though there were the lingering effects of the booze that I'd probably feel for a few more hours yet, but mainly I was exhausted, and confused.

Jonathan double-locked the door behind us and then wedged a chair under the doorknob for good measure by the time I'd untangled the black UV-retardant fabric from my coat. "Right," he said, as if I were actually doing something useful. "Let's get this up." I just held my end high while he went at it with the staple gun. I had a vision of him stretching canvases in his studio with that same air of concentration about him, his lips pressed together and his eyebrows drawn down into a pair of taut lines.

"So who's 'he'?" I asked.

"What?"

"You said, 'If *he* has found me.' Who's 'he'?"

Jonathan made a clicking noise. "Can we secure the room first?"

"Secure the room? Don't you sound butch."

He made a variation on his clickkety sigh that sounded even more exasperated. "We must cover the door. Light will leak in all around it."

I was plenty annoyed, but I didn't want it to be my fault if he ended up covered in painful blisters, so I held my tongue while we got to work on the door. The only sound in the room was the rhythmic snap of the staple gun. Then I checked the bathroom. It faced the interior of the building and didn't have a window. I came back into the bedroom to resume my line of questioning about "him" and found Jonathan with a gun in his hand, snapping something out of its handle and peering inside. Not a staple gun. A *gun* gun.

"Tch. I don't think he ever cleaned this."

I swallowed. "That—is a gun."

“And it didn’t do Phil very much good.” He snapped the parts back together like an ugly metal Pez dispenser.

“Quit that,” I said. “You’re going to shoot one of us.”

He glanced up at me with a look that was fairly withering in its startlement, and then raised an eyebrow. “The safety is on.”

“Jesus, I don’t even know where the safety is.”

He snapped some other part open, scowled at it, then snapped it shut again and set it on the table. “Mark, I think you should take an aspirin, drink some water and then go to bed.”

“What is this—*gun* business? You’re not supposed to know about guns. You’re a painter.”

He stared at me hard. “I come from a Soviet-ruled country. It was not like it is here.”

“So, what—were you some sort of guerilla freedom fighter?”

He half-laughed at that, but his gaze dropped to the floor. “That would make for a very dramatic story, yes?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Never mind.” He picked the gun back up and brought it to the table between the pair of double beds, and placed it there. “I was in the army. Many of us were. It’s mandatory there—one of every three men is called.”

I tried to imagine him with his tousled hair and pigment-stained fingers, carrying a rifle over his shoulder as he cat-walked over a desolate landscape. Because although I’ve never been to a Communist Bloc country, I imagine them all looking desolate in various shades of brown. Except Russia, which we all know is covered with snow and populated by men in tall black hats with ear flaps.

“How long?”

“Three years.” He shrugged. “And then I got sick, and then I came here.”

“One of these days, I’ll acquaint you with a little something we like to call ‘the detail’ in America.”

Jonathan cracked open one of the gallon-sized jugs of cooking oil and knocked back a long, unctuous swallow. I’ll admit—I’ve often envied V-positives being so calorically challenged that they’ve actually got to drink pure fat to keep up their strength. Now, though, the need to calorie-load didn’t seem half as tasty as I’d always imagined. “I must go to sleep now.” Jonathan’s voice was thick. He swallowed several times, cringing, and then rolled up in his blankets so that the only thing I could see of him were a few black curls escaping the top of the roll.

I stared at him for a while, though a headache was inching its way across the back of my skull and I really wanted to take a shower. Phil was dead. I shoved that thought aside, worried that it might make my brain explode. Jonathan had been all over me, making up for four years of non-contact all in one night. Unfortunately, most of the touching had consisted of shoving me around and keeping me vertical. I’d thought, for just a few minutes there, that maybe he was actually into men—or, more specifically, into me.

Because the way he'd sounded, when he said I wouldn't catch anything by kissing his hair? I might've been three sheets to the wind, but even so, it sounded to me like he'd wanted me to.

Although seeing him work that gun like G.I. Joe was enough to give anyone pause.

~ * ~

I was woken by the raging hangover from Hell, inflicted by Beelzebub himself. It was hard to tell whether my eyes were open or closed at first, because the room was completely dark—but then I saw a garish LCD readout that said 7:13 in big, red numbers, and I quickly pieced together where I'd slept.

The “why” of the matter was a different story. That was still a little hazy.

I groped around until my knuckles hit the hard edge of the table, and then I rifled through a bunch of plastic-wrapped stuff that rustled too loudly for my delicate head. After numerous deafening crinkles, I located the bedside lamp, squinted my eyes mostly shut and turned it on.

My God. What an ugly room. And I was the only one in it.

I looked at the bedside table as my eyes quickly adjusted to the low light. Small vending machine bags of crackers and pretzels littered the surface, along with two individually wrapped packets of Bayer, a roll of store-brand antacids and a couple of sweating bottles of water. I picked the safety seal off one of the waters and downed it in a single, long, cotton-mouthed pull.

Ah, water. Water was good. I vowed to drink nothing but water until the day I died.

I looked back at the pile of stuff Jonathan had left me, and wondered if pretzels might stay down. I figured I'd have to give it a little time. It was odd, to say the least—someone else trying to anticipate my needs and meet them, instead of the other way around. And for someone who couldn't have had a hangover in ages, he hadn't done all that bad a job.

I took both packs of the aspirin and five antacids at the same time, and then headed toward the shower as if I could wash some of the aftereffects of the liquor away. A few cockroaches scurried behind the badly hung medicine cabinet as I flicked on the bathroom light, and I almost turned back, but then I caught a whiff of myself and thought I'd better tough it out.

There was nothing else alive in the shower, at least nothing that could be seen with the naked eye, but I dug an antimicrobial wipe out of my pocket and swabbed down the floor and the taps just to be safe. Then I ran the steaming shower for a good ten minutes. The sterilization had been overkill when Jonathan and I were sharing a notepad. But a bathroom? Unfortunately, now it was necessary. Plus, I had no idea who'd been there before us.

As I stripped out of my shirt, I was shocked to discover my right forearm was filthy...and then I realized it was covered in bruises. I could no longer say that Jonathan had never given me anything.

I stepped carefully into the shower. The hot water helped my nausea some, but it also made my head spin. It'd been stupid of me to drink so much. Of course a psychopathic art thief would pick that specific night to come and terrorize us. It figured.

Or...wait a minute. It wasn't just any psychopathic art thief. Jonathan had said something about *him*. And then he'd brushed me off when I asked about it. We needed to talk.

I wished I'd brought my own towel, but my little vacation hadn't exactly been planned. I pulled a motel towel from the pile and shook it out. No roaches—so far, so good. But were they safe to touch for the main reason I never touched anything? Probably, if I had no open wounds—and I didn't, that I knew of. And if they'd been there all day and Jonathan hadn't touched them, they were probably fine too. The HHV can't live outside a body for more than a few hours without moisture. I brought the towel near my face and inhaled the scent of cheap bleach. The vestige of cleanliness made me feel somewhat better, and I dried myself off—gingerly.

Normally, I'd shave, but I didn't have a razor. Or a comb. Or a toothbrush. I rinsed my mouth out with tap water, then spotted a miniature bottle of mouthwash and powered through it in a few good swigs.

I heard the door to the room click shut as I dressed in my old clothes. Other than that single sound, Jonathan didn't make any noise that I could detect through a thin pressboard door over the quiet rustle of fabric. Unless it wasn't even Jonathan.

Unless it was *him*?

Not that I actually thought that. I wasn't really living the horror movie of the week; it just felt like it. I finished buttoning my shirt and charged out of the bathroom completely hot and bothered, with a demand for an explanation at the ready.

Jonathan stood in the middle of the room looking miffed. He swung around to glare at me and beat me to the punch. "My credit card was declined."

"What?"

"It worked this morning when it was preauthorized to book the room. And now it's been declined."

"I'll call the bank." I strained to recall what had happened to the cell phone.

"I'll do it. It's my account."

I'd had full access to the account for over four years. I paid for all of his expenses with that card. Even the cat blood, though I had to stop at the ATM to get Mrs. Jeffers her fat roll of twenties on the way...

"Jonathan," I said in a stage whisper. "What'll we do about the blood?"

He was busy using the room phone to try to call the credit card company, and waved me off. "Hello? I'd like an outside line. Yes, this is Mr. Varga." He made his "pff" sound. "But it is a toll-free number. Yes, I realize that, and I am trying to resolve the issue."

I found my coat in a damp wad on the floor and dug through the pockets until I located the cell. I handed it to him.

Jonathan hung up on the motel manager and switched phones. I lay back on the rumpled bed and half-listened to Jonathan trying to reason with the bank. A sinking feeling in my gut that was more than just the martini aftermath told me we were out of luck with that particular piece of plastic.

Jonathan gave a heavy sigh, began to hand the phone back to me and then realized it was now V-contaminated, and rested it on his thigh instead. “We need a plan we can both agree on.”

Well. It was nice that Jonathan had decided that maybe I could begin having a say in things. Although I’m not sure even I would have trusted my judgment after eight martinis, so maybe he’d done the right thing after all by pitching me in the Audi and taking off.

“What are you going to do about the blood?” I asked him.

“I will have to go without.”

“How long can you do that—a day? I’ll go to Mrs. Jeffers.”

“She already bled her cats twice. She will not do it again.”

“And whose fault was that? She’s the one who screwed up the first batch. I’ll talk her into getting us a little bit, just a couple days’ worth. I’ll get some new cats for her, nice big ones. I’ll pay her triple.”

Jonathan turned the phone around, sliding his black-gloved fingers over the keypad. “And that is another thing. The money.”

“We’ll go visit the fraud specialist in person at the bank to start getting it straightened out. I think if we could just report that your studio’s been broken into, things will start falling into place.”

“No police.”

It was my turn to sigh. “Jonathan, this isn’t Communist Hungary, and the cops aren’t on Big Brother’s payroll and looking to squash you like a bug. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

He set the phone on the bed and stood to face me. “That’s the thing. You know it, and I know it. But he has framed me for those deaths. If not both of us.”

Taking a cue from the night before, I steeled myself and grabbed him by the upper arms. He felt surprisingly slight for someone who’d hauled me all over the Loop a few hours earlier. “If I’m in this with you, you’ve gotta tell me. No hedging, no conveniently omitted details. Who is *he*?”

Jonathan broke away from my grasp like it was nothing and sat down hard on the other bed. “I infected him. In Hungary. And he has finally tracked me down.”

The bad horror-movie-of-the-week scenario was starting to seem much more likely. *Revenge of the Vampire*, starring Mark Hansen, Jonathan Varga, and special guest... “Does he have a name?”

“László. He transferred into my unit two weeks before my discharge.”

“And you were lovers?”

Jonathan got so still that part of me was certain I’d read him all wrong. And yet as the seconds ticked by I realized he hadn’t denied it, either.

“I didn’t love him,” he said, finally. “I hardly knew him.”

I supposed I could allow Jonathan his semantics, at least. “But you had sex.”

He threw his hands in the air and made a noise. I took that for a yes.

“I was infected just before I met László,” he said. His voice was brittle and halting. “There was a boy in the village where we were stationed—he must have contracted it recently himself—he didn’t look sick. And three days after I was with him, he was dead.”

My knees went rubbery and I sat down on the other bed. The virus’s mortality rate had fallen to eighty-five percent even with the help of modern medicine. Back when Jonathan picked it up, nearly everyone who got it died. “So you were in stage one when you passed it?”

“Of course I was,” he snapped. “Do you think I would knowingly inflict this on anybody else?”

“But it’s not your fault, any more than it was the fault of the...young man who gave it to you.” I wondered if Jonathan even knew his name, or if he was just sparing me still more details.

“It may not have been my intention, but it was very much my fault.” Jonathan jumped up and started stuffing our things into a bag.

“Hey, what’re you doing?”

“The manager is going to throw us out any minute. I want to make sure we don’t leave anything behind.”

I helped Jonathan pull the UV-proof fabric off the window and door. Tiny staples pelleted me one by one as the fabric pulled them free. We folded it in silence while I tried my best to keep a straight face. Larry’d been right. Jonathan actually was queer. Sure, he was miles away from slapping a rainbow sticker on the Audi, but he’d admitted to me that he slept with men. Although he couldn’t meet my eyes while he did it. We’d need to work on that.

The manager glared at us something fierce as we loaded the car. I had no idea why he was so pissed off. So Jonathan’s card was declined. I’m sure Jonathan had paid him in cash. What, our money wasn’t any good there? Why, because Jonathan’s V-positive, or because he dragged a big, drunken fag into the room with him? I longed to yell something at the guy that would really curdle his milk—like maybe that we’d spooGED all over his sheets—but first of all, it wasn’t true. And second of all, I only thought vulgar things like that. I didn’t say them.

“Do you want to drive?” Jonathan asked.

“No thanks.” I put my hand to my stomach. “I’m not quite up to snuff yet.”

“Good,” he said, and I stared at him. He had the decency to look a bit guilty. “I mean, the car handles well. Not that you still feel sick.”

We got in the car. The passenger’s seat felt ever so vaguely familiar, for once, and I noticed how gently the suspension cradled us as Jonathan rolled over a speed bump. “But you will have to tell me how to get to Mrs. Jeffers’,” he said. “You know the streets better than I.”

Well, he had that right. I could tell him twenty ways to get to that piss-smelling apartment. I picked one. “Okay. Go straight to the next light and take a left.”

Chapter Seven

It felt really wrong to be having fun, in light of what had happened to Phil. Maybe fun is too strong of a word. It was like an adventure, though, with me in the passenger seat with a sack of White Castles in my lap and Jonathan at the helm, wending his way back into the city diagonally down Milwaukee Avenue.

“Those things don’t smell right. You say they are hamburgers?”

“With steamed onions.” I tried to portion the White Castle into four bites, though I could easily have taken it in three. The burger immediately formed a dense ball in my mouth that I chewed and swallowed and replaced with another bite.

“Do you mind if I roll down the window?”

“Mmm-nm.” I would have said an actual word, but my mouth was glued shut with steamed bun.

Jonathan pressed the button, his window glided down and a bracing gust of winter air filled the car.

“Mnn!” I said, pointing at a cash station. I swallowed. “Pull through there. We’ll draw from my account.” Which hopefully had something in it. I thought it did. I hadn’t bounced a check in ages.

I wedged the White Castle sack onto the dash and struggled to free my wallet as Jonathan pulled up to the machine. I managed to pull a muscle in my shoulder before I finally got my card out. “Here.” I handed him the card. “The pin number’s 5528.”

He looked at the card, and then at the machine. Then he looked back at me.

“Put the card in that slot. There’s a little diagram right there that shows you where the magnetic strip should go.”

He turned the card around a couple of times and then successfully slotted it.

“On the keypad, enter the pin number, 5528. Now press checking. Now withdraw. Okay, and now key in \$500. That’s the most you can do in one day. Tomorrow we’ll do it again.” If there was any money left.

There was a long, ominous beep, and the little money door stayed shut.

“Okay. Maybe you should do a balance check first. See the command? Yeah, there. Okay, now the PIN again, 5528.”

Jonathan hit the keys, and the machine started to beep continually.

“Try it again,” I said. “5528.”

“I did it right.”

“Just try it again.”

He squinted at the readout screen. “It says ‘Error—contact bank.’”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

I leaned over him, shoving him out of the way and hitting the horn in the process. I struggled to pull back from the horn but my coat was wedged between my thigh and the seat and seemed to be dragging my arm toward the steering wheel. Jonathan shrank back into the driver’s seat and was very, very still.

I jabbed the PIN number into the machine, but the readout simply said, “Insert card.” It beeped. I punched in the PIN again. “Insert card.”

“I did it right,” said Jonathan, very quietly, in my ear.

“Son of a bitch!”

The Audi’s horn punctuated my shouting with a few more beeps.

“Mark.” Jonathan disengaged me from the awkward lunge I was in and settled me back into the passenger seat. “I don’t think this is an accident.”

“You think it’s Lagos?”

“László.”

“Whatever his name is. How did he make the ATM eat my card?”

The car behind us beeped, just a little tap, but enough to make me want to go out there, tear the door open and drag the driver out by his hair. And I didn’t care if he was an eighty-year-old man with a heart condition or not. Jonathan pulled away and eased into a parking spot.

“He must have been planning this for a very long time.”

I sank into the seat, and the White Castles turned into rocks in my stomach. I felt so violated. “Should we try using the ATM in the lobby?” I asked him. “I could get a cash advance on my Visa.”

Jonathan watched the car that had been behind us pull away. “I don’t think so. The machine worked for the other car. Maybe you should call the bank before you risk having your Visa ‘eaten’ too.”

I unplugged the phone from the charger, gave it a good swab with a Virusol wipe, turned my credit card over and dialed the 800 number.

A series of strange tones followed. “We’re sorry. Your GoToPhone account has been cancelled. Please visit your local GoTo dealer if you wish to reactivate.”

The phone fell from my hand.

“Jesus Christ.”

Jonathan put his gloved hand on my knee. I felt his eyes boring into the side of my face. “What is it?”

“The phone. He killed the fucking phone.”

“Shh. Mark, be calm. We will figure this out.”

“Figure what out? How much money do we have?”

“I have a little over a hundred dollars left...”

“That won’t even buy you blood!”

“Mark.” He patted my hand awkwardly. “And another thousand hidden in the car.”

“When did you hide money in the car?”

“I hid many things in the car, in case I ever needed to run. Only I wish I prepared better for you.” He turned away from me and his dark hair hid his eyes. “I only made ready for myself.”

“That’s fine—shit, that’s great. You’re the one who’s sick, not me. You’re the one who needs the blood and the UV protection.”

“But your wipes, we have so few.”

“We can just grab them at any gas station. Look, if you’ve got a thousand dollars, we can go to Mrs. Jeffers, get a couple days’ worth of blood from her, then take a long ride somewhere—Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin, I don’t care—hole up in a room and figure out how to get away from this freak.”

Jonathan dropped his head, pinched the bridge of his nose between his gloved thumb and forefinger, and stayed that way.

I rolled down my window and tossed the sack of White Castle wrappers out into a snow-covered trash bin. “Okay.” I tried my best to sound efficient and professional. “Take a right out of this parking lot, go straight until you come to Pulaski, and take another right.”

Jonathan sighed.

“Did you get that? Take a right...”

He straightened up and glanced at me. In the light thrown off by the neon ATM sign, I noticed fine lines on either side of his mouth that suddenly made him look much older than his vampirically perpetual appearance of twenty-five. “Yes. I understand.” He looked up into the rearview and backed out of the parking spot.

“You know, I’m not necessarily the victim of some kind of credit card conspiracy here,” I told Jonathan. “The machine could have eaten my card because I was overdrawn.”

“Pff. You?”

“I’m just saying, it’s within the realm of possibi—”

“You are the most cautious man I have ever met. Your checking account was not overdrawn.”

So. There were a few things Jonathan didn’t know about me, either. Unfortunately, my secrets weren’t nearly as interesting as his. They involved overdrawn checking accounts and really dusty apartments, not cold-war Hungarian love affairs and ballistics training.

It really hit home how topsy-turvy my life had gotten when pulling up in front of Mrs. Jeffers’ building caused me to fill with relief, rather than apprehension. “I don’t think you should come with me,” I told Jonathan.

“It isn’t safe for you to be alone.”

“You left me alone in the motel.”

“That was the motel. We were in...where were we? Niles? Anyway, he couldn’t have known where we would go. But he probably knows this place. You come here every week.”

“But I take dozens of different routes to get here.” If Jonathan were someone else, I would have touched him at that point. A hand on the arm, a pat on the back of the hand. But I was more accustomed to not touching him, and anything else would’ve felt forced and contrived. “And here’s the thing. She’s such a bigot, I think she’s less likely to help us out if she sees you.”

“I would take that chance. I am not leaving you alone, not here.”

“Whatever. It’s your...diet.”

He glanced around. “I’ll wait in the hall. She won’t even know I’m there.”

His jumpiness made me edgy, and I took an extra-cautious look around. But her building still looked like her building, and the kid sitting on the stoop down the block was a pretty regular fixture too. The cars—were they the same cars? Heck, I didn’t know. Suddenly all those routes Jonathan had made me take didn’t seem like nearly enough precautions.

Jonathan reached over, opened the glove box and pulled out the Audi’s manual. You know, that leather-bound thing you don’t look at unless you need to program the clock? He flipped to the back and tugged a crisp, flat stack of hundreds from the point where the book was inserted into the binding. “Here.” He handed me five. “We’ll each keep half, to be safe.”

After what had happened to my ATM card, I wanted to stash each bill somewhere different on my person “just to be safe.” But I also didn’t want to be found lurking around in front of Mrs. Jeffers’ apartment acting suspicious, so I just put the bills in my wallet instead of secreting the money in the pockets that held the flasks of oil and water.

“Well,” said Jonathan, again with a stilted pat to my knee, “lead the way.”

It felt all wrong to be getting out of the passenger’s side at Mrs. Jeffers’ house, but I figured the new seating arrangement was something I’d need to start getting used to if the two of us would keep playing Starsky and Hutch. I walked down the alley and let myself in to the perpetually ajar side door. The buzzing fluorescent overheads were on, most of them lit this time, and I held my breath as I took the short flight of steps down to the dim, shadowed hallway that led to her basement hovel.

Something hissed behind me and I jumped, but it was only Jonathan.

He hissed?

Couldn’t think too hard about it—didn’t want to. Something scuttled in the shadows in front of me and I froze. Jonathan eased me against the wall with a touch to my shoulder and slipped past me. He tightrope-walked up to Mrs. Jeffers’ front door, gave it a little push, and went in with his elbow tucked close to his ribs and his gun hand beside his jaw like a TV detective. I wished I hadn’t come up with the Starsky and Hutch reference earlier. It was disturbing on too many levels.

My feet held their ground even more stubbornly as the door sighed open at his touch, because Mrs. Jeffers’ door just didn’t do that. Mrs. Jeffers’ door mocked you as you stood there with your fistful of money and waited for her fat ass to open it. Her door jingled with five separate locks when she deigned to

let you in. And it slammed itself behind you as if to tell you it'd be just as happy if you never showed your face there again. It never simply yielded.

Something else low to the floor darted toward me—obviously a cat, and yet I jumped out of my skin anyhow. It didn't want anything to do with me, though. It kept going, its paws thumping their way up the stairs as it escaped. I'd always thought cats were supposed to be quiet.

At least it broke my inertia and allowed me to start moving. I was too scared to close my eyes but didn't want to look, either. So I settled for squinting, which accomplished nothing but a heightening of the hangover headache that throbbed at the back of my skull.

The smell of cat piss greeted me a few steps farther from her apartment than usual. Mrs. Jeffers' half-open door seemed insubstantial without her malignant bulk bodily blocking the view of her apartment, behind it. I wondered how long it had been open.

I winced as I set my foot down inside the door, then quickly followed up with my other foot. I would rather have been either out or in, than half-and-half, exposed to both the evil that might be lurking outside and whatever probably waited within.

"Mark, come here," called Jonathan. I glanced across the combo living/dining room and over a counter that led to the kitchen. Cats of every color and pattern milled around the edges of the room, a few of them mewling, at us or at each other, I had no idea. And between me and the kitchen, sprawled in a wedgewood blue recliner with shredded arms, lay Mrs. Jeffers. There was a small red stain on the front of her faded pink terrycloth bathrobe. Thankfully, her eyes were closed. I don't think I could have handled both dead and open-eyed.

I hastened past Mrs. Jeffers' body and into the kitchen.

I'm not sure if the room was normally a wreck, or if it just looked that way because Jonathan had started searching it. A black cat meowed at me from where he sat in the sink. A kitten with orange stripes was attempting to step from the countertop into an open junk drawer, but he thought better of it and pulled his paw back, and instead gazed into the drawer longingly. A pair of tabbies wove through Jonathan's ankles as he stared into the refrigerator. Round kibble that'd been spilled over the floor crunched beneath my feet. "Does she keep the blood in here?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've never gotten past the hallway."

Jonathan leaned into the fridge and began throwing opened cans of cat food loosely covered with tin foil over his shoulder. A few cats came running in while others approached more cautiously and sniffed at the floor. "Don't touch anything unless you've got gloves."

I stared around me, fighting the urge to vomit. The smell of cat was so thick I could taste it on the back of my pasty tongue. I owned at least a half-dozen pairs of gloves. Not one of them was on me. The pair I'd been wearing the night before was still in the car. "No gloves."

Jonathan pulled his head out of the refrigerator. “Plastic bags.” He nodded at one of the open drawers. “Put a couple of those on your hands and take what you need from her bathroom. You don’t have to worry about the virus here—I just don’t want you to leave any fingerprints.”

More cats surged in over the countertop, and I resisted the compulsive urge to count them. I stepped over a series of water dishes, past a torn throw rug and around a lamp that had toppled onto its side. I pulled the freezer storage bags over my hands and tried one door. It led to a closet filled with canned food, both human and feline, and about a dozen two-packs of paper towels.

The next door opened into a tiny bathroom taken up mostly by a clawfoot tub and a shower curtain suspended from the ceiling. The tub was the perfect place for an axe murderer or a psychotic vampire to be hiding, but it turned out to be empty of everything but a small puddle of urine.

I rifled through the medicine cabinet and found aspirin, toothpaste and a prescription bottle of antibiotics made out to Claudine Jeffers. Her name was Claudine? She’d looked more like a Shirley to me.

The final door, which led to the bedroom, was already open. At least a dozen cats lounged on the otherwise neatly made bed, and three more sat on a high, street-level windowsill, staring out. Another ran under the bed when I entered the room.

In addition to the real cats, faded Polaroid photos of cats were propped against all the lamps and knickknacks. The eyes of the photographed cats all glowed satanically. Had *Art in America* needed to use some serious Photoshop mojo to keep Jonathan’s retinas from doing the same thing?

A loud cracking sound in the kitchen brought me running back. “False bottom drawer,” Jonathan said. He drew out a baggie full of syringes. “She would not get in so much trouble if she claimed they were pets.”

“I think they actually were her pets.” I wondered which one was purring.

“There are no reserves.” Jonathan gestured at the refrigerator. “She must have bled them right before you were scheduled to pick up.”

“In case she was raided.”

“Yes.”

I stared at the varicolored animals milling around us and realized I’d already forgotten what the two new cats looked like. “So...I guess we try to bleed them?”

“Do you know how?”

“No idea.”

“Then hold a cat,” said Jonathan, “and I will find a vein.”

“Do you even know how much to draw?” Yes, there was a dead woman about four feet away from me. A murder victim, no less. But I wasn’t sure I could handle holding down a squirming animal while Jonathan drained it dry.

“Let me get the needle in first.”

I made a grab for a cat but it eeled away from me. “Take the bags off your hands,” Jonathan said. “I don’t think they can dust the cats for fingerprints.”

I thought maybe he was teasing, but his face looked pretty grim. I suppose if I were starving and I had to figure out how to get hamburger from a herd of cattle, I wouldn’t be very happy, either. I shook the bags off my hands and grabbed another cat, nabbing a larger one in hopes that it could spare more blood. Was this kitty one of the newbies? I couldn’t tell.

I held it with the lower end of its black and white body dangling, its front feet sticking out straight. “Is this okay?”

“I think so.” Jonathan slid off his right glove and uncapped a syringe. “I will look for an artery in the thigh. I’ve dressed conies, and that’s where they have a large one.” I had no idea what a cony was or what it would wear, but when he clenched the syringe sideways between his teeth I figured it wasn’t the time or place to ask.

He held the cat’s lower leg open, stroking the fur aside with his bare hand. He seemed to find the artery quickly, and I thought the cat was taking it all pretty well. Until the needle hit, anyway.

The cat went berserk, claws flailing. It wrenched itself from my grasp and flew over the countertop and into the living room.

Jonathan’s mouth dropped open in shock. He yanked his bare hand up and it sprayed blood. “Get back,” he said urgently. “Don’t touch it. Don’t touch anything.”

He pulled his remaining glove off with his teeth and carefully pressed his wound shut. I watched him, dry-mouthed now with more than just the hangover, trying to recall if I’d felt the wet mist of bodily fluids hitting me.

“We cannot do this.” He stepped over the kibble to the sink. The basin was now unoccupied. “It’s too dangerous.”

I would have agreed with him, but I wouldn’t have been able to hear my own voice over the pounding in my ears.

Jonathan turned the faucet on with his elbow and rinsed the deep scratch. A scab-like clot had already formed across the back of his hand, curving around his wrist. Vampires might not heal as quickly as they did in the old Hammer films, but they sure can clot. He scrubbed the excess drying blood from his arm with a paper towel, and then shoved the damp, pulpy blob into his pocket.

“There might be blood on my coat.” I hated how cowardly my voice sounded.

“We need to get out of here.” Jonathan picked up the syringe, the baggies and the aspirin I’d left on the counter. “Don’t touch your coat or anything else. Just go outside and we’ll put your coat in the trunk.”

“But then I won’t be able to touch anything in the trunk.”

Jonathan grabbed something out of one of the open drawers, then shoved a box of garbage bags into my hands. “Take this.”

“This isn’t antimicrobial. It’d be like trying to carry sand in a mesh bag.”

“Mark, do you want the police to find you in an apartment with a hundred cats and a dead woman? Take it and go. It’s the best we can do.”

Jonathan put his gloves back on, then picked up everything we’d touched, crammed it into one of the baggies I’d worn on my hands and hustled me towards the door. “We will get something at the store. That spray you like, we will get that.”

“Virusol Power Pump.” I wondered if it would even be effective against something as potent as vampire blood, and then decided it would probably discolor the wool.

I let him propel me down the narrow alleyway with a hand between my shoulder blades, and pull me back short of the street with a handful of my tainted coat. He slipped by me and checked both ways, the tip of the gun poking out from his coat sleeve.

I was busy staring at a silver SUV parked in front of the building. I thought that was where we’d been parked.

“All clear.” He pulled me out of the alleyway by my sleeve, stopped...and looked baffled.

I took a couple of steps toward the SUV and froze as I realized that it could be full of crazed Hungarian vampires. Jonathan continued to creep forward. He peeked into the vehicle, circled it and glanced around at the nearby cars.

Finally, he looked down, and just stayed that way. I stiffened my upper lip, then went and joined him, straining to see what he saw in the shadow thrown by the SUV where it blocked the streetlight. I picked out a small glitter, and then another. Broken safety glass, like a window had been smashed.

“He has taken the car,” Jonathan said.

Chapter Eight

“Why didn’t the alarm go off?” I said. Because I believe in things. Like death and taxes and car alarms.

“It was probably disconnected long ago.”

A shiver ran down my spine at the thought of this László person touching the car I drove, jimmying things open and snipping wires. And of him lurking around outside my apartment. Or staring at me while I looked at hoagie-flavored water in the grocery store. I looked for that kid who’d been squatting a couple doors down, maybe to ask him if the car thief looked anything like Dracula, but the kid had disappeared somewhere into the night, just like the Audi. “Come on,” said Jonathan, “we’re too exposed. Follow me.”

He took me by the sleeve and dragged me down the alley next door to Mrs. Jeffers’ place. A silhouette of a cat darted by the back of the alley. Jonathan led me on a serpentine jog through the dumpsters, stopping just briefly at a residential red bio-dumpster with a one-way door to dispose of the used paper towel from his pocket.

“I should pitch my coat,” I said. And then I vowed not to talk because it was painfully obvious from the way my breath kept catching that I was beyond out of shape.

“No, you’re too broad across the back to wear mine. We’ll get the Virusol—have a little faith.”

“I wasn’t asking for yours.”

“Ah. There’s a good one.” At first I thought he was mocking what I’d just said, but then I saw he had his eye on a car. He approached an older four-door sedan, something my dad would drive, and pulled the door handle. “Try your side,” he told me, snapping at the back driver’s side handle.

I tried the passenger side. The back door was open. “Wonderful,” he said. He leaned in, unlocked the front door, climbed inside, sat in the passenger seat and tugged off his right glove. He leaned across and grasped the ignition.

“Um. I think you need a key for that.”

And while I was being a smartass, Jonathan snapped off the keyed part with his bare hand.

“You just—”

“The virus,” he said quietly, rifling through his pockets. “It heightens your strength, after some years.”

“Well, that’s what they say.” My bruised forearm throbbed in sympathy. “But I never thought you were so...I mean, you never really act like...”

He located his useless credit card, stuck the corner into the mechanism and turned it. The car gave a few chugs, sputtered, and started right up.

“I thought you had to pull wires out to hotwire a car.”

“This is faster than hotwiring.” Jonathan pushed up the center armrest and slid into the driver’s seat. “Get in.”

I figured I could ask him about where he’d learned to steal a car later. Once we’d actually gotten away with it.

I climbed into the car. I should have felt guilty. But mostly, I felt scared. Suffering my hangover, wearing dirty clothes, having my coat sprayed with V-positive blood and then being toted around by Jonathan like an old piece of luggage was wearing thin. Fast.

“Look,” I said. “We need to talk—”

“Four hours until dawn. Do you think we have time to stop in the Russian neighborhood before we buy food and blood at the grocery store, and still find a hotel that will accept cash?”

The analytical chunk of my brain clicked into play before I could finish complaining. If he knew of a Russian who could find him some cat, I was all for making a stop. “It depends how long you spend there.”

“As much as an hour and a half.”

“We can’t go too far outside the city for the hotel, then, but I think we’ll make it. The food and blood is easy.”

We drove in silence for a while, the headlights of oncoming SUVs temporarily blinding me as they passed. Did things like that bother Jonathan, or did the virus, or maybe the cat blood, make any difference? I didn’t know. But of course it seemed too awkward to simply ask him.

“I should see the Russians first,” he said finally. “In case they drag their heels and force me to talk to one, then another, until dawn. Can you go without food?”

If it were anyone but Jonathan asking that question, I’d assume they were going to follow up with a crack about my gut, and maybe a reference to a camel for good measure. Not him. He was too damn polite. “Sure.”

“Then we will go and make some new Russian friends.”

I leaned against the passenger window and let myself look at him through mostly shut eyelids. He seemed unusually swarthy, and then I realized he had the beginnings of a five-o’clock shadow, which I’d never seen on him before. It looked like a pretty formidable one too.

I stroked my chin and felt some growth there, as well. At least I wasn’t stuck with an outrageously red beard like some other blonds I knew. I wondered if a couple days’ growth of beard made me look rugged or just hung over.

Jonathan didn’t seem to need directions from me, which was just as well. I dozed a little as he drove, starting to wakefulness whenever a pothole jostled my head against the window. I came fully awake when

Jonathan killed the engine, and opened my eyes to him slipping his unconventionally useful credit card into his pocket.

“Do you want me to wait out here?” I asked.

“We stick together from now on.” He spoke quietly, but he stared me right in the eye as he said it. Be still, my beating heart. “What would have happened if one of us was in the car alone at Mrs. Jeffers’ apartment?”

“Point taken.”

As I opened the ungainly, rust-bottomed car door, I noticed the trilingual signs all around me: Laundromat—*Lavanderia*—and something else with letters that looked all backwards and strange, which I presumed was Russian.

I followed Jonathan down a gangway between a bakery and an apartment building. “They probably don’t speak much English,” he said, “so you won’t need to worry about what to say.”

The guy who couldn’t answer his own phone was telling me to shut up and act dumb. Cute.

Jonathan gave a few sharp knocks to the bakery’s back door. A beanpole of a teenaged boy answered. He was dressed all in white, with a long apron that hung down below his knees.

Jonathan said a fairly lengthy something in another language that was definitely not Hungarian.

The boy brightened right up and ushered us in.

I nearly fainted at the smell of baking bread. Yeasty. Floury. I think I even detected slight notes of delectable sourness and a whiff of rye. A twenty-something redheaded girl wielding a giant wooden paddle looked us over, and her eyes lingered on Jonathan. For all she knew, he was her age. And I was the middle-aged guy bringing up the rear.

“Get a bread,” I whispered.

Jonathan said something else in Russian and the teenager flashed crooked teeth at me in a wide smile, then led us down a narrow hall.

Well. The Russians weren’t so scary after all. Though I hadn’t expected them to be bakers, and was beginning to doubt the whole Russian blood-dealer theory. I wondered how Jonathan was coping with the overpowering aroma of fresh-baked bread when he couldn’t eat solid food at all and was starving for blood. If we weren’t at the bakery to score blood, then what? Maybe Jonathan wanted a certain kind of oil. But that didn’t make sense either, since I’d been feeding him peanut oil for years, and that was as easy to get as Virusol.

The teenager rapped on a door to an office, then squeezed by us to get back to the kitchen. Someone called out to us in Russian, and we went in.

The smell of freshly baked bread was dispelled by a cloud of cigarette smoke. A wide, gray-haired, substantial-looking man with a cigarette hanging from between his lips gestured for us to come in, and Jonathan approached while I dawdled by the door.

They talked together in Russian for a while. I made up some pleasantries in my head as they went along. *Nice weather we're having. Sure, if you like freezing rain. So how long have you been a vampire? Oh, a gentleman never tells. Well, you look pretty fit. Yes, the virus'll give you the outward appearance of health like that...*

"Mark."

I snapped back into the present. The Russian was unrolling a black nylon tool holder on his desk. It was full of guns.

Suddenly the Russian bakers didn't seem quite so innocuous.

Jonathan talked some more in Russian and the smoking man pulled out some boxes. He handed one to Jonathan, who opened it up and tapped a couple of bullets onto his palm.

"Act very interested in the derringer," Jonathan murmured.

I peeked over his shoulder and looked over the dozen or so handguns spread on the desk. None of them had "derringer" engraved on them that I could see. "Details?"

"Pearl handle."

"What a nice gun." I leaned over it and did my best to control the level of sarcasm in my voice. "It's so...petite."

Negotiations resumed again in Russian, two more boxes of bullets appeared from behind the desk, and the baker-slash-arms dealer held the derringer out to me, bottom first.

"Take it," said Jonathan, "and give him four hundred dollars."

I accepted the tiny gun from the Russian, while I wondered how I was supposed to get my billfold out with a gun in my hand. As tiny and prissy as the thing was, it still felt harder and heavier than anything I cared to hold. I stuck it in my coat pocket and paid the man.

He brightened and held up a finger. He yanked open his top desk drawer, rifled through a bunch of pens and pencils, then came up with a half-dozen bullets, which he pressed into my palm, nodding.

"Thank you ever so much," I said, and he kept on nodding. I stuck the bullets in my pocket. The gun dealer said something to me.

"He says you're very tall." Jonathan pocketed his box of bullets.

"How observant. Can we leave now?"

Jonathan said his goodbyes in Russian, smiling and bowing, and prodded me to get a move on. "You could have told me we were buying guns," I whispered, as we made our way down the narrow hall that felt twice as long as it had on the way in.

"I only wanted to buy rounds for the Ruger, but once we got in, it would be insulting not to take a gun after he offered."

"Rounds for the Ruger" sounded like a bad musical, or maybe a board game, but I refrained from bringing any more attention to my own naiveté. As the hallway opened into the kitchen, something grabbed

me by the arm, and I jumped. But it was just the teenaged boy, with a white paper bag in his hand. He handed it to me.

Oh yeah. Bread. “Thanks,” I said weakly.

“No problem.” Heavily accented, but definitely English.

Great. They spoke English. Why was it that suddenly nothing was like it seemed anymore? Not only that, but maybe nothing ever had been. The bakeries where I used to pick up a cherry-topped babka on Sunday mornings sold guns in back. The painter with the dreamy eyes turned out to be perfectly at home buying those guns from the Russian mob. And now I had a gun in my pocket. A sissy gun with a pearl handle.

Jonathan cat-walked to the end of the alley, then went stock-still and scanned the street. I caught the black gleam of the Ruger protruding from his coat sleeve. When he saw it was clear, he slunk around to the driver’s side of the car while I thrust myself into the passenger’s seat with more force than was strictly necessary. He started the car with the corner of the credit card and pulled away from the curb. “Why don’t you eat?” he said. “You probably have low blood sugar.”

Oh God, could he smell my blood chemistry? Or was he reading the way I’d gone quiet and sulky? Either way, it meant that Jonathan was a heck of a lot more aware of me than I’d ever realized—and that realization rocked my world just as hard as the thought of being able to score bullets with my apple turnovers.

If I was hungry, what about him? He had to be famished. He hadn’t had any oil that day, and no blood, either, so he probably felt like crap—and if he didn’t get some blood soon, he’d be in trouble.

“Should I go back and buy some oil from that kid?” I offered.

“No. It was animal fat. What is the word? Lard. It would not stay down.”

I opened the bag and a waft of warm, fresh-baked bread filled the car. My mouth started watering. His probably did too. Except he couldn’t have any. Ever.

I scootched over toward the passenger door as far as I could, but it didn’t help. The entire car smelled like steaming-hot, succulent, perfectly baked, tender, crusty bread. And I was ravenous. I tore off a hunk and stuffed it into my mouth. “I’m sorry,” I said, even as I did it. It was the best bread I’d ever tasted. Lard and all.

He stared over at me for a moment, disarmingly swarthy in his five-o’clock shadow. He didn’t look disgusted with me—and I could’ve come up with a whole laundry list of reasons why he should have been. He didn’t look terrified, either. Which I’m sure I did—terrified and confused. He just looked like Jonathan, with tousled hair and a scruff of beard. Handsome. And calm. “Tell me the way to the store. We will make it before dawn if we hurry.”

I looked around and got my bearings. “Go to the next light and hang a left.”

Chapter Nine

After so many years of being coy about shopping for a V-positive boss, I was twitchy about marching straight past the produce displays and into the vampire aisle. Jonathan didn't have a problem with it, though.

Even with his hair tangled and his long, black coat dusted with cat hair, road salt and flour, he still looked incredible. Maybe even more so, because being worn around the edges, rough and unshaven, seemed to flatter him. His perfect vampire skin was flawless in the fluorescent grocery store light.

The other late-night, early-morning shoppers stared at him, really stared. But he just breezed by them with his peculiar gait, eyes lighting here and there as he tugged on his gloves.

A girl with a long blonde ponytail who was stocking the shelves in the second aisle wore turquoise gloves and a matching hospital-type mask. She had lean, rangy limbs, carefully covered from neck to toe in clingy, body-conscious fabric, cut in a style that only a vampire or a gymnast could pull off. I was guessing she wasn't a gymnast.

"Excuse me," said Jonathan. "Could you show me the V-positive products, please?"

I wanted to be angry. How many years had I bought that damn oil one or two liters at a time and left all the interesting flavored water untouched on the shelves? But his question really seemed to have made her day.

It didn't matter that I couldn't see most of her face. Her bright blue eyes shone over the mask, and their corners crinkled in a genuine smile. "You have such a beautiful accent! Did you just arrive from...where are you from?"

"Poland."

Interesting choice. I supposed I'd buy it if I didn't know any better.

The ponytailed vampiress gave a squeal of delight, only slightly muffled by her mask. "Just wait 'til you see what we carry."

I lumbered along behind them feeling particularly paunchy and slow.

"Chicago's a test market, you know." We turned the corner and the red-stickered shelves leapt out at us. "We get all kinds of good stuff before the rest of the country. Us, and uh, Dallas, I think."

So. I was finally allowed to stare at the shelves. But I didn't touch anything. Not without my gloves.

"This is really good." She held up an opaque white bottle with a tiny red Coca-Cola swoosh in the corner. "It's mostly soybean oil, but it tastes a little bit like a vanilla milkshake."

“Really. You’ve tried it?”

“Uh-huh. It’s best if you let it get really cold.”

Jonathan accepted the “milkshake”. He also let her select several waters for him, including French-onion-soup flavor, a NASA-like pouch of synthetic blood and a big bottle of V-strength sunblock. “And did you need any vitamins for your...?”

Her animated eyes came to rest on me for the first time during the conversation and a blush spread up over her mask. I stared at her, wondering exactly how she’d planned to finish the sentence.

I chose that moment to demonstrate my meager knowledge of Hungarian to Jonathan. “Little pet dog?”

He bit down on his lower lip. I’d almost made him laugh. And a big old whoop, too, not just a polite titter. “My bloodbonded does not speak English. We have vitamins, thank you.”

Vampire sorority girl’s shoulders relaxed visibly and her voice got phenomenally perky in a very relieved way. “Okay, great. Anything else I can help you with?”

“Some Virusol should do it.” Jonathan’s eyes flickered over to mine while he gnawed away on the inside of his cheek.

“That’s in the cleaning section. Aisle seven.”

I think I kind of floated to aisle seven. And I don’t much remember where the various bizarre bags of almonds and snack cakes came from that rolled by at the checkout. Or paying for them. Or even getting in the car. Because ever since the movie *Bloodbond* came out, that word had become the most romantic label anyone could give their partner. It didn’t just mean, “I love you.” It meant, “I’d die for you.”

Well, John Travolta died after he caught the virus from Demi Moore in *Bloodbond*, anyway.

I stared at Jonathan’s profile as he hopped on the expressway and headed northwest. He was still smirking a little. Eventually he glanced over at me. “What?” he said. “You started it.”

I just shook my head.

“And your Magyar accent was atrocious.”

He looked back at the road, since some knucklehead who felt the need to go ninety miles an hour was coming up on our left. I could tell by the way Jonathan’s jaw worked under his still-darkening five-o’clock shadow that he was trying not to smile. Damn, why did he have to be so handsome? And why’d he need to bring up *Bloodbond*? I’ve always been a sucker for movies like that. Especially with John Travolta.

The vampire virus was not romantic, I reminded myself. And my coat was probably contaminated. That notion was fairly effective as a mental cold shower. At least in as far as I wouldn’t need to adjourn to the bathroom directly after we checked in to the motel and take matters into my own hands.

I couldn’t help but watch him watching the road, and maybe pretend for a few minutes that we had one of those frilly, romantic bloodbonds, where we made up for the fact that we couldn’t even kiss by

calling each other fifty times a day and writing embarrassing poetry and picking up those silly little presents for each other “just because.”

I shifted in the seat and tore my attention from his chiseled profile to focus on a pair of cigarette burns on the dash that looked like fang marks. Not good. My glance dropped to the molded plastic lettering fixed to the glove box. It said Dodge. I was riding in a rusty maroon Dodge with a gun in my pocket and my vampiric fake boyfriend at the wheel to get a cash-paid fleabag motel room out by O’Hare.

What would Aunt Trixie say?

~ * ~

In Lincolnwood, a suburb directly northwest of the city, there’s a diagonal street that’s home to a strip of odd-looking motels, all built in the fifties and sixties, many of them now home to ladies of dubious employ. I think the night manager of the motel we randomly picked was a vampire.

No credit card? No problem! There was even a UV-proof room that just happened to be available.

“This is good.” Jonathan put his bag of V-groceries down on a chair upholstered in red crushed velvet. I think he meant the sunproofing and not the Count Orlock décor. “I wish we could stay here for a little while. Rest, you know?”

I stared at the gigantic, red-shrouded California King in the middle of the room. No pair of doubles here.

Rest. Right.

“But it’s not safe,” he went on. “Maybe we should try to get farther away tomorrow. Make sure we have lost him. Figure out what we’re going to do.”

I hunted down some antiviral hand sanitizer from our bags, then wandered away from him and into the bathroom. I scrubbed down my hands, taking care to work the soap under each fingernail, then rinsed, repeated, dried, and gave them a liberal going-over with the gel. I wished I’d thought to grab some purple disposable gloves at the store, but I’d been too busy mooning over Jonathan to keep my wits about me.

I wondered if I trusted Jonathan to clean my coat for me. I supposed if I were going to keep casting him as my knight in shining armor, I’d better try.

“Do you think you can help me out with the Virusol?” I asked him.

“How?”

“My coat.”

“Let me see that in the light,” he said, angling me toward a tassle-trimmed bedside lamp. “I don’t think it actually hit you.”

Could Jonathan see a fine spray of blood on a black wool coat? Probably so. He could distinguish about fifty shades of black, maybe more.

“But I suppose we should be safe. Hold out your arms.” I did, and he slid my coat off and brought it into the bathroom. I grabbed something random from my grocery bag—donut stix—and went to lean in the doorway, all the while striving to banish images of him undressing me from my overactive imagination.

He’d draped my coat over the bathroom sink and was sitting on the edge of the tub, studying the back of the Virusol container. “There’s chlorine in this product,” he said, frowning. “I think it will ruin your coat. What about your hand gel?”

It hadn’t occurred to me to use the hand gel on anything other than my hands. “Try it.”

I consumed three packets of donut stix and a small mesh bag of tiny Gouda cheeses while Jonathan systematically disinfected my coat with a gel-soaked washcloth. And while he worked, his face set itself into those familiar lines I knew so well, straight and purposeful. As if he were painting again.

I needn’t have worried about him doing a thorough job. He was even more meticulous than I would have been.

“There we have it.” He sandwiched the coat between layers of towels. “We will see how it dries.”

“Thank you.”

He gave me a little “it was nothing” type shrug and then went to raid his own bag of goodies. I blanched, realizing that he was probably fainting from hunger and I’d made cleaning my coat the first order of business, but he didn’t seem perturbed about it. He’d opened an apple-cider-flavored water, and he sipped it carefully while he scrutinized the label of the synthetic blood.

“If you were going to take a shower,” he said, “perhaps you should do it now. I may need some privacy to try this.”

And a handy toilet.

I accepted the invitation to shower first. Some stranger appeared in the mirror—certainly not me. He was wearing the peach-colored dress shirt and brown tweedy wool slacks I’d worn to work three days prior, but his hair was a wreck. I wondered if I could justify spending part of my remaining hundred dollars on a blow drier. The back of my hair curled weirdly when left to its own devices, and while I wouldn’t exactly say the top was thinning, it needed a little gel and TLC to look presentable.

And deodorant. I really needed deodorant. And a clean shirt. I stripped down and ran the shower, and shortly the mirror steamed up so I didn’t need to look at the scruffy guy with the weird hair anymore.

I needed underwear too. I really wanted to stuff my boxers in the garbage, but the idea of my unencumbered self rubbing freely against the inside of a pair of pants with no dry cleaning in their near future, stimulated by thoughts of rakish Jonathan calling me his bloodbonded, convinced me to keep the boxers.

I scrubbed them with a tiny bar of motel soap in the running shower and wrung them out as best I could, then draped them over a towel rack laid bare by the cleaning of my coat.

I kept my shower short, since Jonathan was probably waiting out in the bedroom with the patience of a saint to try his synthetic bag of blood. I tugged my pants on again, sans underwear, and congratulated myself on not throwing the offensive little garment away. Wool pants on bare skin aren't fun. I would've blown somebody for a broken-in pair of jeans.

"Sorry I took so long." I found that I felt weird about walking around with cuffs unbuttoned in front of Jonathan. Of all the silly things.

He was perched on the edge of the big red bed with the oil milkshake between his thighs, watching the early morning news on TV. "They found a body at Navy Pier, covered with bites."

"Nothing about Phil?"

Jonathan took a pull of his milkshake, shuddered a bit, and then sighed. "That was two days ago. Old news in this city." He stood and stretched, and his shirt hitched up to give me a tantalizing peek of his bare belly. I blinked, trying my best to dispel the image of the sleek six-pack with the line of dark hair that extended downward from his navel and disappeared into the waistband of his black jeans. Unfortunately, the image was burned into my brain as if I'd just tried to stare down the sun.

"We need clothes," I said, while my body told me I needed to hold him down and strip him naked. Or at least try to talk dirty for him while he stripped for me.

He nodded, heading toward the bathroom with an armload of bags and bottles. "Yes. Tomorrow."

The sound of the showerhead spraying against the tub enclosure started up, sputtering at first, and then growing steady. I couldn't help but listen for telltale noises of gagging that might easily accompany the initial encounter with synthetic blood, but Jonathan was obviously running the shower to spare me such intimate details.

A cheesy elderly actor hawked life insurance from the television set, and I lay back on the big red bed, all the way on the left-hand edge, wishing I'd scrubbed out my socks too. I strained to hear my own progress report of how things were shaping up in the bathroom, but heard nothing but the lulling sound of the shower spray.

The weatherman came on, predicting snow showers starting midday and bitter cold temperatures by nightfall. I imagined the big, white flakes floating around Jonathan and me against the black backdrop of the night sky like a giant snow globe.

Chapter Ten

I woke up in a room that was utterly dark except for a sliver of yellow light shining under a doorway to my right. I touched the blanket that covered my chest—flocked polyester. And the big red bed came back to me.

I groped the nightstand beside me until I found the ridiculous tasseled lamp and turned it on. Just as I found the lamp, the bathroom door swung open silently and Jonathan emerged with a heavy-duty garbage bag in his hand.

He had the top opening squeezed shut in his fist, while whatever he'd thrown away dangled there heavily at hip level. My first thought was that he had a wet ball of my clothes and was going to pitch them while I was asleep. But then I realized that I was wearing all of my clothes, everything except my coat and underwear, and my underwear was nowhere near that big or heavy. Thank God.

"What're you doing?" I wished I could spring to wakefulness a little more quickly.

"I'd hoped you wouldn't need to see." He placed the bag carefully beside the door. "But I couldn't...the synthetic blood does not agree with me."

"And?"

"And so, while you were sleeping, I found a cat."

I wondered for a second why he hadn't woken me up so we could try to bleed it. But then the lump in the garbage bag made sense. "Oh." I swallowed some bile.

I looked up at the clock. It read seven. I didn't know if it was morning or night.

"Don't look like that," Jonathan said. How did I look, exactly, other than confused? "I will start degenerating without it." He reached down, plucked my overcoat from the nest of towels, and shook it out. He was much more focused on the coat than he needed to be.

"Yes, I know." I wished it hadn't taken me so long to say something comforting back to him. But...a cat. If it were just anything else but a fuzzy little kitty cat. "Have you...have you tried other kinds?"

He slammed the coat over a none-too-sturdy desk and glared at me. "Would you like me to contaminate myself with the blood of prey animals? How long do you think we will survive against László without my reflexes?"

Jonathan didn't wait for me to answer. He scooped up the dead cat in the garbage bag and kicked the door shut behind him.

Of all the reasons to go through the effort and expense of drinking cat blood, the need to keep one step ahead of a predator—to keep from turning into prey—was the last reason I would’ve thought of. Dang. Would he have admitted as much to me four years ago, when he was stammering out the directions to Mrs. Jeffers’ house? I had no idea. But since I hadn’t had the cajones to ask, at least not until now, the point was moot.

According to *V Living*, the bovine blood on the market nowadays was a byproduct of the slaughter process that made White Castles available to the rest of us, something that used to get made into animal feed. Manufacturers tried sneaking chicken and turkey blood in there initially, but V-positives started spewing left and right. The birds were too genetically different from humans. The blood had to be mammalian.

Ideally, all vampires would drink human blood—though you can’t just pick up a six-pack at the store. Even so, it was a heck of a lot easier to score than cat blood—and it was technically legal to sell human blood, as long as it was your own. Legal, though not any classier than it had been before HHV, when winos would hit the blood banks for fifteen dollars and a cookie.

The going rate for a pint was around a grand, although no one vampire could drink it that fast. Even though blood was so precious, the blood banks still thrived, and not only from the after-hours sales that I’m sure they made. ACN listeners considered it their sacred duty to keep the coffers full, just in case a V-negative needed a surgical procedure that required a transfusion.

Jonathan could have afforded to pay off some stranger before, but not now. Not with the way our funds had dwindled.

Funny thing, human blood. So expensive, and yet so readily available. With enough fluids and good nutrition, one human donor could sustain one V-positive partner—especially if the donor was larger. That’s just how the math worked out.

The bloodbond.

It was possible to swap blood without all the trappings, of course. The bloodbond was a social thing, really. A custom. A way to compensate for not being able to have a sex life if your partner didn’t share the same HHV status as you. There had to be some sort of way for me to shoehorn that into conversation—to let Jonathan know that if he wanted to pick up a cheap phlebotomy rig and get his blood from me instead of chasing cats around, that I would consider it a matter of simple practicality, nothing more.

Right. I might as well offer him a hand job. The bloodbond was that intimate. Maybe more.

I swung my feet out of bed. I’d been lying on top of half the covers and the other half was folded over me. I had no idea where Jonathan had slept, if he’d even slept at all. I slipped into my shoes, crossed the room and opened the front door cautiously.

There was a window in the hallway. It was night after all. Jonathan leaned against the wall, taking a deep drag off a cigarette.

“You smoke?”

“I do tonight.”

Well. When in Rome... “Can I have one?” It’d been more than ten years for me, but since the American Lung Association had never mailed me a gold pin or anything, I figured, why not?

Jonathan parked his cigarette in an ashtray on the windowsill and took a pack of Camel Filters from beside it. He tapped the pack so that a cigarette poked out without him touching it. I drew the cigarette out of the pack, turning it between my fingers while he pulled a book of motel matches from his jeans pocket. I held the cigarette between my lips while he struck the match, his gaze lingering on me while he held the flame steady, and I inhaled.

He shook out the match and flicked it toward the ashtray, not bothering to step back from me. Not taking his eyes from mine.

I tilted my head just enough to aim the stream of smoke over his shoulder. “Funny, how some things just come back to you.”

“Some.” His slight Magyar accent made the word sound rounder than it had when I’d pronounced it.

God. If it were ten years ago, I would’ve just closed that stiflingly narrow gap between us and kissed him. Because ten years ago they didn’t sell blood at the grocery store, and HIV was the worst thing you had to worry about—and you couldn’t get that from kissing, at least not according to a majority of the authorities.

My hand, the one I wasn’t smoking with, drifted toward him anyway. Not that I wanted to touch the black silk shirt he’d been wearing for three days. But it could hover there.

I realized that if I had one single pair of my antimicrobial gloves left, I could touch him. Or even those purple no-latex disposables.

I took another drag and leaned back just slightly to avoid singeing his long hair with my cherry. “I really need to get some clothes.”

He nodded, then stepped back and picked up his own half-smoked cigarette. I almost followed him, step for step, to preserve that magnetic closeness we’d had. But since I couldn’t touch him, I figured it was probably for the best to tear that Band-Aid off in one sharp pull.

He took a drag, exhaled through his nose. Jesus. He even smoked sexy. As if I had any doubt that he would. “Then we will get clothing tonight.”

I needed to calm down. I imagined him in the bathroom, attempting to eat and drink some gaudily packaged crap from the store, throwing up, and then bleeding a dead cat, while the whole time my pathetic underpants bore silent witness from the towel rack. No, not a dead cat. Not...yet. It was enough to make me stop straining against my wool slacks.

Even so, I really did need clothes.

~ * ~

“We must change this license plate,” Jonathan said as he threw his plastic bag of V-food into the back seat. “Look for a car’s plate with most of the same letters in it. Then we can switch them, and if we’re lucky, no one will notice.”

We had about six hundred dollars between us and a desperate need of clothing, but I just couldn’t handle shopping at K-Mart. Not after two years of having my shirts custom made and my suits painstakingly tailored. “Where do you usually...um...shop for clothes?” I asked him.

The glare of a streetlamp played over Jonathan’s sculpted cheekbone as we passed. “Catalog.”

I sighed. Great. “There’s a Carson Pirie Scott in the Harlem-Irving Plaza.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I think we need to be more conservative with our money.” He wended down a curved side street that branched off Lincoln Avenue. “Motel rooms are expensive, and I worry that he is waiting around the bank to see if we will try to fix the credit card.”

“How many places can he be at once?” I demanded, hating that every time we said *he*, it could only mean one particularly nasty vampire.

“He has probably paid someone to watch the bank,” Jonathan said. He slowed to eye a license plate, then pulled away as a group of Hispanic men lounging around in the cold squinted at our car. “With cell phones it is hardly a problem.”

Oh, great. So he had minions.

Jonathan took a series of right-hand turns that popped us back out on Lincoln again, then hung a left on Lawrence. Neon signs flickered all around us, enticing us to try the pizza, the burritos, the wienerschnitzel, the pad thai. An overhead train had just pulled into the station a couple blocks south of us, maybe the same train we’d seen that night in the Loop. The night our whole world went to shit.

We passed a wide Korean restaurant with a laundromat attached to it, a KFC, and yet another pizza place. I felt my stomach rumbling and hoped it was quiet enough to have passed under Jonathan’s sonar. Eventually he pulled up in the parking lot of a Sears.

At least it was better than K-Mart.

“We will need to be quick.” He pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and handed it to me. “We haven’t been followed and there is no way for him to know we would choose this store, so it’s safe enough to split up here. Get what you need and meet me by this exit. And be sure to get some shoes you can run in.”

I looked down at my Tanino Criscis, now crusted with road salt, and hated that he’d even needed to tell me something so painfully obvious. The Sears was just like I’d remembered it inside from when my Grandpa Erik was still alive, and he brought me here to buy Toughskins for after-school roughhousing. I headed for the menswear.

Socks and underwear were my primary objective. Everywhere I looked, something was marked down, price slashed or specially priced. It was confusing, purchasing the items wadded together in plastic bags where I couldn't touch them or hold them up to get a look at them.

And then there were the jeans. I hated to admit that I probably couldn't fit comfortably into a thirty-six-inch waist, but there were only so many items I could bring inside the fitting rooms at once. Did I even have time to try on jeans? I struggled into the dressing rooms built for 1950's-sized people and power-modeled five pairs. And I'd been wrong. I did fit in thirty-sixes—the ones that said “relaxed fit” on them, which I believe means “middle-aged slob” in English.

Damn it. Where had I been while my body was hurtling towards forty?

I wended my way through the kids' section to the other side of the store and grabbed some cross-trainers, popping open a bag of athletic socks to try them on with. I looked like a big dork in them, but at that point I was so disgusted I bought them anyway.

I was on my way back to the door when I saw them—gloves. In their own little display, with a tag that seemed pretty discreet, especially for Sears with their Low, Low, Low prices. Antimicrobial certified, tensile strength of eighty-five pounds, guaranteed against tears for one year or we'll replace them free. Offer not valid in New York or Texas.

They cost eighty dollars, which was actually pretty cheap. If you wanted cute little turquoise gloves like the cheerleader in the grocery store, you'd be looking at three hundred, minimum. I scraped together my remaining money, scrounging for a five that I often kept in my breast pocket to use as a tip. I had enough—barely. I tore the package open as I strode by the portrait studio, and slid my hand into the glove.

The ring finger was a touch long. But other than that, it fit fine. Snug. Comfortable.

I imagined running that gloved hand over Jonathan's washboard abs and dropped my bag.

“There you are.” Jonathan scooped my gym shoes back into the bag they'd spilled from. “Oh, you found gloves—good.” He looked very intently at the single one I'd squirmed my hand into, and I was positive that I'd managed to broadcast my X-rated thoughts straight into his brain. “They look slippery.”

I nodded while he grabbed up the rest of my packages.

“Come on,” he said. “I spent more time than I wanted, but I found some good things in the hardware department.”

I'd been trying to find jeans that made my hips look smaller while Jonathan had been picking up something useful. Maybe the apocalypse just needed to happen so the universe could get Darwinian on my ass and eliminate me already.

Chapter Eleven

I guess the Dodge wasn't good enough for us anymore. Jonathan had scored the metal bar of a coat hanger from the dressing rooms. The same ones where I'd only gotten a good look at my flabby ass in a three-way mirror. "Start taking the plates off." He pulled a screwdriver from one of our shopping bags and handed it to me.

I hunkered down behind another unimpressive sedan. Before I'd gotten the first rusted screw loose, he'd stuck the wire down past the rubber molding on the window, and with a few flicks and a Magyar curse, was in.

"This one will work," he said, his breath streaming out in a long white plume as he crouched beside me. I was glad for the gloves, then, since it was probably less than ten degrees out and I didn't have valets parking my car for me anymore.

He pulled out a screwdriver of his own and set to work beside me. One of the screws made a high-pitched screech as he forced it out, and I flashed back to him breaking the ignition off the Dodge with his bare hand. "I need to eat," I said, and I wondered if he'd had his fill of oil that night.

"Once we are away from here." He waited for me to finish unscrewing the single bolt I'd been responsible for. "We will leave the front plates alone. Policemen don't stare at your plates from the front."

I supposed it was unlikely that anyone would be looking at both the fronts and the backs of the car at the same time, so I let him usher me over to another car a few doors down. This one's plates weren't quite so rusted, and I managed to unscrew two bolts in almost as little time as it took him. We swapped the plates, climbed into our new Ford Taurus and hit the road.

"We must decide on a plan," Jonathan said as he squinted like Clint Eastwood against the glare from the headlights of an oncoming bus. "We cannot keep driving aimlessly."

True enough. We'd run out of money before long. "What are our options?"

Jonathan pressed the lighter in and patted his pockets. "We go somewhere else, change our names and start fresh."

"With no money," I said.

"We will get our money from Murray."

Cold, hard cash. I didn't mind the sound of that. But still, where would we go? Chicago was one of the few cities in the Midwest where you didn't occasionally hear about a vampire getting lynched, albeit in a very hush-hush way that suggested the authorities were covering it up.

“What’s plan B?”

Jonathan managed to maneuver a Camel out of the pack in his pocket. I wished he wouldn’t smoke in the car, but given everything else going on, it seemed too petty to ask him not to. I heard the tobacco crackle as he lit it on the glowing red coil. He took a deep, lung-drenching drag and exhaled.

“I find László and kill him.”

I stared at the green glow of the radio dial and stopped myself from telling him he couldn’t possibly be serious. Because of course he was.

“Give me one,” I said weakly, and he slid the pack of Camels across the seat, his gloved hand brushing mine. It took me a few tries, but I picked one loose even with my gloves on, though I noticed my tobacco insisted on sticking to the lighter coil while Jonathan’s hadn’t given him any trouble at all. I tapped the blob of smoldering tobacco into the ashtray and cracked open my window, where arctic air sang through the small gap and into the car.

“I don’t think you should kill anyone.” I wondered why I’d proceeded to speak without thinking first, let alone censoring myself. “You’d get thrown in jail, and then where would I be?”

“Better off without either of us, László or me.”

“Uh-uh. You and László are not us. You and me, we’re us.”

“I knew I should not have mentioned the bloodbond. It’s filled your head with nonsense.”

“And why is it so crazy?”

He clenched his jaw as he pulled up to a red light. Once the car had stopped, he nailed me with one of his full-force looks. “I am not drinking your blood and we will never be lovers. Get it?”

“Fine. All you had to do was tell me you weren’t interested.”

The light turned green. He made an explosive “pff” and pulled away. “Interest has nothing to do with it. You think I would risk killing you so that we could set up house and play boyfriends? Then you don’t know me at all.”

I glared out my window at the parked cars we sped by. “I never claimed to.”

The perfect quote sprang to mind, but I resisted saying it under my breath, since Jonathan would hear. I couldn’t even mouth the words, since for all I knew, he’d hear my lips moving. So I conjured up a vision of the Tin Man and let him say it for me in my head.

“Now I know I’ve got a heart. I can feel it breaking.”

~ * ~

We drove farther than usual that night, and the fact that we didn’t care to speak to each other made the trip seem that much longer. We rolled off the Interstate in Rockford to find our den for the day. A low-to-the-ground traditional motor court looked pretty promising in terms of price. I was sure the interior would either be retro and cozy or delightfully hideous.

Jonathan had dealt with booking the rooms so far, which I would have been happy to handle, since it would actually give me something useful to do. But I figured if he wanted to be the one in charge, I wasn't going to rain on his closeted parade.

Okay, so he wasn't closeted, not really. It's not like I ever asked him which team he pitched for until our first night in a motel together. He just wasn't playing by my rules, which were sibilant "S"es, monthly manicures and appropriate references to Rogers & Hammerstein. But maybe that's just because he was European.

Jonathan threw himself back into the car and slammed the door shut so hard I was worried it'd fall off. The tires spun, flinging black slush out behind us in a wide arc, and then he jammed the shift into forward, jolted out of the divot, punched it into reverse, third gear, and peeled out.

"Okay." I was dying to know what had happened in the office. "Let me guess. There's a Marilyn Monroe impersonator convention coming to town first thing in the morning, and they're all booked up."

Jonathan didn't laugh, even to try and make me feel better. "I think you should talk to the clerks from now on."

"We're not in Chicago anymore," I reminded him, "and anywhere else in Illinois is as good as Alabama if you're looking for scary fundamentalist crackers. I don't think they want to see my gay self any more than they want you to spit on their towels."

"We should have headed for Milwaukee."

Schlemeel. Schlemazel. Hasenfeffer incorporated. Yes we should have. But it was too late now.

We drove up the road a ways, and since similar businesses tended to cluster together, found another small motel with a lit vacancy sign within a few blocks. Jonathan gave me a handful of twenties and I approached the next office myself.

I caught sight of the night clerk through a frost-fogged window, reading to himself with a mug cradled in his hand. He had the type of hairline that had probably been receding since he was seventeen, with wispy blond baby hair on top. I figured my "professional" voice would work well enough with him.

"I'd like a room with checkout at seven p.m." I spoke quickly enough to appear decisive, but not forcefully enough to qualify as obnoxious. "And my AmEx is over the limit for the month. Would cash be a problem?"

He looked me up and down, probably trying to rectify my attitude with my three-day growth of beard. I hoped the sanitizer gel hadn't stained the wool, or at least that the dusting of snow on top covered it up if it had.

"We take cash," he said, neither friendly nor hostile.

"And it needs good shades. I'll be working into the night and don't want the sun to wake me."

"The rooms are all the same. Miniblinds with curtains you can pull over the top."

"And I assume there's wireless access?" I said, wondering whatever had become of my laptop.

“Yup. In every room.”

I pulled out my wad of twenties. “Would you like me to prepay or square up at checkout?”

He looked from my money to the window behind me. Not that I’d expected the twenties to hold his attention for long. As wads go, it was not very impressive. “You’re alone,” he said, “right?”

“No. My employer is with me.”

The clerk crossed his hands over his chest. “Only one occupant per room after nine p.m., married couples excluded. Company policy.”

I almost shouted out, “That’s insane! What year is this, 1950?” but I suspected it wouldn’t do me any good. I did my best to keep playing it professionally. “We have business to attend to, and the Tokyo stock markets are opening in an hour.” Of course, I had no idea what time it was in Tokyo, but I was banking on it that he didn’t, either. “So if you could arrange a room for me I would gladly pay you up front.”

The clerk craned his neck to look at the frumpy Ford Taurus. What, he didn’t buy a high-powered stockbroker who needed a shave driving a fifteen-year-old car with a swarthy long-haired man at the wheel? “Your boss would have to get his own room.”

Maybe I could have bargained for a discount at that point, but that irritating little twit was getting under my skin. “And is someone going to police us to be sure he stayed in his room and I stayed in mine?”

“One person per room,” he said, probably because anything he could have answered my actual question with would’ve been unbelievably stupid. “That’s the policy.”

“We are trading futures.” I mentally congratulated myself for remembering the word, since learning about the stock market was still on my very neglected to-do list. “And I would think you’d be able to make an exception.”

“One person per room.”

I really wished there were a convenient, V-negative fag nearby so I could give the clerk a big, gay freak show, right in the middle of his cramped little front office. “And I suppose the phones are equipped for conference calling, so my employer and I can do our business from separate rooms.”

“No.”

There was still about an hour left before dawn. We’d have time to find something, I was sure. But just in case. “So how much for two rooms?”

He added something up on a little plastic calculator. “One hundred forty-seven ninety. Plus tax.”

Highway robbery. I wished I had some time to stand there and argue with him about why he had his dingy motel confused with the Taj Mahal, but I didn’t feel like outrunning the sun.

I got back in the car, wounded that my stockbroker routine didn’t fly. “We’re not staying here,” I told Jonathan. “Let’s go.”

Luckily, our money was good at the next place we stopped, though the window shades left something to be desired. I got an extra couple of blankets from the clerk by telling her I was freezing—and luckily, I really didn't have to do very much acting since it was bitterly cold outside.

In the final fifteen minutes before sunrise, we managed to take a quick trip to a gas station and score a ham sandwich hermetically sealed in clear plastic and a diet Mountain Dew for me, and a couple of vampiric oil drinks for Jonathan. At the register, we threw in a 60-minute prepaid phone card, a lighter and a pack of Camels. Thirty-five dollars.

"I don't want to alarm you," said Jonathan, "but we are running out of money."

"Yes, we are."

We both stared hard out the windshield as Jonathan drove us back to the friendliest motel in Rockford. It was good to get in out of the cold, and even if we were hemorrhaging money, at least we were warm.

I held a spare blanket up over the window and Jonathan manned the staple gun, which luckily he'd slipped into his pocket and not into the bag with our UV fabric, which was now long gone with the Audi. "I'll call someone and have them wire us money," I said, feeling pretty smart.

"Who can you call? Whoever helps us will be in danger."

I crossed Aunt Trixie off the list. She's in her eighties now, and she probably wouldn't have grasped the concept of wiring money too well, anyway, given that she kept her life savings tucked between the pages of her Agatha Christies in twenties and tens. So Aunt Trixie was out, but I did know someone who could help us. "I've got a friend in Arizona. Is László going to fly out to Arizona just to mess with him?"

"Arizona. Good." Jonathan sat down in a very uncomfortable-looking pressboard chair and opened up a flavored oil drink called Mango Crème Delight. "Is he awake now? Maybe you should call him."

It was six thirty in the morning, and I had no idea if that would be too late, too early or just right. It had been midmorning the last time I talked to Larry. But hadn't I once taken three consecutive calls from him at four, four fifteen and four thirty in the morning when he discovered his shameless, unemployed boyfriend in the embrace of his downstairs neighbor?

I'd be using up some emergency credits. But I figured it was about time to cash them in.

I dialed the toll-free number on the back of the phone card, and then the code from the front, and after opting out of a few special recorded offers, finally punched in Larry's number.

"What I said in the car earlier," Jonathan said as Larry's phone rang. "I didn't mean to sound so rotten."

How nice. Jonathan was apologizing for shattering my pathetic little vision of him and me, just as Larry answered the phone.

"H'lo?"

"Uh, hey, Larry. Sorry for calling so late."

“Oh! Greg, hey! Long time no hear.”

Greg? Who the hell was Greg—his ex-boyfriend? He’d recognized my voice right away the last time we talked, which was only a few days ago.

“Larry—”

“I know you probably want to gossip about Mark, but it’s really not such a good idea.”

“What about...Mark?”

“Um, you know. Prancing around, playing FBI’s most wanted.”

My empty, acid-filled stomach clenched up and tried to digest itself. “What on earth was Mark thinking?” I said. If I sounded even remotely natural, I was sure I deserved an Academy Award.

“How should I know?” It occurred to me that he sounded awfully strained too. “Bitch never calls me.”

“No. He never shows his face around here, either.”

“And what about you?” said Larry. “You must be leaving on that long vacation you’ve been bragging about...any minute now.”

My throat was doing that fluttery thing. I had no idea it was possible to actually vomit from anxiety. “I really deserve a vacation.”

“Well, sometimes you just gotta get away from it all.”

There was an awkward pause where I wondered how I could possibly ask him any more without giving anything else away. But even if I could have spoken plainly, I wouldn’t have known what to say.

Larry took up the ball. “Look, I’ve got to get ready for work. We’ll catch up more later, ’kay? And it was really good to hear from you.”

I watched the tacky carpet go in and out of focus while I tried to imagine the FBI looking for me. “Yeah. You too.”

“Take care of yourself, girlfriend.”

“You too, Miss Thang.”

Chapter Twelve

Jonathan took the news that the FBI was on our trail pretty well, considering it was dawn, and the sun could potentially turn him into a Cheeto. “We must keep moving.” He gooped the V-strength sunscreen on to his face and neck, taking care to dab it on his ears. “You can drive during the day and I will drive at night.”

“How much money is left?”

“A little over fifty.”

A tank of gas and a paltry meal, and we’d have to give ourselves up to the cops. I wondered if they could protect us from a vampire psycho stalker. I doubted it.

I thought it was possible that they’d give us a refund on the room since we really hadn’t used it, except to staple blankets to the walls and make a phone call. But since we’d need to keep the blankets as a souvenir if we wanted to travel by day, I figured it was better not to draw attention to ourselves by asking for my money back.

Jonathan dug a pair of wraparound shades out of his coat pocket. His hair was beginning to make dreadlocks, and he had the world’s most defined beard growth, which formed a little peak beneath his lower lip that was so sharp it looked like he’d groomed it that way. This whole experience had turned him into something out of a Road Warrior movie.

And me? I was just a dowdy, unshaven, aging queer in relaxed-fit jeans.

We loaded our stuff into the car while the sky lightened. It was shaping up to be an overcast day, and I was grateful for whatever small crumbs of luck the universe deigned to throw our way. Jonathan started the Taurus with a tiny screwdriver that fit in his palm, then spread out in the back seat so I could cover him up. “Keep the heater low,” he said as I slid into the unfamiliar driver’s seat. “I feel claustrophobic already.”

I backed out of the parking space, and the wheels spun as I hit a patch of frozen slush. I put the car in drive, fishtailed a little, then rolled out of the parking lot. “You’re claustrophobic? Since when?”

“Since now.”

“Good thing I didn’t get you that coffin for your birthday.”

“Ha ha.”

I headed back to the Interstate, figuring I’d be less likely to get lost on a road that had a big green and white sign every mile or so. I had the choice of going back toward the northwest suburbs of Chicago, or

Madison, Wisconsin. Choices, choices. I decided that if V-politics were iffier in America's Dairyland than they were in Chicago, I didn't want to learn about it the hard way.

I headed south, back the way we'd come, all the while trying to convince myself that I was not heading directly into László's outstretched arms. After all, Chicago was a big city. We'd find somewhere to hide.

Traffic slowed, and I wondered if I had rush hour or an accident to thank for it. Though I reminded myself that it was useless getting frustrated about traffic if I had nowhere in particular to be, anyhow. And then the cars sorted themselves out into the lanes of a toll plaza, depending on how many axles they had and whether or not they'd invested in an electronic device to pay their tolls for them.

I didn't see anything on the dash that looked high-tech enough to perform that function, so I assumed I'd need to use some of our dwindling money. I chose a manual lane, just in case I needed to break a dollar, then put the car in park and started digging through my pockets. I pulled out what I assumed to be a dollar, but it turned out to be the ridiculous pink flier I'd gotten from the goth girl at the supermarket.

"V-Luvv, haven for spouses and partners of V-positives." And there was a phone number.

A haven. That was exactly what we needed. I rolled up the flier and slipped it into my glove, worried that I would lose it between the time I paid the toll and the time I could get myself to a pay phone. Because if anyone could safely hide me and my vampire companion, it would be them. Plenty of people put their lives in the hands of safe-sex groups, didn't they? Okay, maybe more figuratively than I was about to do. But if I couldn't trust someone who'd be willing to show me how to do the nasty with a vampire without catching the virus myself, who could I trust?

Pay phones are fewer and farther between, now that everyone's got a cell phone, and people mainly use them for making drug deals. However, they're not entirely absent. I managed to find a bank of phones near a city bus terminal. I pulled into a handicapped parking spot and barely stopped myself from locking the car behind me. I left it running, too, since Jonathan had never shown me the screwdriver trick, and I didn't think it was the time or place for me to learn.

I slipped the flier from my glove, put a pair of quarters into the phone and dialed the number.

"Hi, you've reached Mona, Ben and Sparky. If you're calling about V-Luvv, the next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Monday the fourth. Leave your number and I'll call you back with the details."

There was a long beep, in which it occurred to me that even someone as out-there as Mona, if that was actually the girl I'd met in the grocery store, needed to be at least a little discreet.

"Hello, you may not remember me, but I met you last week. My name is Mark, and we were in the water aisle..." I had no idea how to describe myself to a young girl. None at all. "I was looking at Meatball Hoagie De-Lite, and you said...well, anyway, I denied it..."

There was a click and the clatter of something falling, and then the breath of someone holding the phone right up to their face. "Yeah, hey. I remember you. What'd you say your name is?"

“Mark.”

“Mark Hansen? No. Way.”

The logical answer to that is “way.” But I just couldn’t say it.

“Omigod. You’re, like, the one who disappeared with that famous vampire artist.”

I was very happy that Jonathan was still bundled in the back of the car, since he would probably have had a fit. I glanced over and checked on the Taurus. The car was still right where I’d left it, in the parking spot with absolutely nothing around it that a vampiric psycho killer could pop out of. Because I was getting really sick of surprises.

“Ben,” the girl shouted, ineffectively muffling the phone. “Ben, wake up! It’s that really old Transylvanian vampire from the news. Yeah. Well, his boyfriend. I *told* you he was the guy I met at the store.”

“We’re not, um... It’s complicated.”

Mona kept going without missing a beat. “Oh, sorry. Thought you were gay. My bad.”

“I am.”

That didn’t faze her, either. “They still haven’t caught you yet, right? Wait—don’t tell me where you are. The walls have ears.”

I could’ve sworn the expression was “eyes”, but even so, it was appropriate. “Right. Um, I—we need some help.”

“No prob. I’ll send someone to meet you in the parking lot of the place we met—don’t say the name. When can you be there?”

Funny. A week ago I would have thought she was being paranoid, or at least melodramatic. And now she seemed very, very smart. I took a look at the traffic. Rush hour was starting to die down. “An hour. Maybe a little longer.”

“They’ll take you somewhere safe. Oh, and is he with you?”

For once, *he* didn’t mean László. “Yes.”

“Poor baby. We’ll get him out of the sun.”

~ * ~

I pulled into the supermarket parking lot, and wondered how someone I’d never met was supposed to find me. Leaving the car running, I stood beside it and smoked to make it look like I was doing something other than standing there waiting for the FBI to scoop me up.

After three cigarettes, a small box truck pulled up. It had been an ice cream truck, once. I could tell by the shapes of the decals that had been painted over. One was a Push-Up. One was an Eskimo Pie. One was a soft serve cone—with sprinkles. The window the driver would’ve leaned through to serve the cones

hadn't been opened since the makeshift paint job. I could see the dried spray paint pooled and hardened in the crevices of the window.

The back door still worked, though. It snapped up and rolled halfway into the roof, and a girl with platinum blonde hair and a leather biker jacket jumped out and scuttled over, low to the ground. "Is he in back?" she whispered, and I nodded. As she yanked open the Taurus's rear door, I realized it probably would have been a good idea to warn Jonathan first.

"Wait—he's asleep."

The blankets flew open and the blonde girl found herself looking down the barrel of a gun.

"Put that away," I snapped. "She's helping us."

I couldn't see his eyes through the wraparound sunglasses, but he sized her up longer than I would've liked before he lowered the gun. She held a wad of fabric out to him. Her hand shook visibly. "Sunhood," she said.

"I'm wearing V-block."

"But your scalp will blister. Put it on. Please."

Jonathan took the filmy black fabric and slid it over his head. I couldn't help but think of a prisoner of war.

"You've gotta lose the car," the girl said.

Jonathan nodded once in his sunhood. He pocketed the gun, came out with the squat screwdriver, reached into the front seat and cut the engine. He allowed the girl to grasp him by the forearms with her antimicrobial gloves and help him out of the car, then usher him into the back of the truck.

I got myself into the passenger's seat as quickly as possible, and sized up the kid at the steering wheel in a single glance. He was as tall as me, with studs through his nose, earlobes and lip that plainly marked him as a V-negative. Unless fake pierced jewelry had gotten really advanced since the last time I'd been clubbing, anyway. Vampires can't wear the stuff; their bodies just reject it and clot over.

The kid gave me a goofy grin. What? Was he gonna play the ice cream jingle? "Thanks," I said, and his grin got even wider.

"All right." He peeled out of the parking lot on ancient, balding tires. No jingle. I was relieved he didn't call me "dude".

I sank back in my bucket seat in an effort to put as much distance between the windshield and me, and my stomach gave a long, low gurgle. I wondered what had ever happened to that ham sandwich. "There isn't any actual ice cream in back. Is there?"

"Sorry," said the kid, while I tried to get rid of a hunger-induced headache by pressing my thumb into my temple, hard. "A refrigerated truck's the best daytime ride a V-positive can have, but not if you keep it at twenty below. So...is it true that Jonathan's patient zero?"

"What?"

“You know. The top vampire. The eldest.”

“Of course not. That’s crazy.”

“They say there aren’t any known cases of the virus in the U.S. from before he emigrated in ’87.”

“Known cases,” I repeated, because I was sure that Jonathan couldn’t possibly be the Typhoid Mary of vampirism. He’d picked it up himself by sleeping around, back in the Hungarian army. In the...eighties.

Holy crap. How long had Jonathan been infected? I’d always assumed ten years, since that’s when HIV started getting bandied around the dinner table. But if he caught the virus in Hungary and then fled to America in 1987, that meant he’d been living with it for well over twenty years.

How old *was* Jonathan?

Older than me. My God. The kid kept rattling on. He had no idea that he’d just well and truly blown my mind. “We scan ACN twenty-four seven to find out how the Man’s gonna try to stick it to us next. None of the real networks are saying it, but Pat Crinshaw’s been kinda dropping hints. Not accusations, but questions. So Jonathan wouldn’t be able to sue him for slander—but ACN donations are already up seven percent.

“And Rush Limbaugh chimed in today. He didn’t name names. But, ya know. ‘These vampires and their so-called rights.’ That kinda crap.”

Oh my God. I shrank down even lower in the seat.

“My name’s Josh,” he said. “My mate Tina’s in back.”

Mate. Okay. There was a word I hadn’t yet heard in polite conversation. At least, not in that context. Or, really, any. That I could think of.

“Mark—”

“Hansen. Yeah, I know.”

I propped my elbow against the passenger door and mashed my face into my hand. Dear Lord. I’d become a celebrity in the goth-vampire freedom-fighter circuit.

Chapter Thirteen

Josh wended his way southwest into a neighborhood that was both trendier and more dangerous than the one in which we'd met him. While graffiti was pretty ubiquitous in Chicago, it somehow seemed more in-your-face and territorial where we were headed. I figured the rent must have been pretty affordable.

He pulled up in an alley behind a medium-sized blond brick apartment building and everyone slipped into the back door of the basement apartment while he went off to park the truck. It made me miss the parking garage under my...Jonathan's studio.

The apartment's windows were totally sealed, yet it was lit by so many different lamps, sconces and candles that it felt more homey than cave-like. The ceiling was lower than I might have liked, but other than that, the mismatched furniture and riotous explosion of faux-religious knickknacks made it seem rather homey.

Beside me, Jonathan pulled off his sunhood and shook out his hair. Once he'd ditched the shades, his eyes were wary. I don't suppose I blamed him. But while I hardly knew these kids any more than he did, they just felt trustworthy to me.

The blonde girl let the motorcycle jacket fall to the floor and then peeled off her hair, which was a wig.

"Mona?"

She shook out her dyed-black hair and smiled at me, that little knowing smile that said, "I know why you're buying peanut oil."

"We've got about a million questions," she said, "but you both look totally wiped out. Tina?"

A gorgeous African American girl with hair cropped so close she was nearly bald stepped forward. I didn't mean to stare, but the grace with which she moved...she had to be a vampire. It was so obvious. How come my V-sensors got so finely tuned while my gaydar had died? Maybe it was from watching Jonathan so closely for so long.

Tina pointed to a door. "The negative bathroom's here if you wanna clean up, and the positive is through the bedroom," she said, and I saw her fangs, like Jonathan's, were blunt and unaltered. "And we have Oleoshakes, pizza, beer, and all kinds of water." She looked around to see if she'd forgotten anything. "Or if you just wanna crash, you can use our bed."

"Why are you doing this for us?" Jonathan's voice was cold.

But I wasn't in the mood to explain that we were the ideal cause for these kids to throw themselves behind, nor did I feel like listening to them trying to convince him. "I'm starving," I blurted out.

Mona went to get me something. Pizza, I assume. Anything remotely related to food sounded absolutely heavenly.

The doorbell rang, two short buzzes, and Tina closed the door to the vestibule. "That's just Josh," she said. "We worked out the signal to keep the sun seal."

I nodded as Josh came through the interior door, still beaming about his real-life adventure in vampire smuggling. "So do you guys party?" he asked. He pulled a carved box from behind a shelf of CDs, which I assumed held his stash.

"I was so drunk when this whole thing started that I've vowed not to alter my consciousness for at least a year," I said.

Unfazed, Josh pulled out a small pipe, packed it with pot and lit it. He offered it around but had no other takers. Vampires could get high? Apparently so, since there was a second one-hitter in a baggie that he offered to Tina.

Mona came back from the kitchen with a big, greasy, honest-to-goodness slab of carryout pizza on a paper plate that was clear with absorbed oil. I started inhaling it, and I didn't care that the hot cheese was taking the skin off the roof of my mouth.

"Would you like anything?" she asked Jonathan. "Water?" She squinted at him more closely. "Have you had your daily?"

Jonathan narrowed his eyes back at her. I wished he could be just a little more friendly to the strangers sticking out their necks to help us, but I supposed if I were him I wouldn't have developed a great trust of mankind, either. "Daily?" he repeated.

"Your human tomato juice," said Tina, picking up Mona's jacket from the floor and throwing it over the back of a chair.

"I'm fine," Jonathan said, which hadn't actually answered the question she'd put to him. "I can't stomach that synthetic, anyway."

"Oh, me neither." Tina said it like it was the most natural thing in the world to talk about what sorts of blood they liked. Like they were comparing laundry detergents. "I've got plenty of fresh syringes. They're in the top left dresser drawer. You boys take what you need."

I had to swallow three times to get the pizza crust in my throat down. Because she'd been talking about Jonathan drinking my blood.

She assumed that's what we did. It was what they all assumed.

The moment I finally choked down that pizza, Josh was at my side with two bottles of Twist o' Lemon water. He opened his and thunked the plastic against mine. "Here's to stickin' it to the Man," he said happily.

“Hear, hear,” I said, covertly watching Jonathan look utterly uncomfortable as I tipped back my bottle.

~ * ~

I couldn’t blame the V-Luvv kids for being curious. The radical Christians had pegged Jonathan as their progenitor, after all. But instead of bombarding us with questions, they just fed us and let us crawl off to bed.

“Right side’s positive,” Josh called as I filed into the dark room behind Jonathan.

That struck me as odd. I mean, I knew what all the words meant, taken separately. But I’d never really considered the sleeping arrangements.

Jonathan flipped on the light, and the meaning of “right side’s positive” became evident.

“Oh.” That was Jonathan. He must not have expected it, either. The bed was divided down the center by a clear latex curtain.

There’d been attempts to make it look like just another part of the décor. Shiny, clear latex strips were woven in with gauzy black and purple curtains that framed the headboard, the tiebacks studded with brown dried roses. The bedside table on Josh’s side was pale blue Lucite, and clear shower curtains speckled with glitter covered the black sun-blocker shades.

Jonathan stood at the foot of the bed, staring hard at the latex divider. I wondered if it wouldn’t be less trouble to go back to the 50’s-era pair of twin beds. To sleep in the same bed as the one you loved but still not be able to touch them...I thought it might just be easier to drop the pretense of normalcy altogether.

Jonathan stepped around the right side of the bed and took off his gloves. His hands looked pale and shrunken from their long incarceration. He unbuttoned his cuffs and slid his shirt over his head. I knew I was staring, but I was too exhausted to care. He took off his shoes and his belt, and then climbed into Tina’s side of the bed. “It looks like you won’t lose your virginity tonight, after all,” he said, tapping the latex curtain.

I had no idea if it was a bad attempt at a joke or he was just being mean, but I wasn’t in the mood. It bothered me too much, that two really good people like Tina and Josh had to live that way. I turned off the overhead light without a word and groped my way to Josh’s side of the bed. I fell asleep with my gloves on.

~ * ~

Jonathan was awake already when I woke up. He had a small photo album in his lap, and he was looking at it by the low light of a tiny table lamp. Even from across the room I could tell it was shots of Josh and Tina, from his slightly awkward height and her skin like polished bronze.

I remembered how moody Jonathan had been that morning and didn't relish the thought of trying to talk. If we were in his apartment, I would have left him to make his black paintings in the studio, or I would have invented a few errands to run, myself. But it seemed that he and I were stuck with each other.

"They seem so happy," he said.

I must have been expecting some backhanded remark, so I hardly knew what to reply. "Maybe they are," I said eventually.

"But how do they stand this?" He waved his hand at the latex curtain. I wasn't sure if it was just the angle of the light, but his forehead seemed deeply creased, his eyes sharp and hawkish. He looked a bit closer to his real age, I thought—whatever that was. I followed his gaze back to the clear curtain and shrugged. "Maybe they don't dwell on it," I said. I found a T-shirt from my Sears bag and slipped it over my head. And since I'd look positively ridiculous in a T-shirt and gloves, I put my dress shirt, unbuttoned and untucked, over the top of it. "Maybe it's better than nothing."

Jonathan closed the photo album and set it back on the dresser. "Mark, I hate to ask this of you."

He had my attention.

"I don't feel well at all. Do you think you could go try to find a cat?"

Okay. Now I knew how women felt when they thought they were going to get a diamond ring and ended up with an onion ring. "A cat."

"I would go look myself..."

"Jonathan, it's ten below, and you think I can just march out the door in this gang-infested neighborhood and find you a kitty cat?"

He held his gloved hand up between his face and mine. "I should not have asked, I'm sorry."

"Would you just take my blood and get it over with?"

He looked pretty spooked. But he didn't refuse, not immediately.

I pressed on. "What do you think Tina does? She's got a big healthy boyfriend so she doesn't have to deal with bovine blood at the grocery store."

"That's not the only reason she has him," Jonathan said.

I thought of the two of them, easy in the nest they'd built together, filling us with flavored water and V-shakes. "No, that's not the only one," I agreed, trying to lighten up on my preachy tone. "But they're both in it together. You know?"

"I don't know if I can do this," he said, and I found myself starting to feel a little sorry for him.

"I don't know if you have a choice." I went to the dresser on Josh's side of the bed and started opening drawers. I found the syringes in a drawer with small foil-wrapped packs of alcohol wipes, two boxes of no-latex gloves—one small, one large—and a few bottles of musk-scented antiviral cream that suddenly seemed too intimate for me to be rifling through.

"I don't mean the idea of it is bothering me," Jonathan said. "I don't know if I can keep human blood down."

"It's been that long?"

Jonathan stared at the syringe with his lip slightly curled. "No. That is one line I have never crossed."

"Twenty-some years and you've never had the blood of a human." He didn't correct me. Holy cow, he really was older than me.

He shrank back into the chair. "Does it not seem cannibalistic to you?"

I stared down at him, looking scraggly and swarthy and ill and, of course, hot all at the same time, and I hardly knew what to make of him. "No. It doesn't." I squatted down so that my eyes were level with his. "It's not like you're killing me and chopping off pieces."

He waved his hand like he was shooing away a mosquito. "But it is...blood."

I nodded. "I can make more."

He stared harder at the syringe.

I leaned forward. Not enough to touch him, but hopefully enough to let him know I meant business. "Look. If there were no vampire virus and no HIV," I said, my voice pitched low, "and I met you at a club, and we talked and danced and had a few drinks, and ended up slipping away somewhere private so I could suck you off..."

I watched his eyes go wide.

"...I'd swallow."

Jonathan blinked, and then closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

"You don't play fair," he said.

Merely talking about drawing the blood was much easier than actually doing it. I missed the vein on my first poke and kind of...well, I won't say I fainted, but my peripheral vision tunneled a little bit.

"Look away and I will do it." Jonathan's fingers were fidgety in their purple no-latex gloves. He'd made me loop his belt above my biceps and hold the end taut.

I stared over at a tiny framed picture of Josh and Tina on the wall. They were on a beach and the full moon reflected off the water behind them. "I guess I won't make a very good heroin addict."

"We just need to practice."

"How do people do this by themselves?"

"They hold the belt with their teeth. Make a fist."

I dug my fingernails into my palm. "Tell me you don't know this from personal experience." I felt a stick. It wasn't fun, but I could handle it.

Jonathan glanced up at me, smiling a little. It was good to see that smile, even if it was in a haggard face that was growing harder and harder to recognize. "I saw it in a movie. Okay, release."

I let go of the belt end and felt the syringe tube grow warm on my arm.

“Grab the sterile pad and place it on top of the hole,” he said. I did, and he slid the needle out of my arm. “There. We’ve done it.”

“I’ll leave you alone.” I stuck a Band-Aid we’d already peeled over the tiny wound.

Jonathan shook his head. “Never mind.” He screwed off the plunger end of the syringe. “It wouldn’t seem right to hide from you. Not after you’ve done this for me.” He separated the syringe from the plunger, saluted me with it, then downed the blood like a shot of Jägermeister.

I’ll admit, my stomach lurched a little to see him actually do the deed, especially after so many years of seeing nothing stronger than an oil smoothie pass his lips. And yet I got a thrill from seeing it too. That was my blood. I’d done that for him.

He handed me the syringe. “I will let you clean this,” he said. “I think they are too precious to throw away in this home.”

In other words, if we were back in our old lifestyle, they would’ve been disposable. True.

“How does it feel?” I held the bloody syringe gingerly so that it didn’t puncture my purple gloves. “Would you know by now if it wasn’t...going to stay with you?”

Jonathan nodded slowly. “It’s fine. I hate to say it, but it’s better than cat’s blood.” He met my eyes briefly and then stared down at his hands. “I feel stubborn for waiting this long to try.”

I did my best not to laugh out loud. I could count the number of times he’d eaten crow on one hand. “What?” I asked as I headed for the V-negative bathroom to clean out the syringe. “You, stubborn?”

This wasn’t the first step in becoming his bloodbonded. I had to keep that in mind. No, I was simply relieved because we didn’t need to go buying expensive synthetics that he’d only throw up, and I didn’t have to watch him looking more and more wretched as he did without blood. And we didn’t have to kill anyone’s pet kitty to keep Jonathan vertical.

Those were the reasons I was on cloud nine. That’s what I told myself.

Chapter Fourteen

Tina was the only one home. I'm not sure if I thought that was brave or foolhardy of her, lounging on the couch and watching vampire soap operas while two strange men skulked around her apartment.

"You watch these?" she asked as I settled down in a recliner beside her.

"No."

"They're bad, real bad. All the actors are clean. The ones that're supposed to be V-positive all got this white shit caked on 'em. But there's something about the shows." She shrugged. "I don't tape 'em or anything. But if I have a day off work..."

"Are the vampires all 'bad guys'?"

"Hell, no. They got a Cleanliness for Morality sect that's just like something right off the ACN."

We watched together as a V-positive gal who bore a striking resemblance to Morticia Addams visited her uninfected beau in the hospital. The evil nurses made her wear big latex gloves that looked like they belonged in the kitchen beside the sink, and a hideous mask. She ripped off the mask once the coast was clear so she could croon over her beloved.

I thought it wasn't particularly realistic that they'd let her into the hospital at all. But then, I guessed they weren't necessarily aiming for realism.

"He got e coli from eating a bad burger," Tina explained. "And they're scared he gonna die. They figuring out if she should give him the Kiss of Night before he kicks the bucket, or if he gonna pull through after all."

A wave of gooseflesh tore up my arms, and suddenly the actors in their cheesy vampire makeup didn't seem quite so ridiculous anymore. I thought of the latex curtain dividing Tina's bed and my eyes stung. I couldn't watch any more, so I stood up and wandered away, and pretended to look at a funky wooden triptych on the wall.

"Josh left you some coffee," Tina said, her eyes never leaving the screen. "You can heat it up in the microwave. Don't worry, I don't use the microwave. We keep all our food separate."

A small bar fridge in the corner of the kitchen had a note that read "positive" stuck to it with a banana-shaped magnet. I guessed that was for my benefit. Even the standard-sized refrigerator was pretty paltry compared to the models Jonathan and I had in our apartments. No slide-out plexiglass shelves or special trays inside, just some stationary metal racks covered in patchy, worn chrome.

But there was pizza, and milk, and coffee, as well as lots of half-dried jars of store-brand condiments. That was all I needed, condiments excluded. I heard Jonathan's voice intermingling with Tina's in the other room, but they were talking too low for me to make out what they were saying. Occasional laughter on both of their parts made the cadence seem easy and comfortable. And given how leery Jonathan had been acting before we'd slept, I was glad.

Once I'd had my fill, I made my way back out to the living room, sheepish that I'd polished off all the pizza and a couple of individually wrapped cheese slices to boot. But the living room was empty, and Jonathan and Tina's voices floated out from the positive bathroom.

Jonathan was a sight with a pink towel draped over his shoulders as Tina worked conditioner through his hair. He'd shaved, and he looked much more like his old self—except for the fact that someone else was touching him so intimately. I felt equal pangs of jealousy and fascination.

"I keep thinking I'll grow my hair out, then it gets all nappy-lookin' and I change my mind," Tina said. "But I keep all the conditioner anyway. Can't stand to throw nothing expensive away."

I watched as her long fingers dug deep into Jonathan's dense hair, then pulled back, found a mat and picked it carefully apart.

"Mona called," she added as she picked up a pair of shears and snipped out a tiny mat that was too stubborn to untangle. "Ben's pretty bad tonight, so she can't come over. But she wanted to show you everything she put together since y'all started being hunted."

Mona had a dossier on us? I wanted it—immediately. But I supposed I should find out what was wrong with Ben first. "What do you mean by Ben being 'bad'?"

Tina slid her fingers in deep and planted them, looking me in the eye. "Between you and me, he ain't gonna see stage four."

"Does he even leave the house?"

"Nope. He on Medicaid but they don't really pay for nothing beyond the basics. And somehow Mona stretches it between the two of 'em and keeps 'em going. Plus the group."

"V-Luvv."

"Mmm hmm."

She started massaging Jonathan's scalp and his eyes dropped shut. My fingers itched to dig in there and do the same, but I doubted the faux latex would feel very good yanking at the roots of his hair.

"She'd like it if you came to the meeting," said Tina.

"I don't know that I'm all that comfortable in groups," I told her. Jonathan cracked open his eyes just a little to watch me.

"You don't need to speak up or nothing. Just be there for her."

"Can Jonathan come?"

"He'll be asleep. Me too. They have 'em during the day."

“I don’t think so. Ever since this whole trouble, we’ve been sticking together.”

“Rinse.” Tina leaned Jonathan back into the tub and turned on the shower. The showerhead detached from the wall, and she held it right up against his scalp as she rinsed away the product. “He’ll just be in the next room. They’re meeting here tomorrow.”

I’m not sure if Jonathan could hear her with the spray going on right by his ears. He didn’t seem to care much one way or the other; he’d obviously decided Tina was all right by him and wasn’t about to let anything disturb their hairdressing party.

I didn’t really care to explain to them that a group for uninfected lovers of vampires was about the last place I cared to be, since I wasn’t technically seeing any action in the romance department, myself. But I thought of Mona’s earnest face, and her housebound boyfriend who’d probably succumb to stage three, and I felt like I’d be too big of a heel to live with myself if I didn’t attend.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “I’m sure it will be quite an experience.”

~ * ~

Josh had come home from his job as the night usher of Star Cinema with a paper-lined box of overcooked hot dogs and a plastic garbage bag full of popcorn. A mostly empty cup designed to hold approximately half a gallon of soda protruded from the pocket of his scrappy parka.

“Dude!” he said to Jonathan. I was happy he’d finally gotten that word out of his system so I didn’t have to live in fear of him blurting it out when I didn’t expect it. “You look like a totally different person without your beard!”

Jonathan nodded and Josh gave him a big grin, then made his way into the kitchen, leaving a trail of gray slush behind him.

“Why you bringing them nasty things into our house?” said Tina. But even as she said it, she kissed the palm of her antimicrobial glove, then pressed the backs of her fingers to Josh’s cheek. Vampire kisses. All the rage on the late-night soaps.

“Two of us big guys to feed, now,” he said, and winked at me. “Gotta keep our strength up.”

He poured the popcorn into a big plastic bowl, and the aroma of its fake butter scent was frighteningly alluring.

“Shopping list.” Tina pressed a sticky note to Josh’s arm.

“Oh, the meeting’s today. Cool.” He slipped off his V-glove, picked up a bare hot dog and chowed it down in a few bites. Since he’d started it, I felt free to do the same. They were a little chewy, but I was starving as usual, so they tasted like the best damn hot dogs I’d ever had. “You need anything?” he asked me.

I suddenly felt awkward about freeloading. I pulled out my wallet, but Tina stopped me.

“Your money’s no good here,” she said. She turned to Josh. “Get some real food. And extra shakes too. These boys are half-starved.”

Josh kissed the pads of his fingers, then bopped the back of his hand against Tina’s nose. “Catch ya in a few.” I wondered if he ever got depressed.

“I know,” Tina said as he managed to lay another track of slush beside the first one he’d brought in. “He’s young.” She crossed her arms and sighed.

“You two seem really good together.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Me and a white boy twelve years younger.”

I hadn’t realized the age difference was quite that much—but it was clearly even more difficult than I’d ever known it would be to guess a vampire’s age.

“His daddy stopped talking to him two years ago, when we moved in together. Don’t know if it’s ’cos of the virus or ’cos I’m black. His momma sends him a little money now and then, always cash.”

I stared at the door with her. “But now he’s got you.”

“That’s right.” She pulled a sponge mop off a holder on the back of her kitchen door. “Black, white, gay, whatever. This virus made us all family now.”

Tina mopped around the couch where Jonathan sat with his eyes glued to an early morning V-drama. “What’re you gonna do, you boys thought about it?”

“I could get money from our gallery,” Jonathan said, “but I don’t want to call there. It seems that all of our close friends are being watched. Even the ones in different states.”

“See, that’s where y’all need to use the power of the group. There’s a bunch of us, and we can bring your guy a note, arrange to get a cell phone to him.” Tina wrung the mop over the V-positive tub, ran the water for a second to rinse the gray slush water away, then took the mop back into the kitchen. “They got this character they play, call her Witch Hazel. She the blonde. And most all of ’em can play her. Witch Hazel comes, Witch Hazel goes. But which witch is it? Could be any of ’em in that wig and leather jacket.”

“Are you ever Witch Hazel?” Jonathan asked.

Tina brought a Twist o’ Lemon out to him and sat beside him on the couch, curling her feet beneath her. “Only when it’s real dark out.”

With Tina’s multiple reassurances that it was fine to use any and all of Josh’s things, I retired to the V-negative bathroom to try to make myself more presentable for the V-Luvv meeting. His plastic-handled razors were so atrocious I actually ended up shaping my stubble into a goatee rather than risk taking half my face off with the cheap blades.

And for hair products he had something called “Riot Paste Wax” and something else just called “Goo”, which I thought was the equivalent of gel, though it had a strange sheen to it once I’d put it in my hair.

Josh had gotten back from the store while I was primping, and was skating around the hardwood floors with a grayed kitchen towel under each stocking foot. “I got some clothes for you, over there,” he called, pointing at an uncomfortable-looking Bauhaus rip-off chair against the wall. “Just throw yours in my hamper and I’ll put ‘em in with mine. Probably do wash next week.”

“They need to be dry cleaned.”

Josh seemed to think that was pretty funny. “Then you’ll be waiting a lot longer than a week for clean clothes.”

I went back into the bathroom and removed the outfit I’d been wearing all week, then stepped into Josh’s jeans. They were soft and broken in, the back pocket hanging where it had caught on something and torn. They felt much better than the stiff things in the store. The bleach-spattered navy T-shirt felt sloppy and soft, and its stretched out neck slipped easily over my head. The flannel shirt was soothing against my bare, bruised arms, though I winced to see its collar had formed itself into a tiny, crunched-up rim after having been repeatedly washed and dried without ever having seen an iron.

“Whoa,” Josh said when I came back out. “You look way younger.”

As if I didn’t feel self-conscious enough wearing someone else’s clothing, let alone a twenty-year-old straight kid’s. He was young enough to be my son. There was a weird thought. “Thanks.”

“Hey, Mona,” he called. “Come look at Mark.”

“That’s okay,” I said, undoubtedly blushing to the roots of my blond hair.

Mona skidded out of the kitchen in a pair of black and purple striped toe socks. Her black hair was now touched with purple streaks too. “Omgod, you look really good.”

“Where’s Jona—”

“We put him to bed. No vampires.” She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the kitchen. “Except Rachel. Because she was a regular member for seven months before she caught it.”

In the kitchen, Josh turned to hand me a tray of mugs and a plastic carafe with a Denny’s logo on the side. “We always do some major caffeine,” he said, “since all of us keep a third shift schedule.”

Mona hauled out a tray of sugary snack cakes fanned out like glittering, plastic-wrapped rhinestones. Since when had partially hydrogenated soybean oil become one of my major food groups?

Six more V-Luvv members showed up in all, five of them women. No wonder Josh seemed so happy to have me there. “Awesome turnout,” Josh said, a few colored sprinkles rolling down the front of his Ramones T-shirt. “Everyone came this time.” He elbowed me. “Guess they wanted to meet you.”

The couch and recliner filled, even the Bauhaus chair, and three of the group had to sit on the floor. Introductions were made, though they merged in a wall of twenty-something girly names for me. Most everyone wore black. One was Asian with bleached orange hair. The solitary guy, other than Josh, weighed about ninety pounds and didn’t make eye contact; his name was Shawn. I figured the one with the sunhood was Rachel, the honorary V-negative. Her stage four was so new her fangs hadn’t even dropped.

The meeting began with an update on Ben's condition: high spirits. I supposed that meant that physically, he was screwed. Then there was a brief round robin in which everyone gave a quick update. A new job, a stellar physical, the most awesome V-shake in the world and we all had to run out and get one for our partner.

The round robin ended with me and I hardly knew what to say. "We...ah...Jonathan and I are temporarily displaced and are lucky to have found such a kind and generous group of people."

A couple of claps went up, along with general positive murmurings, Josh's something to do with "the Man", and it occurred to me that they thought they were just hiding us from the FBI. They didn't know anything about László. Jonathan and I would need to talk.

Once the spotlight swung away from me, the meeting got truly weird.

The Asian girl started talking about an antimicrobial vibrator. I thought she must have been joking, but then someone else piped in about a series of safe V-sex DVDs. She suggested that if they pooled their money they could afford the hefty price tag. She'd downloaded a video clip, and though the actors were a little grainy and they were both obviously uninfected, the one who played the vampire did a very nice job.

The talk went on and on and on in that vein. Full body condom. Tongue sheaths, and why they were impossible to keep on. The new antimicrobial gel that got really cold when you blew on it.

At first I wanted to crawl away and hide. But my body just couldn't physiologically sustain the level of high embarrassment long enough to outlast the conversation, and eventually I simply did my best to take it all in.

Once there was nothing else shockingly private to air, Mona called the meeting to an official close, and people started clustering to talk amongst themselves. Most of them ended up hovering around me. How long have you been with Jonathan? Is he really Transylvanian? I'll compile a list of gay-oriented V-safe websites for you to check out—here's my email. Good thing you were away from home when the whole frame-up went down. My aunt has a cottage in Michigan if you need to use it, but it'd have to be sunproofed.

As morning wore on, even through the coffee and sugar buzz I'd been nursing, I started to wind down. So did many of the group, who'd just worked a full night and were probably out way past their bedtimes. Mona got people's coats—and Rachel's sunhood—and began subtly herding them toward the door. Josh had fallen asleep in the recliner.

After the last V-groupie left, Mona turned to me, grinning from ear to ear. "Wow, that was great. Thanks."

"No, thank you. I don't know what we would've done without you."

"I'd stay to clean up, but I really need to go check on Ben."

I looked around at the mugs and wrappers scattered over the living room. "It'll keep 'til tonight. You should go."

Mona pulled on a long, black coat. I wondered briefly about the leather biker jacket, but remembered that it wasn't really hers—it was Witch Hazel's. I flinched away at first as she flung her arms around me, but then I quickly remembered that she wasn't infected, and let myself hug her back.

Chapter Fifteen

I woke to a dim, amber-colored bedroom lit only by a tiny lamp with a scarf thrown over the shade. I immediately picked out Jonathan's dark eyes watching over me. I'm not sure if he'd just sat down beside me on Josh's side of the bed, or if he'd been staring at me for a long time.

I quirked an eyebrow at him.

"The beard." He glanced quickly away from me and stared down the lamp, instead. "It suits you."

He started to get up. I would have grabbed him if I'd had my gloves on, but instead my arm just gave a little flap. "Wait. Stay here."

He settled back down, closer to the edge of the bed, ready for flight. He was looking around at everything but my face.

"Just tell me you couldn't love me," I said, "and I swear I'll let it drop." It had to have been the V-Luvv meeting that'd made me so bold. Seven other couples could deal with the lifestyle. Why not us?

Jonathan closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "You would live like this."

"Yeah."

He opened his eyes and looked over his shoulder at the curtain—the one that was meant to prevent a V-positive from drooling on her partner in her sleep and spreading the virus.

"We're already living like this," I told him. "The only difference is that we don't admit to each other how we really feel."

Jonathan shook his head. "That is not what I mean."

"Isn't it? We're already partners—already an 'us', whether you acknowledge it or not. The only thing that's missing is the sex."

He did look me in the eye, then. I wished he hadn't. "I was looking at their sex booklets while you were out there eating cake—yes, I could smell the sugar. It is sex, but at the same time, it is not. They stroke each other through layers of gloves and jellies, they penetrate each other with objects. They strip for each other and masturbate together and hump back-to-front so they don't get carried away and actually kiss."

My mouth had grown too dry to allow me to answer him.

Jonathan tore his fierce gaze away from my eyes and looked down at his knees. "If someone could tell me—for certain—that you would survive all the stages should I ever infect you, things would be different." His long hair swayed as he shook his head. "But this could kill you."

And I didn't care. How far gone was I that I wanted to beg him to at least try? He didn't need to make it sound so dirty and freakish. We could be happy, damn it. We could.

"I have loved you for years," he said, but his bittersweet smile told me he'd already given it up as a lost cause long ago. "I will not kill you because of it."

I felt numb all over, too stunned to get out of bed or even try to stop Jonathan when he got up. When someone says they love you, it's supposed to be a happy time. Instead I wanted to roll over and wish for sleep to put me out of my misery. But I couldn't. I had an obligation to fulfill.

To say that night's bloodletting was awkward would've been an understatement. Jonathan had just said more things of substance than he had in the whole time I'd known him, and it seemed that he wasn't inclined to say anything more.

I tried to tap my own vein again, and again couldn't quite manage it. At least my arm seemed to have some memory of "the position" and assumed it readily enough, and I saw where the best vein was. It just seemed so...so round as I attempted to slip the needle in.

I watched as Jonathan did it that time, and though my stomach lurched I didn't feel I would actually pass out. I guess you could call it progress.

He turned away from me as he drank it. Not quite hiding, but not quite sharing the experience anymore either. Kinda like the way he did everything else with me.

Even though I felt like some crucial aspect of myself had just been pummeled into submission, if not outright killed, the face that I showed the world must not have changed very much. "Tina says I gotta feed you some real food, so I made spaghetti," Josh said as I emerged from the bedroom. "I wish we had some of that cheese in a can."

Tina came out of the kitchen and handed Jonathan a shake. "Y'all get some food in you and get ready to hear this idea."

I would've rather she just told me as I scarfed down the overcooked pasta with jarred sauce, but it would've been rude to make demands. Our hosts didn't seem to notice our silence since the afternoon news started out with its typical sensationalistic bang and we all turned our attention to the TV. The body of a fifteen-year-old girl was found dead in the Calumet River. The coroner had yet to determine the cause of death, but police reported multiple bite wounds on the victim. Police Chief Higgins would not confirm or deny that all of the bites on the victims were made by the same suspect. He would also not comment if the death was related to the body found in the Sherman Brothers' warehouse the week before.

Bitter cold expected to continue until the middle of next week. Jerry will have a full update with the weather.

And a five-car accident on the Ryan resulted in rush-hour-traffic times up to an hour greater than usual.

Tina picked up the remote and flicked off the set. “Okay,” she said, “here’s what we got. You got someone who owes you money but the FBI’s looking at him? Witch Hazel gonna go visit him with Mona’s cell phone. We’ll get him to wire the money to the currency exchange on the corner, and you get your money. For a thousand dollars each, Mona got friends who can get you I.D.s with dead guys’ Social Security numbers. Move to Indiana, get you some new drivers’ licenses, you be all set.”

It sounded good—better than anything I’d come up with, which had pretty much amounted to keep warm, eat and run.

I looked over at Jonathan. “Can Witch Hazel handle it?” he asked.

Tina pursed her lips, then said, “Girl, Witch Hazel knows what she’s doing.”

I cleared my throat in an attempt to reroute a strand of spaghetti that had tried to escape via my nose. I’d never considered calling Jonathan “Girl.”

~ * ~

Once we’d given V-Luvv our blessing, a series of phone calls ensued and we were told that Witch Hazel had contacted Murray from a payphone to be sure he’d be expecting her. A twenty-something vampire named Tom with pointy fangs, a green Mohawk and a silver ear cuff dropped off a cell phone in a baggie, then lingered around to ask Jonathan a few halting questions about his life in Communist Hungary “way back” in the 1980’s.

Tina called her workplace, a design firm where she was a night manager, and told them she’d be off another day. Josh called Star Cinema and told them he had diarrhea. Rachel, the honorary V-negative, came by with her vampiric beau. He was a mild-looking, quiet young man whose name I couldn’t retain for the life of me, and the two of them held hands and smooched every five minutes while we all waited for Witch Hazel to work her magic.

Somewhere among the movie recommendations and Tropical Mango oil smoothies, the cell phone, freshly swabbed with antiviral, played an unconvincing electronic rendition of Beethoven’s Fifth from its spot on the coffee table.

I looked up at Jonathan, who was staring at me with urgent, wide eyes.

“Do you want to get it?” I asked him.

“I never deal with Murray. You get it.”

I picked up the phone and hit the talk button. “Hello?”

“Mark?” Murray’s voice was a frantic whisper. “Oh my God.” He pronounced it “Gawd.”

“I’m glad you called,” I said.

“I’m so sorry. Oh my God, Mark. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Yeah, uh...obviously you know we’re in a spot...”

“You’re in a spot? If you press charges, Beacon’s gonna put me out on the street. I got mouths to feed, Mark. I’m a family man.”

Murray’s two daughters were both grown, lived in Skokie with their own families and probably made more money than he did. But that was beside the point. “Whoa, back up, Murray. What are you talking about? Me, press charges for what?”

There was a long moment in which I thought that maybe the phone had cut out even though I still heard the subtle ambient noise of the phone connection. And then Murray sighed. “They didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

He was still there. I heard him breathing. It wasn’t a good sign—I’d never known Murray to be at a loss for words. “It’s the paintings.”

“What paintings?”

“The ones we sold. All twenty of them, gone.”

“Yes. Because you sold them.”

“But the money, Mark. The money they paid with was fake.”

Good thing I was already sitting down, or else I probably would’ve fallen over. Murray didn’t owe us squat—unless Beacon’s insurance covered counterfeit payments, and I didn’t think Murray would’ve been quite so beside himself if they did.

“All of the money?” I asked stupidly.

“Every last bill. Except for a coin at the bottom that I’m told is a Hungarian Forint.”

Jonathan slipped his gloved hand onto my forearm. “Mark, what is it?”

I waved him away.

“Okay, look, Murray. Neither one of us could’ve seen it coming.” I was careful not to let the rest of the room in on the exact nature of the conversation, not until I’d tried to do some wheeling and dealing myself. “Right now you’re in a spot, and so are we. So why don’t we see what we can do so both of us walk away happy.”

“I always knew I could count on you. You’re like the son I never had.”

I figured his sons-in-law were probably a lot closer to his vision, being both Jewish and heterosexual, but I decided the current time was not the most ideal in which to bring it up. “What do you say to a ten percent payoff in cash, no lawsuits?”

Jonathan must have had some notion what was happening. He patted my arm reassuringly; I didn’t have the heart to tell him he was on the vein we’d tapped earlier.

“I don’t have that kind of cash liquid. How about ten grand, and another ten after the first of April?”

“We need it now, Murray. What about seventeen?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fine.”

“How do you want it? Messenger?”

“No, a messenger can be followed. Wire it, and make sure no one hears you.”

“All right.” He sighed heavily into the phone. “Gimme the location.”

We chose a privately owned currency exchange rather than a grocery store, since we reasoned that they’d be more likely to have that kind of cash in their coffers. It would take a business day, at least. But I just couldn’t risk the messenger, not with the FBI potentially watching Murray. Or worse, László.

I turned off the phone. The members of V-Luvv were making me feel like a regular three-ring circus. The support was wonderful, don’t get me wrong. I just wasn’t accustomed to having a gaggle of fans hanging on my every move. I excused myself and took Jonathan into the kitchen to talk.

“How low did he get you?” Jonathan asked. He smiled as he said it, which I couldn’t fathom. We were talking about our very survival, not some gigantic game of Monopoly.

“Fifteen.”

Jonathan shook his head. “You are selling me for less than a thousand per painting. For shame.”

“Seven fifty, to be exact.” I crossed my arms over my chest and Jonathan picked at the hem on the cuff of his glove. “The payment was counterfeit. But there was a real Hungarian coin in with all the rest.”

Jonathan sighed, and his smile went wistful. “Aside from the money, I think it is worse to know that László has twenty of my paintings.”

Worse? It was downright creepy. I imagined László building a house of cards with the giant canvasses and cavorting naked through the slightly skewed hallways. No doubt he’d really be doing something much more horrible than even I could imagine, like killing people and wearing their severed heads as hats while he romped.

“Our hosts are talking about shuffling us to another of their homes,” Jonathan said. His range of vampire hearing outstripped theirs, given that his body had hosted the virus more years than many of them had even been on the planet.

“I suppose that’s a good idea.”

We allowed them to fill us in themselves, rather than telling them that Jonathan had heard them whispering from the kitchen. Each of us had only a bag of clothes to our name, Jonathan’s with a few tools from Sears on the bottom, and that was about it. Josh replaced the plastic shopping bags with a couple of old nylon gym bags. Mine had a paper clip as a zipper tab and Jonathan’s had “Community Bank” silk-screened on its side. At least they were both black.

Rachel and what’s-his-name offered to take us in for the night, though I’d have to confine myself to the living room since that was the only room they kept negative-safe, for company’s sake. Rachel suggested I use the bathroom before I left, since she only had one, and she’d need to give it a scrub down when we got there. Josh packed a clean pillow and blanket into my old plastic Sears bag to hold me over for the night. Though I doubted I could even sleep at all.

I deduced from the address on a bank statement on the coffee table that Rachel's boyfriend's name was Trent. Funny, he didn't seem macho enough to be a Trent, though he was very nice. The four of us hung out with the vampire soaps playing in the background while we talked about nothing much, and Jonathan sketched a portrait of Rachel and Trent that even I could see with a number two pencil.

As morning approached, evidenced solely by the glowing blue numbers on the VCR since light couldn't possibly filter through the blackened windowpanes, Rachel laid a sheet of plastic that'd been spritzed with antiviral over the couch, and then covered it with one of Josh's sheets. Since there wasn't actual blood or saliva contact, the chance of catching the virus just from touching the couch fabric was about as likely as getting struck by lightning. But I supposed there was always the chance that in my sleep I would suckle a bolster pillow that a vampire had recently cried on. I was under quite a bit of stress.

We woke around three. Rachel had me shower first while the bathroom was still sanitized. I ended up drying off with Josh's blanket since Rachel had stopped sterilizing her laundry several months earlier. No one had thought to pack me anything to eat, so I was offered a peaches 'n' cream V-shake to tide me over. I didn't bother reading the label—I knew it was just some vegetable oil and water with an emulsification agent to keep them from separating. Plus sweetener and flavor, of course.

My first sip was perfectly hideous. The back of my throat seized like it did when I ate cake frosted with really cheap icing, the kind made of shortening rather than butter. The whole thing left an oily film inside my mouth, and my teeth felt slippery and weird. And it didn't really taste very much like peaches, either.

"Well?" Jonathan asked.

"It's fine."

"I would like them not as thick," he said. "But they are not too bad when they're cold."

I did my best to keep my expression neutral as I took a few more swallows of the liquid cake frosting. "Awfully sweet."

Jonathan shrugged. "Tastes better than peanut oil."

Chapter Sixteen

Josh showed up with the ice cream truck to take us to the currency exchange. I wondered if V-Luvv could actually be traced by the FBI. I supposed so, if the feds really set their minds to it. But given that Mona or Rachel or any of them could walk into a bathroom (albeit with a largish bag) and Witch Hazel could walk out, I suspected that if those kids were important enough in the scheme of things to register on the FBI's radar, that maybe they also took enough precautions to cover their tracks.

As I climbed into the passenger seat, Josh smiled at me pointedly. I steeled myself against the jingle, then I realized he had a bag of Chicken McNuggets pointing in my direction. I'd just had a 2,000 calorie vampire drink, but what the hell?

"Ever drink a V-shake?" I asked him.

"Cookies and cream tastes okay," he said, "but it's way cheaper to just get the real deal. 'Sides. You don't wanna see a pissed-off vampire looking for her breakfast that you happened to drink while you had the munchies."

I couldn't imagine ever drinking one of those things if there were even the remotest possibility of going to a convenience store and buying anything else.

We pulled up to the curb, and Josh knocked a couple of times to give everyone a chance to put on their sungear before I unsealed the hatch that led to the back, so I could check with Jonathan. It was jarring to see him crouching among the others in the converted ice cream cooler. He looked the same age as the V-Luvv members, but was so much older.

"I'd meant to teach you to shoot by now," he said.

"I'm not going to be shooting anybody, I'm just picking up our paycheck. And besides, I have a sissy gun, remember?"

"Show me." Jonathan held out his gloved hand. I pulled the pearl-handled gun out of my pocket and a bullet fell out along with it, clattering to the floor.

"That's cute," Tina said. "For a gun."

Jonathan pointed at a vintage T-Rex poster taped to the wall of the cooler. "The derringer is a very powerful weapon at close range." He held the gun about a yard away from the poster and aimed. "Cock the hammer first. That disengages the safety. Line this sight up with the target's chest and hold your arm steady while you squeeze the trigger. Don't aim for the head; you'll probably jerk your arm and miss."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." I probably would miss, but that was beside the point.

“It holds a big bullet for such a small gun, though. Just aim for the torso. And you get one shot. That’s it.”

“What’re the other bullets for, then?”

“If you have time to reload...” Jonathan pushed a button and cracked the gun in half. I made a mental note of the location of the release. Because if I ever did need to reload that gun, I’d sure show him. “The empty casing will be here. Pull it out, reload.”

“And the pointy end goes forward.” I batted my eyelashes. “Right?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes, snapped the gun shut and handed it to me. I stuck it back in my pocket.

“I don’t want you going in alone, but I don’t want you to be seen with me, either. I think that you look different enough with that beard that you wouldn’t necessarily be recognized, at least if we are not together.”

I supposed we could’ve gone with full-fledged disguises, complete with haircuts and dye jobs, but I didn’t really think that would fool anyone, so I hadn’t bothered suggesting it.

“Tina will go in with you. Aside from me, she is the oldest, strongest one here. We will need Josh to stay in the truck in case we have to drive away quickly.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m just picking up some money. And if I see anyone shady in there, I’ll turn around and walk back out. Okay?”

Jonathan nodded, and stared at me so hard that even though Tina was pulling on her sunhood and making ready to hit the currency exchange, I couldn’t budge.

After a long, long moment, Jonathan kissed his gloved fingertips and then pressed the backs of his knuckles to my cheek. “Okay.”

There were two windows at this particular currency exchange, and they were actually both staffed, which I recalled as being the exception rather than the norm. It had been years since I’d needed to use a currency exchange, since the primary function of currency exchanges is not, in fact, to exchange currency, but rather to cash paychecks for people too unsophisticated to have their own bank accounts. In my case, I’d just broken up with Roger the two-timer and didn’t have enough to open my own checking account, put a month-and-a-half security deposit on a new apartment and buy a bus pass. I really didn’t miss my twenties at all.

The clerks were both Latina, which was no big surprise. They needed the clerks to be bilingual because much of the clientele they catered to didn’t speak English. Their hair was not quite so big as I remembered, but it was still streaked orange. The chubby one was chewing gum like she was in a race to see who could pull out a filling first, and the slender one in the tiny little off-the-shoulder top kept twirling her permed hair with a pencil as she chatted with a weaselly guy in Spanish. Now, she could have actually been conducting business, for all I knew of Spanish, but her body language didn’t jibe. If it were me trying to slack off my work, I would’ve preserved the semblance of a work ethic by counting a stack of singles

over and over as I talked, all the while looking very serious. Or at least holding a clipboard. But that's just me.

The bigger girl had a line of three people going, and the one in front was arguing with her in Spanish and waving an electric bill. The clerk looked bored. She blinked and chewed her gum. I wondered why anyone would think the currency exchange could do anything about her electric bill, since all they do is take bill payments (for a fee) and route them to the utility companies. Some scam. I wish I'd thought of it.

Behind the angry electric bill lady was a kid with a pierced lip wringing a paycheck in his hands. I wanted to tell him to stop before he wore the numbers off. Next in line, a guy in his early thirties with spiky, bleached blond hair in a navy peacoat, jeans and combat boots noodled around on a Blackberry. For someone who'd probably been in line for quite a while, he looked pretty chipper. He was whistling—actually whistling—the “Blue Danube Waltz”, I think they call it. Maybe he found the currency exchange drama unfolding before him absurd, and was attempting to set it to music à la *America's Funniest Home Videos*. Or maybe he had a new video game on his PDA. Whatever the reason, he'd have to be pretty amused in order to keep a cheerful attitude like that, all things considered.

So the kid with the paycheck was unlikely to butt in on the conversation in the left-hand line in order to get service. He looked too wet behind the ears to be so assertive. The happy punk guy with the Blackberry...nah. Too happy. And me? Normally I would, but I was trying to keep a low profile. “Do you believe this shit?” Tina muttered. She'd taken off her sunhood, and I realized that the ubiquitous currency exchange bulletproof glass storefront windows had been painted black. It made me glad, just a little, that they'd put forth the effort to serve a segment of the population that was normally so disenfranchised. But then again, it probably just meant that they were casting their net for more poor, downtrodden people without checking accounts who would have no choice but to pay their exorbitant fees.

The chatting in one line continued. The arguing in the other line did too. The kid with the paycheck sighed loudly. The happy punk guy's whistling trailed off and he pocketed his Blackberry, then turned to look at me. “Do you speak Spanish?” he asked. I noticed two things right off. First, he was British—great accent. And second, he had a super-sharp set of fangs.

“No, I don't.”

“It'd be pretty useful around here, wouldn't it? Everyone I've dealt with 'round here has been Chicano. Is that the word?”

“Hispanic.”

“Hispanic. Right.”

The angry woman with the electric bill stormed out, and the kid with the paycheck got to the window. He didn't have his I.D. ready. He'd been standing there God knows how long and he hadn't gotten his driver's license out. “Give me a break,” Tina muttered.

“These places don’t really exchange a lot of currency,” the happy guy informed me. “They always have to pull out instructions to change my money. But they’re open later than banks, if you know what I mean.”

I tried to imagine him making a transatlantic flight with the virus and shuddered.

“You can go first, if you want,” he said. “I’m in no hurry.”

I was itching to get out of there. Jonathan probably thought I’d been murdered and would come in with Phil’s pistol all fired up and massacre us all. But I didn’t want the vampire chatting me up while I got a wire for fifteen grand.

I wondered if he was flirting with me. I knew how to have safe sex with vampires now. Huh.

Not that I’d consider sleeping with him, of course. I just think things like that, I don’t do them. Besides, I was too busy carrying a torch for Jonathan that’d start a second Great Chicago Fire if it got any more intense.

“Lookit this gizmo I picked up on State Street,” the vampire said, and he whipped a tiny, instamatic camera out of his peacoat pocket. He leaned back against me, stuck his arm out and shot.

Behind me, Tina grabbed hold of my love handles, and even through my coat, clutched me hard enough to bruise.

“I think, I um...”

The vampire pulled a little tab thing out of the camera. “You want it?” He peeled off a backing and stuck it to my chest like a postage-stamp-sized name tag. It hadn’t developed yet. It just looked like grayish instamatic emulsion.

The paycheck kid finished up at the window. The British vampire winked at me, said, “Cheers,” and went on to change some pounds sterling into dollars. He shot a picture of the chunky clerk and stuck it to the outside of her barred window, then left, whistling.

The clerk looked at the small photo of herself with the same boundless enthusiasm with which she conducted all of her other transactions.

“Hi. I’m picking up a wire transfer,” I said.

“See some I.D.”

I gave her my driver’s license and asked for my pickup in twenties. Luckily, the name Mark Hansen was common enough that it didn’t seem to ring a bell for her. She pulled out three bank-sealed stacks of twenties, broke one open, wet her thumb in a small plastic pot of pink wax, and started counting them out. Her fingers flew like a Vegas poker dealer’s, forming neat fans of one hundred. She made ten fans and then squared up the stack, counting it once more to be thorough.

I looked at the two sealed stacks. Both had *2000 US Dollars* printed on them in bold lettering. “That’s only five thousand dollars,” I said.

She looked bored. “That’s the most you can send in a day.”

My stomach churned. “But there’s supposed to be fifteen.”

She initialed a couple of boxes on a yellow carbonless form, stamped it with a big, round, metal stamper, then slid it beneath the bars of her window. “Sign at the bottom,” she said.

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” I asked. After all, she worked there. I didn’t. She had to know something. I felt an overwhelming surge of empathy for the woman who’d been yelling about her electric bill.

The clerk chewed her gum more vigorously. “Five thousand. That’s what the paper says.”

Damn it, Murray, damn it. He should have known. He should have warned me.

“Just take it,” Tina whispered. “It’s better than none.”

I signed on the line at the bottom and the girl slid the stacks of money through. Tina slipped a stack into her inner coat pocket and I did the same with the other stack and the half-stack that’d been counted twice.

“There’s supposed to be fifteen,” I whispered to Tina.

“We’ll figure it out.” She looped her arm through mine. “Let’s just get out of here.”

I turned and began walking to the door, my body numb, propelled only by Tina’s momentum. Oblivious to our distress, the cashier in the off-the-shoulder top laughed aloud, and her voice carried easily through the bulletproof, barred-glass window.

“Sun’s down.” Tina peeled off the sunhood she’d just slipped on. “Go in back and tell Jonathan what happened, and I’ll ride up front.”

I got into the truck first, stooping down to slip through the heavy hatch into the back. They’d remodeled since the days of sundaes and popsicles in the typical piecemeal, no-budget way they seemed to do everything. Two shag-carpeted benches lined either side, and a couple of nets hung from the roof that were filled with sleeping bags, V-shakes and other emergency gear. I planted myself across from Jonathan as Rachel scooted over to make room for me. “The money—”

“They found the Audi,” he said, his voice flat.

“What? Who?”

“The police. They found the car. It is all over the news.”

It made no sense to me that a stolen car would be a very exciting story—even if that car belonged to us. But maybe it was a slow night.

“There was a corpse in it. A sixteen-year-old boy. His whole body bitten.”

No. Not very slow after all.

So it hadn’t been a gang of deviant vampire derelicts leaving a body trail after all. It was László. And he’d managed, yet again, to paint Jonathan as a sadistic freak, while he was free to continue terrorizing us.

“Who the fuck is this guy?” I said. “He closed our bank accounts, bought out your paintings with counterfeit money, stole our car, killed our doorman...and now this. He’s killing total strangers and eating them, and making it look like you did it. Who the fuck is he and how can he do this?”

I could feel Rachel and Trent staring at me like I was some kind of space alien. For all they knew, the radical right-wing Christians were out to martyr us, and the FBI was the worst of our problems. And we’d never told them anything different.

But I didn’t care. I had to know, and I had to know now.

Jonathan had this look of horror on his face I’d never seen before. Sure, I’d blown our cover in front of the poor kids we’d used to shield ourselves from that madman for the past few days, but screw that. They were clever and resourceful—they could deal with it. I deserved an explanation.

Jonathan wasn’t looking at me. At least, not at my eyes. “Where did you get that?” he whispered urgently. He pointed at the stupid Polaroid stuck to my chest.

“In the—” I waved my hand in the direction of the currency exchange. I was too mad to even explain it to him. “Jonathan, tell me. Who is he and how can he do this?”

The truck screeched and fishtailed as Josh slammed on the brakes. Jonathan smashed hard into the insulated wall, and Trent tumbled onto him. Rachel bounced off me and a sleeping bag saved me from splitting my knees open on the corrugated metal floor.

Just what we needed. A fucking accident. Except there’d been no impact on the truck, so we were okay. We could get rerouted, drive around.

A tinny police voice broadcast over a speaker carried into the truck bed. “Put your hands in the air. Do not exit the vehicle.”

Tina yanked open the hatch and I could see the strobe of police lights illuminating her wide eyes. “It’s the Feds,” she said. “Run!”

Chapter Seventeen

Jonathan yanked open the back door of the truck, and we ran. I heard shots fired behind us but they didn't seem real, like an old Western was on TV in another room, maybe. Playing really loud.

I skidded on ice and dodged between a trash can and an SUV. Jonathan kept low to the ground, and even still he was so much faster than me that he had to keep pausing, crouched behind cars, so I could catch up to him.

We passed a gangway, and my initial impulse was to dodge down it, as if I could get away, if only I could get to a different street. But I realized I probably just would've been an easier target if I were running all that way without anything to hide behind.

I caught up to Jonathan again, skidding on ice. "Stay in the crowds." He veered toward a group of people waiting for a bus. "They won't shoot."

I hoped he was right. I didn't want it to be on my head if a little old lady got shot because I happened to be dodging around her.

"Freeze! Police!"

Crap, they were right behind us. But the firecracker-pops of their guns did stop once we were in a crowd.

While he waited for me, Jonathan had enough time to turn and survey whatever was happening behind us. I just had to flat-out run, and boy was I happy with those dorky cross-trainers. We sprinted another block and I was really feeling it. Lungs on fire, the taste of copper in the back of my throat, the whole deal. That runner's high they're always talking about when they pass "the wall"? I needed it. Bad.

Up ahead, Jonathan went down on his knee and put his hand to the sidewalk, listening, feeling. I caught up to him, positive that I must be breathing blood by then, my lungs were so raw. "You go without me." I was angry that words required air. "Can't keep up." A pair of shots rang out, then another.

Jonathan grabbed my sleeve. "This way," he snapped. And then I saw where he was headed. A subway station.

Omigod. Perfect. So perfect. I remembered the look he'd had on his face when he was touching the ground. He'd been checking to see if a train was coming.

The runner's high blossomed in my aching chest as we ran to the plexiglass and metal mouth that led down to the trains. I took the stairs three at a time. Heck, I'm tall. I could at least do that. Jonathan crashed into a huge woman who lurched to one side at the last moment as he was trying to pass, and she spun

around, dropping a paper grocery bag she'd been carrying. I jumped the bag—actually jumped it—and it was just like *Chariots of Fire*.

Jonathan's black coat billowed behind him as he soared over a turnstile. The people milling around us seemed to be moving in slow motion, some staring in outrage and some in amusement, but all of them a sea of frozen figures that were easily navigated.

If I thought too hard about jumping that turnstile, it wouldn't have happened. But I got both hands to one side of me and pushed myself up and over like I was getting out of a swimming pool, and then holy crap, I'd done it, I was over.

"Mark! Now!" Jonathan cried, and the whole subway vibrated as a train pulled into the station two more flights down.

Please, oh please, don't let there be anything for me to slip in—a puddle of bum's urine, a splash of congealed grease. One more flight of stairs, three at a time, three at a time and I was on the platform, running for my life to make that very last car.

Jonathan was in, trying to get someone to hold the train. I heard his voice, frantic and loud with his accent thick, difficult to understand. He didn't realize all he had to do was block the door with his body and it wouldn't close. He'd never ridden the subway.

The doors started closing and my stride faltered. At least he'd get away. The Feds might get me, but what could I tell them? I wouldn't know where he would go. My guess would be as good as theirs.

A stranger's hand shot out and blocked the doors, and they bounced open again. The conductor's head popped out of the third car down. Annoyed, but tough luck, pal. I was gonna make that train.

I staggered onto the car and the doors slid shut. The train lurched and began pulling away as men in trench coats, suits and ties ran alongside, neck and neck at first, but slowly losing ground as the train picked up speed.

I doubled over as my lungs screamed in earnest for air, and I breathed like I'd just been drowning. "Thank you," I said, eventually, to whomever had probably saved my life with the mere flick of a hand. I looked up to see a Hispanic teenaged boy with a wispy mustache and close-cropped haircut. He was chewing a toothpick and looking down at me with an expression of mild interest, but mostly boredom.

"De nada."

I found Jonathan slumped on the floor across the aisle from me. His black coat spread around him, and his black hair tumbled forward to hide his luminescent white skin. The aisles weren't terribly crowded but there weren't any seats left, and the standing riders had moved toward the center of the car to give Jonathan wide berth. At first I thought maybe he was just incredibly winded, or maybe the heat pouring out from the vent above his head was too much for his heat-sensitive vampire constitution, but then I heard his breath really rattle.

“What happened?” I lurched as the train jerked to another stop. The conductor’s voice crackled something about Chicago and State over the announcement system, and a couple of people got on behind me, squeezing themselves against the graffiti-and-gum-covered rails to either side of the door to avoid touching a pair of strange men on the car’s grooved rubber floor.

“Shot.”

“Holy crap,” cried the kid who’d held the door for me. “You jus’ got shot?”

“Are you bleeding?” I flinched back.

“I don’t think so.” Jonathan’s breath wheezed in again. “Rubber bullets.”

I wanted to slap him. Which made no sense. But I didn’t know what that meant—rubber bullet. Did it bounce off you? Was it like getting beaned really hard with a superball? Or was it really a bullet?

“Man,” said the kid. It sounded like “Mang.” “Them things fuckin’ hurt.”

Jonathan had shed his coat and torn open his shirt in a move that should have been gorgeous, but considering the context, was only horrifying. Two black circles stood out violently on his white back, one toward the shoulder and one on his ribs. Blue circles ringed the black ones, and fuchsia circles ringed those. He pressed his face against the disgusting rail wall. “Clotting.”

“What do I do?” I said. Actually, I think I was yelling.

“Break it up. The low one.” He bared his fangs in a grimace of pain.

“How?”

“Use your fingers.”

I insisted to myself that this was not happening, though I knew that my nightmares would never have been so creative, nor so visceral. Jonathan clutched the chrome pole that held up the rail, and I heard the bolts in the floor screech as he nearly dislodged it with the strength he usually concealed so well.

I batted at all of my pockets searching for my antimicrobial gloves, just in case the clot would burst all over me and reward me for my bravery by infecting me. My palms slapped a gun, a brick of money, some bullets—metal ones, and then the gloves. I struggled into them and started to poke one of the convex blackened lumps.

“Damn it, Mark,” he growled, sounding more like Bela Lugosi than ever. “Press them out. They will reabsorb faster.”

I swallowed bile and stuck my thumb into the lowest one. It felt like half a golf ball.

“Aw, mang, you a vampire,” said the Hispanic kid. He was pretty quick.

Jonathan hissed, more of a pain hiss than a cat hiss. I did my best to ignore the fleshy, lumpen sensation of the clot and thanked the universe that I hadn’t been able to afford the really expensive gloves—ones which would’ve let me feel even more.

After a few of my inept jabs, the lump did seem to break up and disperse, at least somewhat. Though the whole area was so swollen it was hard to tell if maybe it hadn't just swelled up to disguise the point of impact.

The train rattled along, lights occasionally flickering. The crowd shifted behind me, though I did my best to block out my awareness of them and simply worked on breaking up the nasty things under Jonathan's skin. "Here he come," said the kid, and he turned his back toward us and gave me a waist-high view of his gigantic, oversized jeans drooping halfway off his ass.

Suddenly I thought *he* was László. Even though I didn't know what he was going to look like (though Nosferatu was probably my best bet), I swung around as if I'd recognize him.

The conductor was bent over me. He'd come through the little door between the cars, the ones that say you're not supposed to use them but are never locked.

"I'll call the paramedics," he said, then stepped past us to unlock the little conductor box that's at the back of each car.

"No, I'm fine," Jonathan insisted as he struggled into both his shirt and coat at the same time.

The conductor paused and gave him the hairy eyeball. He knew something was fishy, though the hideous marks on Jonathan's back thankfully didn't scream "bullet wound". At least they were nothing like the ones they show on TV.

"I have no insurance." Jonathan let his accent grow even thicker. "I cannot afford an ambulance. Please, it is nothing."

The train slowed and stopped, and the conductor stepped over to the little box on the wall and flipped on his talk button. "Grand and State," he called out. "Grand and State." He opened the doors.

"Go, now," Jonathan said, and he pushed me so hard I nearly went sprawling. We staggered out into a small group of commuters, second shift techs and people looking to hit a sale or two on Michigan Avenue. Not enough people to lose ourselves among, not if someone were really looking for us hard. But enough to confuse someone who wasn't really trying.

The train sat there for a long moment, and I thought that maybe the conductor was going to hold it there and call the police. Then it lurched and started up again, and rolled away with a deafening metallic rattle.

Jonathan wove among the commuters and sat down heavily on a bench made more to discourage graffiti with its widely spaced wooden slats than to provide comfort. I sat beside him, still breathing hard from the run five minutes before, and my heart pounded from both exertion and terror.

"What are we going to do?" I said. A northbound train pulled in, and I considered getting on that and taking us way up north, maybe even to Evanston, but traffic headed that direction was much thicker with office grunts leaving their nine-to-six jobs and packing in like sardines. I wasn't sure if Jonathan could stand to be pressed up against anyone like that, not with those wounds on his back, and I wondered how

anyone managed to ride such a crowded subway without finding themselves sprouting fangs one day. Or dying. The doors snapped open and shut a few times as everyone held their breath and tried to wedge themselves in, and then the second train clattered off, a plastic shopping bag floating in its wake.

The few people who'd gotten off the northbound train found their exits, which left Jonathan and me alone in the station on the bench. A subterranean chill crept over me, and I put an arm around him and drew his head down onto my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He threaded a hand between us and rubbed the general vicinity of the higher welt. "I will be."

I was staring at the cracked concrete platform when I noticed a play of shadow that resolved itself into the silhouette of a head and a pair of shoulders. The other commuters hadn't all cleared the platform after all.

I glanced up at whomever was intrusive enough to ruin such a brutally earned moment of closeness between Jonathan and me, and found myself doubly annoyed that the interloper was wearing sunglasses. At night. Underground.

But then the bald head, goatee and other Anton LaVey-like affectations fell together and I realized it was our old friend, Mister Smith. He finished keying something into his cell, then pocketed it.

Jonathan was on his feet already. I stood, still winded, my calves burning. I stuck my hand in my pocket and my fingers curled around the derringer.

"Who are you?" said Jonathan.

"A friend of a friend," said Mister Smith, who was now annoying me with not only his proximity, his sunglasses and his name, but his clichéd response, as well.

"What does he want?" Jonathan asked.

Smith grinned. That was annoying too. His fangs were too big for his face. No sense of proportion.

"He just wants you to know that he is coming."

"Let him come," Jonathan said.

"And when he wishes to see you, there will be nowhere to hide." Smith spun on his heel and walked toward the stairway, and I was annoyed that he'd developed such a great vampire stride. He really didn't deserve it.

A hundred paces or so away, he turned back. There was a gun in his hand where his phone had been. "László wants you to remember him by this until then."

He fired.

A dark blur flew in front of me, and I fell back. At first I was more stunned than anything else. But then it hurt like hell.

The subway tunnel stretched and tilted around me and the lights dimmed.

I was pretty sure he hadn't fired a rubber bullet.

Chapter Eighteen

My sense of hearing came back first, the sound of drips, some higher in pitch and some lower, the plinks and plunks staggered in time, too irregular in relation to one another to form a rhythm. The sound painted a vague picture in my bleary mind of something hollow and vast.

Cold, damp air played over my face, and it felt both cloying in its moistness and comforting at the same time. Because I was hot. Sweating. And the air was cool, if too humid for my liking.

With the awareness of the feel of air on my face came the perception of its smell, murky and moldy and tinged with urine.

I struggled to open my eyes but couldn't. I was able to get my elbows beneath me, but the left side of my chest exploded in a sickening surge of pain.

"Mark, stop. Lie back."

"Where are we? I can't see."

"Shh, be quiet. I can hear you, I'm right here."

Jonathan's hand rested gently on my right shoulder and I grabbed his arm, clutching at a handful of his flowing silk sleeve. "I can't see," I repeated, pitching my voice lower. I hadn't realized how shrill it'd been until I'd heard Jonathan's in comparison, soothing and low.

"It is dark. But you must be still. You've been shot."

The not-rubber bullet came back to me, and I was way more than just annoyed with Mister Smith. "I take it this isn't the hospital."

"Smith would find you there. And kill you."

I couldn't imagine that the candy stripers would be able to fend off an icky, bald, gun-toting Czechoslovakian vampire any more than I could. Although the FBI would probably get into the act at that point. And then I'd tell them all I knew about László and the illustrious Mister Smith. Which would fit inside a toy teacup.

"So this being-shot thing," I said. "Is it bad?" It hurt to breathe. That couldn't be good.

"I got the bullet out." His voice had that flatness I'd come to recognize as him holding back a detail, or maybe a hundred—and without even seeing his gaze dart over to some piece of furniture as if it were the most interesting thing in the room. I was getting good.

"You're saying you did surgery on me. Did you have your gloves on?"

Jonathan sighed.

Crap. Oh crap.

“It would not have mattered.”

“Could you be a little more ambiguous?”

“The bullet passed through me first.”

“So he aimed at me, and you tried to take the bullet for me.” Well, shit. Of all the ways to get infected. There was a chance the virus hadn’t taken hold of me, with his blood touching mine directly. The same chance I had of being crowned the king of Zimbabwe. Which may not even be a monarchy, for all I knew. I told myself that I’d be a major asshole if I stayed very pissed off about it. I wished it felt more romantic. Mostly it just hurt like hell.

“He didn’t just aim at you. He aimed at your heart.”

I pretended I was doing the Pledge of Allegiance to remind myself where that organ kept itself. The bullet wound was only a few inches higher, up toward my collarbone.

“If he were farther away I would have stopped the bullet. But at such close range, I just refracted it.”

“So if you didn’t hop in...”

“His aim was true. It would have killed you.”

Too bad no one had been videotaping. I’m sure it would have been quite a sight. I sighed and tried not to think about the virus killing me. Or the notion of having a slapdash surgery performed on me somewhere in a subway service tunnel—because where else could we possibly be? The dripping was the seepage from the Chicago River and the ubiquitous smell of urine was exactly what it seemed to be.

“What did you dig out the bullet with?” I asked.

“The screwdriver.”

“Jesus.”

“Go ahead and pray, if it has ever done you any good.”

I rolled my eyes. Then I reminded myself that Jonathan could probably see perfectly well in the dark. “So when do my vampire superpowers kick in?” I asked. If I was one of the lucky few the virus didn’t kill, first. Neither of us needed to say that part out loud.

“Stage three. But you will be so ill you will hardly notice.”

Wonderful. Stage one, my current stage, was the point at which most people infected their friends, lovers and casual acquaintances because they didn’t know they even had the virus. There was usually a mild fever and a little achiness, like maybe they’d slept wrong. It lasted a couple of weeks unless one morning they just didn’t happen to wake up.

Assuming you survived stage one, stage two didn’t kill you, but it was pretty ugly nonetheless. That’s when solid food stopped going down. People start checking into hospitals during stage two just to keep hydrated for the week.

They'd normally go back home during stage three. Their GI systems would be clean as whistles and they couldn't tolerate IV needles anymore since their bodies were starting to reject them, plus any piercings they might have had. Even though they felt like shit, they had to start figuring out how they were going to get their daily dose of blood. Because without it they'd just shrivel up and die.

Oh God, I'd have to drink blood. Within a month.

The backs of Jonathan's fingers caressed my cheek, and I realized my face was all screwed up, and he could see that as well as he saw me roll my eyes. But we didn't need to settle for vampire kisses anymore, not us. Now he could tear off my pants and fuck me on the spot; at least I was wearing clean underwear. Except that I'd just been shot in the chest, so it wouldn't be all that much fun on my part.

"Someone's coming," Jonathan said. Night vision, supersonic hearing...I don't know how he knew. "He is doing a job for us. But it is best if you don't speak to him. Just lie there and let me handle it."

How condescending did that sound? Unfortunately, since I was flat on my back with a bullet wound in my chest and the vampire virus starting to course through my bloodstream, I guessed I didn't have any choice.

"Did you find all of it?" Jonathan asked. His tone was a clipped bark I'd never heard from him before.

"Yes." A timid voice. A little dusty, like he needed to clear his throat.

"Set it out, all of it. I want to see."

In all the time I'd worked for Jonathan, he had never ordered me to do something. He always asked—and, sad to say, it was sexy in its own perverse way to listen to him being so incredibly butch. My bullet wound throbbed as my pulse sped, and I did my best to quiet my mind by imagining a calm beach on a balmy afternoon.

A few feet away from us a bag rattled, and things made small hollow clumps as they were set down, probably on damp concrete.

"Light a candle," Jonathan ordered. There were plastic bag rustlings, the sound of a match being struck, and then a small light flared, bright to my light-starved eyes. I quickly closed my eyelids down to small slits and played unconscious. I could make out the shape of a derelict in an oversized tweed coat. He flinched at the light as it flared, and his teeth—I only caught a glimpse, but that was plenty. All four front teeth were horribly long, with exposed, brown roots. His other teeth were long too, but the front pair were so particularly disfigured he could hardly close his mouth.

The rest of him? I dunno, a dirty guy who needed a shave, who acted older than he looked, like a college student playing the part of a seventy-year-old man in clumsy makeup.

But the teeth. I could hardly comprehend anything else about him aside from those horrible, painful-looking teeth.

"What is this?" Jonathan pointed down at a bottle. "I told you no aspirin. Tylenol, Advil, any of those other things. But not aspirin."

The bum wrung his filthy hands and stared down at the bottle. "It says Bayer." He flinched as he said it, as if Jonathan might smite him for trying to stick up for himself. And who knows, maybe Jonathan would.

"It is just aspirin, a brand name for it. You told me you could read."

The horrid, dirty man flinched harder, and pulled his shoulder up to guard his face full of overgrown brown teeth. "I can read. It says Bayer."

"No, this won't do." Jonathan sent the aspirin skittering away with an aristocratic flick of his hand. "You will need to bring something else."

The bum's head drooped in a posture of rejection so overacted it would have been absurd if he weren't so abhorrent.

"And where is the cat?" said Jonathan.

The filthy man fished out another wrinkled plastic shopping bag and held it out.

"That is not a cat," Jonathan said, without even looking inside. I supposed he could smell. My stomach lurched a little as I thought of myself being able to play "name that roadkill" with my nose alone. I tried my best not to gag too visibly.

"This is better," said the bum, stroking the bag. "You don't want a cat."

Jonathan took the shopping bag. The bum brightened. His shoulders relaxed visibly and the tips of his incisors showed over his cracked bottom lip as he tried to press his lips together in a thin smile. Jonathan opened the bag calmly and reached in, as if he were bartering over some figs with a local on the shores of the Mediterranean. His lips pulled back in a snarl and he pelted the bum with something from the bag. It hit him with a sound like a baseball striking a mitt. "I do not eat rats." Jonathan's voice sounded sharper, though he hadn't raised it. He flung another, striking the bum's hands where they shielded his head. "If you ever bring me another, I'll beat you with it."

The bum did a little Quasimodo-like stoop-and-grovel and backed out of range of the flung rats. Luckily I found it funny, at least on some level, or for sure I would've tossed my cookies and been a very unconvincing unconscious man.

Jonathan threw the rest of the bag, and it hit the bum in the chest with a thump. "I want the drugs and the cat or the deal is off."

"But you promised me twenty dollars."

"And you brought me the wrong things. Now go." Jonathan stepped forward threateningly. "Go!"

The hideous man loped away half-crouched, clutching the bag of rats to his chest.

"This is all just a really vivid hallucination," I said. "Right?"

"I had hoped he wasn't that much of a half-wit. To survive the disease so many years without medical care, without money or shelter or support, I thought it was possible he might be clever, even a little."

"Hold up. He was a vampire?"

Jonathan nodded. "Couldn't you tell? He's been drinking rats so long his skull has deformed."

And then I couldn't help it. The Chicken McNuggets started making a reappearance.

"Shh, Mark, be calm." Jonathan cradled my head as I yakked into one of the plastic bags. I hoped it had been used to carry candles, and not dead rats. Of course that notion just made the gag factor kick in double-time.

His fingers stroked my hair as I relieved myself of the food, which was aided by the slipperiness of the V-shake I'd consumed much earlier. When I was done he set the bag aside and continued to stroke my hair. I tried to look into his eyes, but the small, flickering candle shed its light from atop a rusted 55 gallon drum, and Jonathan's eyelashes cast shadows on his face like thick, black smudges.

"You touched dead rats with those hands," I said finally, and though I didn't think I could possibly sleep, things seemed to be growing fuzzy anyway. Hard to say if I was in shock or I was just cold, but I couldn't stop shivering. I think I caught Jonathan with a wistful smile on his face as he trailed the side of his pinky finger across my forehead.

Chapter Nineteen

I was hungry when I woke up. I supposed that was a good thing. It meant I was alive, and all.

Jonathan was sitting beside me, resting his back against a concrete tunnel wall. The sleeve of his black shirt had torn at the shoulder seam, and a hint of his pale skin showed through. “Weren’t you supposed to have been shot?” I said.

“The bullet got me here.” He lifted his arm to show me his side. I couldn’t really see anything by the light of a single votive candle, but I took his word for it. “I guess I leapt higher than I meant to in the heat of the moment.”

I remembered the dark blur. “You did. You totally dove.”

“I suppose.” He leaned over and picked up a Big Gulp cup that sat beside him. “You should drink. It tastes bad, but it will be okay.”

I took a small sip and shuddered. “What’s this supposed to be?”

“It’s water. Filtered through a few hundred yards of concrete.”

I focused in on the dripping noises all around us and wished I hadn’t made the connection. “Couldn’t Ralphie the Ratman have scored us some Perrier?”

“I wish I hadn’t had to use him at all. What if László gets hold of him? Or...Smith?”

“Smithski?” I suggested.

He didn’t seem to find my sense of humor amusing at that very moment. “He would lead them right to us. Which is why we should move, if you are up to it.”

Move? Hello, I’d just been shot. Oh, wait, but so had he. And then he’d managed to drag me to safety, perform surgery on me with a screwdriver, hire a new assistant, and sit my bedside vigil. In my own defense, though, I didn’t clot nearly as well as he did. Not yet, anyway.

I tried to sit up, and found that although it hurt just as badly as it had before, the tunnel didn’t go all screwy around me, and I didn’t get that whooshing noise in my ears. “Maybe we can move,” I said.

“Here, take some Tylenol.” Jonathan gave me a couple of pills, and I washed them down with the world’s most intense mineral water. “It probably doesn’t seem like much, but it will help some.”

I held my breath and sipped some more water. It wasn’t so bad if I didn’t breathe through my nose. And at least it was cool.

“Are you hungry?”

“It depends. Did Rat Boy touch my food?”

Jonathan sighed. “Don’t wait until you are starving to death to stop being so picky. Remember, you won’t be able to eat much longer.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Oh, so now this is my fault?” Jonathan thumped his chest, the picture of melodramatic indignation. “Should I have stood by and done nothing while he shot you?” He reached into a plastic bag and pulled out a handful of Slim Jims, and dumped them into my lap.

“What are you getting all fired up about?” I asked him, as I wondered if the Slim Jims would give me heartburn.

“This,” he said, gesturing around at...I don’t know what. The tunnel, maybe. “This.” He waved his hand around in my general vicinity. “I am hiding in a stinking tunnel too. I am tired and hungry too. I am frightened too.” His accent had grown a bit thick at that point. I don’t think it was on purpose. “So could you stop making me out to be the bad guy?”

“Who said I was? You do that just fine all by yourself.” I finally managed to find the tab where the plastic could be separated and pulled the two halves apart. The Slim Jim smelled amazing. I couldn’t imagine why I hadn’t ever tried one before. “But I think you do it for all the wrong reasons. You’re mad at yourself for passing a disease around that you didn’t even know you had, but you think it’s okay that you knowingly put me in danger and then keep secrets from me.”

Jonathan thunked back against the concrete wall like I’d just knocked the wind out of him. “I didn’t think he would find me in America.”

“Really. And the five hundred routes you made me take through the city when I did your errands...you invented those to keep ahead of ACN.”

“Just because I didn’t think he would look here didn’t mean I was going to be careless.”

“So you’ve been hiding from him all along. And here I thought you were ashamed of being V-positive.”

He pulled his knees up to his chest, crossed his arms over them and lowered his face. Maybe the shame thing wasn’t too far off the mark, either.

“You know, you could really score some points with me if you came clean.”

“What do you mean?” he said into his knees.

“Tell me about László. Tell me everything. I’m in this whole thing ass-deep with you and I think I at least deserve to know why.”

Jonathan hugged his knees for a long time. I thought he was probably thinking up a pithy, lame response that would raise more questions than it would answer. As the silence dragged on, I thought that maybe he didn’t actually agree with me, and maybe he didn’t think I deserved to know why I was living in a subway tunnel and not my converted Victorian in Boystown.

“It doesn’t seem like enough,” he said, finally, “to explain that I was very young. But I was. So young.”

He sat for another long while with his head still down, and he sighed and haltingly started again. “Not in years. Hardly younger than Josh. But immature, stupid, full of myself?” He shrugged. His shoulders rose on either side of his mop of tangled hair. “Or maybe just caught up in the heat of passion.

“I had thought about emigrating to avoid the enlistment, but it is not so easy if you don’t have money, a lot of money. Or maybe connections in another country, which I also had none. My father was insufferable anyway, and since I was too lazy to figure out a way to avoid it, I let the army take me just to get out of his house.”

“How old were you?”

“Seventeen, then. Some of my friends had babies on the way, so of course they got married and were no longer of interest to me. Their wives bored me, their marriages bored me, they bored me. Of course I know now that it was because I was a homosexual. But you didn’t talk about things like that then. Not where I grew up.

“And then the army.” He raised his head up, rested his chin on his crossed arms and stared off into the dark.

“You had to be careful not to get caught, but I think that was much of the thrill. Stifling your breaths while another boy reached under your blankets in the bunkhouse, counting the days until you had guard duty with another boy who was as hungry for some kind of contact as you were...I doubt they were all gay. Some of them were probably just desperate. But some of them made me want to desert and run off to Paris, Berlin, maybe Venice, take a new name and start a new life.

“But we were too cowardly to really do such a thing. And we contented ourselves with frantic couplings behind storage sheds, and stolen caresses in the dark.”

Okay. He didn’t need to make it sound so hot. Luckily I was covered by his big wool coat and could pretend it wasn’t better than porn.

“After the first few I stopped getting very attached. You might know them for a few months, maybe a year, but then their terms of service would be over and they’d go back to their wives or girlfriends at home, or maybe they would actually get a visa and head for Paris. But either way, they never looked back.

“I was nineteen when László joined our division. He had his own quarters like the other officers, though he was not really one of them. Our captain had been having trouble with one of the local businessmen...it was a strange mixture of communism and capitalism in those days, and most often the biggest bullies ended up in charge of the money, if not the government.

“This man, Horvath, wanted our troops out of his village. He said we were sucking it dry, and we probably were. The businesses were required to give the officers bribes, and the taverns catered for free to the soldiers on leave.

“The captain brought László in to get rid of Horvath...and to make an example of him.”

“What was he, a sniper?”

Jonathan laughed, a mirthless little bark. “Hardly. I am a better shot than he is. No, he was more of a saboteur.”

“Oh.”

“Special Ops, they would call it in your army. He was not drafted like the rest of us, who were waiting to do our thirty months and then get on with our lives. He was a career soldier.”

Jonathan reached for me and I flinched away. My mind was still reeling with the images of pretty Hungarian soldier boys giving each other hand jobs under scratchy wool blankets in the barracks. But he’d only been reaching for his coat pocket. He tactfully said nothing about my little cringe.

“You have already met him,” he said. He stuck the postage stamp-sized photo to the back of my hand.

I stared at the chipper blond vampire, whose face took up most of the small frame. His head tilted toward mine. I was blinking in the photo and the top of my head was cut off.

“No, that can’t be him,” I said. “That guy was British.”

“László attended Imperial College, London. That’s where he learned English.”

I stared in horror at the grinning face so close to mine in the tiny photo.

“He speaks a dozen languages, at least. His hair is different now, but his eyes are the same. He has not aged much, which is no surprise.”

“Go ahead and finish that thought. Since you gave him the virus.”

Jonathan curled his legs up against himself again.

“One of these days you’ll need to let it go, Jonathan. It’s got to be very romantic to be a tortured artist-type, pining away because life is so unbearable beneath the burden of sins you drag around with you wherever you go. But you were kids, you were fucking around, and you got sick. It’s not your fault any more than it is his.”

“It gets worse,” he said. And I shut up and listened.

“This is what I hate the most. I knew within moments of meeting him that there was something very wrong with him.” Jonathan tapped the side of his head. “Obsessive, maybe. And cruel. That’s what made him so good at his work. And so the captain treated him like a king, and in turn he bought me presents, arranged for me to have an extra day of leave. It was flattering, you know? He was very handsome, and important. And he seemed to think I was special.”

“I only had two more weeks left in my term once he’d joined the unit. I almost told him, one night as we sat outside the village and stared up at the stars, smoked cigarettes and...” Jonathan picked the photo off me and pressed it between his fingertips. “But something stopped me from saying anything. Maybe I was worried that he would be angry, or do something strange. I don’t know. For whatever reason, I had kept it to myself that I would be gone in just a few days.

“And then the day before I left, Istvan died. He was the boy I’d been with from the village. I hadn’t seen as much of him once László started paying attention to me, because I knew there would be jealousy—which was unheard of among me and my other partners, since we were all basically interchangeable to one another.

“I didn’t know Istvan had the virus, not then. I convinced myself that László had just gotten rid of the competition by poisoning him. He knew about poisons. He knew about many things that people shouldn’t know. I realized I was glad that I hadn’t told László I was leaving. Since he thought he was too good to talk to the regular enlisted men, none of my friends had mentioned it to him either. He was on night watch then, and had been asleep the morning I packed my duffel bag and left.

“I didn’t care to see my father again, so I headed for Budapest instead of my home village. I found a job driving a taxicab, but I was already ill at that point, so within a few days I began missing work, and shortly after was told not to return.

“I lived with a group of other young people, seven of us in a two-bedroom flat. Sergei was one of them, a Russian boy who taught me to draw. And maybe we could have had more, the two of us, only I was unable to keep food down anymore, and hardly wanted to impress him by vomiting on him.

“I had applied for medical assistance from the army, and so a letter from one of my friends from the unit was forwarded to me through them. He wanted to warn me, he said, in case I’d been with Istvan. He said the locals were calling Istvan ‘*vampir*’, and though of course he thought it was quite silly, I might want to be checked out for syphilis or some other such thing if I was feeling under the weather.”

The votive candle began guttering, and Jonathan pulled out another and replaced it. The new candle smelled like cheap imitation vanilla extract. Which smelled much better than urine. I peeled open another Slim Jim and waited for him to pick up his story again.

“I checked into a state-run hospital for veterans. By then I’d lost a lot of weight and needed to be fed intravenously. They tested me for many diseases—I’m not even sure which ones—and came up with nothing. My skin was peeling right off and they thought it was eczema or chemical burns from something I’d been exposed to in the field, until one day a medical student noticed that it was much worse on the side of my body that faced the windows.

“I was kept in the dark after that. It was horrible and lonely. But at least I wasn’t peeling.

“Nothing they tried made me feel any better. The stomach cramps were horrible, and though they pumped me full of fluids, I felt like my stomach was eating me from the inside out. My condition must have been a topic of conversation in the hospital cafeteria, the freak disease that nobody could diagnose.

“One day a nurse that I hadn’t seen before slipped into my room. Very dark—Indian, Turkish, something like that. And she had a small bottle with her. ‘We have a folk remedy where I come from,’ she said. I figured I had nothing to lose by trying it. If, instead of curing me, it poisoned me and put me out of my misery, so much the better.

“I knew right away that it was blood. Who has not cut their tongue or their lip and gotten a taste of it? But she seemed so sincere...and maybe the letter from my friend that said Istvan was *vampir* stuck in my mind, too, and I wondered if some sort of magical blood could have cured him, if he would have only had access to it.

“Within an hour, the stomach cramps were gone.

“I lay awake that night, wondering how I should tell the doctors. I didn’t want to get the nurse in trouble, because no doubt she would be fired for giving a patient blood to drink. And yet I was naïve enough to think that such a disease would be diagnosed and treated in Communist Hungary. Looking back, I suspect it is a good thing I didn’t get a chance to tell them, or they probably would have given me a lethal injection and quietly hauled my body to the incinerator.”

“What do you mean, you didn’t get a chance?”

Jonathan held the tiny photo over the votive candle’s flame. It curled up and put off a smell like burning plastic.

“The next morning a telegram came for me, from László.”

Chapter Twenty

I tried very hard to resolve my mental picture of the blond British vampire from the currency exchange with my impression of the shadowy, evil figure who'd ruined my life, but I was coming up short. I wished Jonathan hadn't burned that Polaroid of him, because maybe if I stared at it long enough, I'd begin to understand.

Of course I wouldn't, but it would be better than nothing.

I determined, after a number of Slim Jims, that I could stand, and even walk—albeit slowly. So we packed up our things in a couple of plastic bags, threaded Jonathan's belt through the handles so he could carry them like a pack mule, and set off. He held the gun in one hand, and the votive candle in an old aluminum can in the other. I was charged with carrying the water, with his wool coat tied around my neck by its arms like a cape.

"You can't just stop your story there," I said, unable to see his expression by the mostly obscured candlelight.

"We must be quiet in case we are being followed. Keep your eyes out for anything we might pass through to hide ourselves—doors, hatches, blockades, things like that. It is not safe for us here."

As we walked, I developed a kind of shuffling gait. It wasn't very quiet, but it kept both my feet on the ground at all times, and at the same time alerted me to things I might trip over. Cracked concrete, garbage, sticks, rats—good stuff like that. If Jonathan wished I were more stealthy, he didn't say anything.

I kept checking my trusty Citizen watch, which has the little hands that glow ever so slightly. It was just after five a.m.

When I checked again, after what seemed like hours, it was five fifteen.

I didn't seem to be able to walk more than twenty minutes without needing a rest. Jonathan encouraged me to drink more of that terrible water, and then he did, himself. How strange it was, to actually share a drink with him. In my ideal world, it would have been a gin and tonic and we would have been at that new bar that opened on Broadway. But it was someone else's Big Gulp cup with water that had dripped from the tunnel ceiling, instead. God, I hated reality.

"So what did it say?"

"Hm?"

"The telegram. At least tell me what it said."

He tucked a hank of hair behind his ear and thought. “The sentence structure is different, let me see... ‘Jonathan, I hear you are ill. I am coming to see you at once.’”

“That hardly seems threatening.”

“Does it not? I hadn’t told him where I was. I hadn’t encouraged any sort of relationship once my enlistment was completed. And yet, here he planned on traveling across the country to see me.”

“Now that we know he’s a psycho, sure it does. But then?”

He shook his head. “It felt wrong. If he wanted to cheer me, he could have sent a card.”

“Imagine finding one that was appropriate.”

Jonathan didn’t seem to feel much like joking about his early László experience. “Either he’d poisoned Istvan to get him out of the way, or I’d caught something mysterious from Istvan and potentially passed it on to him. One way or the other, László was the last person I wanted to see.”

“I guess you’re lucky he warned you by sending the telegram.”

Jonathan nodded. “He could not imagine that I was not madly in love with him. He probably thought I was eager to see him.”

I shuddered.

“The night staff at the hospital was sparse. It was easy enough to slip away. I ran, first to Kaposvar, then to Austria. Then to France.” He lit a new votive candle and planted it atop the old one in the tin can. “One day a letter reached me in Paris. It was from him. I threw it away, hid myself in a cheap hotel until my visa came through, and then took all my money and booked a ticket to New York.”

“And now here you are.”

He shrugged.

“I was one of the first to be granted asylum. This is before the virus was much known over here...or anywhere, really, but the hill country of Romania, parts of Bulgaria, the northern regions of Turkey. I think the American government might have found a way to revoke the asylum once the people knew about the virus and the borders grew tight. But I made enough money by then and could afford my own private doctors, so the government left me alone.” Jonathan helped me up, and I shuffled forward, wincing as water seeped into my cross-trainers. The walls and floors vibrated as a train roared by somewhere in the distance, and then the tunnel grew quiet again, except for the dripping and shuffling.

After another span of time that felt like hours, but according to my watch was only twenty-five minutes, Jonathan said, “We should find somewhere to rest.” The candle’s flame danced from his breath. Another train rumbled to a stop somewhere not too far away and we waited until it filled with passengers and rattled away before talking again. “A dead end of some sort we can defend. Dry. Clean...relatively clean.”

We crept along some more, and at one point a sliver of light cast from a turnoff caught our eyes. “Don’t stare,” he told me. “It will only constrict your pupils.”

But I couldn't help staring. I wanted to throw down the stupid cup of water and make a run for it in my wet sneakers, lose him, lose the whole chase, and come out in a subway station somewhere, a place with a map that led to other places I was familiar with. A place that was full of other people who weren't vengeance-crazed vampires. People like...

Well, not people like me. I'm V-positive now, too, I reminded myself.

"This way." Jonathan jerked his head in the direction of a turnoff that was in such bad repair it actually had stalactites hanging from the ceiling. He might have taken me by the arm or made some other vaguely familiar gesture, except he was carrying a gun in that hand.

We left the little slice of light behind us and shuffled more deeply into the tunnel. Well, I shuffled. Jonathan cat-walked, I guess. I tried to imagine myself with a new and improved sexy walk but couldn't really see it.

We came across a jumble of railroad ties that half-heartedly blocked the entrance to another tunnel. Jonathan stuck his head and the tiny candle inside, leaving me momentarily in the dark. I tuned in to the sounds around me, the vague hollowness of the plinks and splashes, and somehow knew that we were alone. Was that a vampire sense, developed after just a day or two of the virus screwing with my DNA? Hard to say. Maybe I was just paying attention to something outside myself for the first time in my life.

"It's an alcove," Jonathan said. "Come on."

He helped me over the railroad ties, which were slimy to the touch, and then we made our way down the tunnel about twenty yards until it dead-ended.

The tunnel itself was fairly empty. There was no track on the bottom, no mysterious piles of garbage or vegetation. The stalactites at the entrance stopped about a third of the way in, and there were five of the ubiquitous 55-gallon rusted metal drums stacked against one wall. I wondered if rats might be hiding in the nooks between the drums, but nothing seemed to shuffle or creep or move in any way inside that tunnel, besides us.

At the far end, a wooden pallet lay on the floor. This particular wood felt dry and maybe a bit powdery rather than slimy. "This will have to do," Jonathan said, and his voice was so weary that I suspected that if I were able to see him clearly, he would have looked like hell.

He took his couture wool coat and spread it over the dry-rotted pallet, then fell on it, practically asleep. He held the gun up to me as his eyelids fluttered. "Here," he said. "Safety's off. Half a squeeze loads the barrel, second half fires. Candles in the bag. Don't let it..."

I assume he wanted me to keep a candle burning, so I figured I'd better deal with the bags tethered to his waist. It seemed almost naughty to be undoing Jonathan's belt while he slept, but I felt too ambivalent about the way things stood between us to sneak a peek or cop a feel. He'd finally unloaded the whole story on me, but somehow I wasn't mollified. He'd waited until push came to shove. He'd hidden from László and anything else he didn't feel like dealing with, and now look where we were.

Would I have done anything differently if he'd told me what I was in for at the outset? I don't know...maybe not. I guess I just wished it had been my decision.

I slid the bags off Jonathan's belt and rifled through them as much as I wanted, since no amount of rustling plastic was going to wake him up. I found the pile of cheap, scented votives in with a few quarts of Wesson oil and some cardboard tubs of peanuts. I opened up the peanuts and laid in.

Another bag held about a dozen more Slim Jims as well as the countertop display they'd stood in, plus another empty Big Gulp cup, flattened but watertight, and a single-serving bottle of Mountain Dew.

It wasn't diet, but at that point I didn't care. I unscrewed the lid and there was no telltale hiss of carbonation escaping. I shook it a little and realized it was only half full. Lucky for me I sniffed it before I took a good swig.

I'm not a doctor or an EMT, and I have no idea what blood is supposed to smell like. But it sure wasn't Mountain Dew in that bottle. I capped it and tucked it back into the grocery bag.

At that point I was so thirsty from those damn peanuts that I finished most of the hideous water I'd been toting around through the subway tunnels, suddenly wishing I'd been more careful not to let any splash over the sides. I briefly considered chugging the blood since I was, after all, V-positive—but I figured that would be salty in its own way and not very refreshing. Besides, the virus hadn't progressed enough to allow my gut to process it.

There was always the oil, but I suspected it probably wasn't a very good thirst quencher, and besides that, might also give me the runs. Without a bathroom in sight, it wasn't a chance I was willing to take.

Of course there wasn't a convenient water drip to be found now that I needed one. Damn it all. I sat on the ground beside Jonathan with the gun loose in my hand and tried my best not to think about being thirsty.

I guess that's when I dozed off.

The candle guttered wildly as I woke. The rat man's distended face filled my vision, all long brown teeth and hideously misshapen skull. I screamed like a little girl—yeah, I'll admit it—and shot at him without thinking twice.

Then it was his turn to scream, and he made tracks like you wouldn't believe. He leapt over the slimy railroad ties and was gone.

Jonathan grabbed the gun from my hand. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." I was shaking uncontrollably.

"Did he touch you?"

"No—I don't think so. It was like I felt him sneaking up on me and I woke up."

Jonathan crept to the middle of the tunnel section. "Light more candles." He crouched and touched the ground.

I pulled some candles out. My hands were trembling so hard that the plastic bag sounded like it was trying to prevail against high winds. I somehow managed to light a candle without setting myself on fire.

"I don't think you hit him." Jonathan felt the crusty tunnel floor and then brought his fingertips to his nose. "There is no blood."

"Thank God." My own response took me by surprise. But I supposed that even though the subway vampire was a ghoulish rat man, he was still a person. Even though he'd snuck up on me, I still didn't feel like he deserved to be shot, not like that. He'd been so close to me that I had no idea how I'd missed him, but still. I was relieved.

Jonathan said, "He probably followed us in hopes of more money, and then decided he wanted the gun."

I felt bad for the rat man. If I were in his place, I'd want the same thing. That, and a good dentist.

"You hit a drum," Jonathan told me.

"That's exactly where I was aiming."

"I think it ricocheted. There's a dent instead of a hole."

Good thing I hadn't shot myself. Or Jonathan. It would be pretty hard to claim I'd meant to do that.

I crouched back into the position I'd been in when the rat man had scared me half to death, then I pointed at the spot on the drum Jonathan was analyzing. The bullet had probably bounced back over our heads. Good thing we'd both been pretty low to the ground at the time.

I got up on the pallet, stepping around Jonathan's coat even though it was completely trashed, and looked back at the tunnel wall to see if I could find a bullet lodged there, just like they did on TV. But they had things like light when they looked for the bullets, I reminded myself. And they even ran computer simulations of the directions of the shots...though I seemed to recall that they had to find bullet holes to do that. And then stick straws in them.

Just as I was imagining a straw topping off a big, juicy diet Mountain Dew covered in condensation, I felt it—the tiniest stream of air. And it smelled different than the air around me. More damp. And yet, cleaner.

I held my hand, palm outward, and located the little air stream. I felt the wall behind the pallet. I'd assumed it was concrete like all the other walls, but it was actually an old sheet of plywood covered in moss. And on the other side? I put my eye to the bullet hole and saw nothing, but as I let the air from the other side of the wall bathe my face, I could sense that whatever lay beyond that wooden barrier was vast and empty.

"Jonathan, c'mere," I said. "I think I found something."

Chapter Twenty-One

Even though Jonathan's eyes were probably better than mine, it was pretty evident that his mechanical skills were much better too. Since he couldn't very well be in two places at once, I kept watch over the railroad ties while he figured out a way to knock out the back wall without totally destroying it. The older tunnel system behind the wall was deserted, and if we wanted it to stay that way, we'd need to cover our tracks.

I stared out at the dark tunnel while I listened to Jonathan tapping on the wood and muttering to himself in Magyar. Though I knew that with the periodic rumble of the train and the tapping and mumbling behind me I wouldn't be able to hear anything approaching if it did so with any level of stealth, I still entertained the notion that I could just put my awareness out there and feel if something were coming.

I felt the air on my face, damp and almost gritty, as if it had to filter through too much concrete to be there, just like the water dripping from the ceiling. I heard a rustle, and though I would normally have figured it was a rat, it seemed more disembodied to me, a small piece of paper whose corner was caught by the passing gust of a subway train.

I was so focused on the tunnel that I nearly jumped out of my skin when Jonathan set his hand on my shoulder. "Mark, are you all right?"

"Fine. Except for the heart attack you just gave me."

"I have been calling you. Come look."

I went back to the wooden barrier with him and found he'd located a seam and knocked out a whole board, leaving a four foot high gap for us to slip under. How had I not heard that?

"What is this thing?" I asked. I meant it as a rhetorical question, mind you.

"Remember when these tunnels near the Merchandise Mart flooded some years ago?" I did, vaguely. Only because the sub-sub basement of Marshall Field's connected into the system and got flooded too, and I remembered being surprised that there even was a sub-sub basement, and then wondering what on earth they kept down there.

"I think we will be safe inside," he said. "We will need to pull this board into place and then lose ourselves within the old tunnels, since it's possible the vampires who live down here will find this connection too."

"Vampires—plural? There's more than one?" Ugh. I had the willies. Even though I was V-positive now too.

We got all of our gear into the new tunnel and made a few lame attempts at shoving the wooden barrier back into place. There was simply nothing we could hold it by, plus all the nails sticking out of it weren't making matters any easier.

Jonathan picked the old nails out, loosening them with the screwdriver and then pulling them out with his bare fingers. Some of them were so rusted they snapped, while others pulled out of the swollen wood with high-pitched noises that sounded like tiny screams. It took a good hour, according to my watch, but I spaced out and watched for rat man, and convinced myself that my wild defensive shot had scared him back into his hole for a good while.

"All right. Let's go." Jonathan had jury-rigged a handle to the back of the wood using a couple of the salvaged nails and a looped plastic bag. We fitted the wood into place, then swung it down as if it was hinged. Once we were certain we'd left nothing behind to mark the spot where we'd rested, we crawled through, and Jonathan pulled the wooden panel closed behind us.

A half inch of wood stood between us and the subway access tunnels. And yet it felt like a completely different world. "We should keep track of where we go," he said, "so we can get back out."

"Aren't we optimistic?"

The floor wasn't made for walking. It had a ridge a little more than a foot wide on either side, and then a dip in the center with metal tracks two feet apart. Were they electrified? Doubtful—I mean, someone at Commonwealth Edison would notice the huge power drain and trace it back to the old freight tunnels, right?

I thought about the fact that when the flood had happened, some workmen had ignored a leaking hole in the wall that eventually turned into a gigantic tidal wave. I decided I didn't want to take any chances on the work ethic of a utility company.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan whispered over his shoulder. He had the gun in one hand and the tin can candle in the other. He also had all the bags. I wasn't even responsible for carrying the water anymore, since we had none.

"I don't want to get electrocuted."

"You'd need to complete the circuit." He pointed at the ceiling, and I looked up. It was close, but not claustrophobic, maybe seven feet at the curved apex. I had no idea what I was supposed be looking at up there. "The wires are all gone," he explained. "They were probably copper, too valuable to leave behind."

"Whatever you say, Mister Wizard."

Well, he was standing on a rail, and he didn't seem to be getting electrocuted. But our physiologies weren't yet similar enough that I felt entirely comfortable touching that rail myself.

Vampires weren't shockproof, were they? I wondered if they'd ever been tested for it. Probably. I shuddered.

Jonathan walked on ahead of me, the light bobbing as he did, and I realized I wasn't shuffling so much. The tunnels were surprisingly clean. I'd expected litter and debris, but they were eerily empty.

Strangely enough, even with the tiny light, and even with Jonathan moving a little faster than I was, I felt very calm. I was tuning in on that new-age awareness again, I guess. Eventually Jonathan paused and I caught up with him, and found him staring at a y-shaped junction. A metal sign in the shape of an inverted triangle hung from the place where the tunnels split off, and I imagined a subterranean world that was once populated by a gang of smudge-faced, floppy-hatted, wool-trousered queers.

But then I decided that the inverted triangle shape probably just fit there pretty well. It said, "THINK about safety!" Catchy slogan.

Jonathan pointed to a white line on the wall that looked like a chalk mark. "Someone else has been down here, marking their place." He tried to smear it with his thumb, but it didn't go anywhere. "But that could have been yesterday or a year ago."

I walked up to the white mark and put my face close to get a better look at it. I imagined some Paleolithic people making marks on the walls of the abandoned freight tunnels under Chicago...but even though that seemed pretty funny to me, I made sure not to laugh about it. Even feeling somewhat lightheaded, as I suddenly realized I did, I knew it was too weird of a thought to have to explain.

Maybe I felt so loopy because we were walking through big pockets of methane gas. Jonathan motioned to me and started down one of the tunnels. No, if there were methane gas around, the candle would flicker, or explode, or something like that. Wouldn't it? Damn. Where was a canary when you really needed it?

I tottered along behind Jonathan, and I noticed that I didn't need to shuffle at all anymore. If I just had faith in myself to make the necessary adjustments as my feet fell, I had nothing to worry about. Twisted ankles, pesky trips...things of the past for me. I was lithe. I was free.

I was sprawled on my face.

"Are you okay?"

"Did you see? I think I cat-walked."

Jonathan frowned. An overdone frown, as if he were onstage and needed the last row of the theater to see his expression. He set down the tin can and pressed the backs of his fingers to my forehead. "You're burning up."

Oh. Maybe that explained the non-methane high.

"We will find somewhere to rest." He picked me up. I let myself be deadweight just to see how strong he really was. He wedged his shoulder under my arm and forced me into a vertical position without much problem. And then I wondered if I really wanted him to be so up close and personal with my armpit, so I took the initiative to stand by myself.

Jonathan kept hold of my arm, but then he seemed confused as to how to carry the candle and the gun while keeping me in tow. “You don’t need that.” I pointed to the pistol. “We’re the only ones here.”

“I don’t want to be careless.”

“But I know.” Okay, so I didn’t feel like explaining that I’d been getting in touch with my natural Amazing Kreskin-like abilities for the last hour—maybe even two—but Jonathan took me seriously without playing Twenty Questions.

“You can’t always trust that,” he said. Even though he was disagreeing with me, it felt good to finally be in on something like that together. To have him understand me.

“Do you have those feelings?” I asked. “All the time?”

Jonathan pulled me along behind him. He stopped to consult a tarnished metal plaque that said “Randolph”—good Lord, they had street signs down there—and then hung a sharp right at an intersecting tunnel. It looked like an inverted triangle sign had hung there at one point, but it had long since fallen off and left only a spot on the wall that had oxidized differently than the concrete around it.

“Can you read minds?” I went on, too blown away to just let it go without more details. “See the future? Levitate?”

“No, and I can’t turn into a bat, either. You’re just being silly. Save your strength.”

“If anyone deserves to be silly for once, it’s me,” I babbled, unable to stem the flow of words that continued to come out of my mouth. “I’ve always got to do the hard stuff without getting any credit for it. I’ve got to keep track of everything.”

“And now who’s dragging a melodramatic burden? Poor Cinderella never gets to go to the ball.”

Well. It was a passable pop-culture reference. A little old-world, though gay enough to be charming. The pod-person reference had been better, though.

“Look.” He turned to face me. “Let’s not do this. I want you to be safe more than I want to stop and give you a dozen anecdotes about what the virus might or might not do to you. Because it wouldn’t matter—it is so different for each person that what happened to me probably won’t be anything like what is happening to you. Have you started to develop a sixth sense or is it just your fever talking? I don’t know—it is too early to tell. Let’s just hide ourselves as well as we can and we will talk about it then.”

I wondered if we’d ever be hidden enough for Jonathan’s taste, or if he’d just keep dragging me around until my arm wrenched out of my shoulder socket while we walked and walked and walked. My feet hurt like hell, to the point that I thought they might do me in before the virus did. Branches off the tunnels seemed few and far between, which I supposed made sense, since they were made for trains rather than pedestrians. Tiny little trains...I started to laugh and worried it might sound hysterical, then ended up snorting into my sleeve.

Jonathan stopped dragging me, and I had to catch myself before I bumped into his back. He didn’t need to say a word. I immediately saw what had stopped him in his tracks—light.

Chapter Twenty-Two

My urge to laugh worsened. I chewed on the inside of my cheek and told myself it was not funny. It was light. Which meant people. Which could also mean the FBI, the ACN, or some psychotic vampire from the old country. Take your pick.

“Stay here while I look,” Jonathan said, incredibly quiet. He stuck his hand into my pocket, causing me to stifle yet another burst of inappropriate mirth, and took the derringer from it. He gave me the bigger gun—Phil’s gun. I stared at it, impressed that I now knew where the safety was. I flicked it, wondering if I’d just turned it on or off. They needed to label those things more clearly. I imagined myself clicking away at the rat man with the safety on, and snorted. And then I imagined László within a foot of me, whistling cheerfully, and my grotesque urge to laugh finally died away.

Jonathan was already at the next tunnel juncture by the time I’d flipped the safety back and forth a few times. The subtle light silhouetted him, and I felt this wrenching sensation in my chest. I could have him now. Sure, it had been the first thing I’d thought once I realized how the big hole under my shoulder had come to be, but seeing him from a greater distance made him feel somehow more attainable and yet harder to grasp, all at once. A couple of weeks earlier I wasn’t even sure he was into men...I supposed I should consider our new circumstances as progress, of a sort.

He walked back with a runway model-esque slither he probably wasn’t even aware of doing. “I don’t think anyone is there,” he said, “but it’s lit. It seems we will be more vulnerable.”

“To whom? Rat boy probably won’t follow us into a lit area, and I’ll bet the FBI thinks we got off at an actual train station. And this lit candle’s more of a beacon than the overhead light is.”

“All right, all right.” Jonathan took the gun from me and flipped the safety to the opposite of whatever it had been. “Why don’t you come and get a *feel* for it.”

“Watch it, missy. If you’re going to belittle my psychic vampire gift I may choose not to share it with you in the future.”

Jonathan blew out the votive candle and allowed the can to cool for a moment, and then tucked it into one of our many plastic bags. “My humblest apologies.”

“That’s better.” I tried to emulate the way he moved as we crept up to the lit passage, but it seemed so complicated—the way he shifted his weight, the way he held his body. And then it came to me: a ballerina. That’s what he was like. No, not the pink tutu, Swan Lake kind. Like the young Nureyev, all wild eyes and muscular thighs.

I worked my way up behind him, with my outstretched hand cupped in an identical curve to that of the back pocket of his jeans, but inches away still, while I wondered what it would be like to actually touch him, and not just fall on him or work rubber bullet clots out of his back.

“Stop that,” he said, and damn it, I believed he could feel my touch though it hadn’t even lit on him yet. At least his voice seemed light, amused.

“But it’s killing me.” Bad choice of words, since a little something else that was passed between us might very well be killing me too. I probably should have expressed my burning lust with different verbiage.

“Mark.” Jonathan spun around and caught the hand that I had been thinking about cupping his ass with. “Believe me, I want to as much as you do—probably more. But not now. When we’re safe—”

“What if we’re never safe again?”

And what if I die first? I was trying really hard not to be morbid. Really, I was. I was even succeeding in not spouting premonitions of my own death, and even quelling the insane laughter that just wanted to ring through that damn tunnel. But I couldn’t not think it.

“Only a little ways more.” Jonathan pulled my arm with both of his hands while he walked backward. “Come look with your psychic vampire gift—I want to know what you think.”

So he was serious and teasing about this “gift” of mine, all at the same time. He did dichotomy so well, honestly. That’s probably why I just had to have him.

We came to the lit tunnel, and it looked pretty much like all the others we’d been slogging through. Empty and plain and a little small. The bare electric bulbs on the ceiling were spaced pretty far apart, as if whoever lit the section didn’t want to seem extravagant.

“Why is this lit,” I asked, “if the tunnels are abandoned?”

Jonathan shook his head. “Don’t ask. Listen. And tell me what they say to you.”

So he really was taking my newfound ability seriously. Surely that was enough to kill it right there on the spot, as it undoubtedly had horrible stage fright. But I had to at least try. I walked away from Jonathan in case I would accidentally pick up a vibe from him, even though his proximity hadn’t mattered much to me before, except in terms of possible accidental rubbings. I snickered a little as I walked down the center of that long tunnel all by myself, then turned it into a kind of throat clearing so as not to sound quite so loony. When I thought I was far enough away from Jonathan, I stopped, and I listened.

No water drips, I noticed that right away. Water did seep somewhere—I felt it—but it was more of a lateral spread than a gravity-induced drip. It felt still, very still. No, wait. The air moved. It was subtle, but it definitely had some direction. I sniffed at it and then let the small current carry me as I followed its flow.

I had assumed it was leading to another tunnel branch, or a door, or something logical like that. I’m not quite sure when my eyes had drifted shut. I presume if they were open I wouldn’t have walked into the wall.

Jonathan was on me in a second. “What is it?”

I looked around and saw a small grate in the ceiling. “Ventilation system. Maybe they want to lay cable down here or something.”

“Even after the flooding?”

“I dunno. I’m sure if they just capped off the really old tunnels, it could work.”

“What about people? That’s what we really need to worry about. Is anybody working down here? Is anyone nearby at all?”

I closed my eyes and listened again. Or maybe I felt. Or thought. I don’t know how to describe it. It was like I tried to cast my awareness out there like a big, invisible net, and then pull something intangible toward me.

Nothing except that water seepage. And now the light bulbs. I swore I could feel them too. Electricity was carried in a current of some sort, wasn’t it? I rued the day I stopped paying attention in physics so I could gaze at John DeLano’s perfect profile instead.

“I don’t think there’s anyone nearby. Not even remotely near.”

“Good. Then we will find somewhere to stay in this area. It’s clean, the air is fresh, and we will see anyone who tries to sneak up on us.” Jonathan took my hand and led me down the sparsely lit tunnel, and the plastic bags at his hip brushed against my coat. We were holding hands. How weird. But for some reason I didn’t find that funny. Maybe my inappropriate sense of humor was triggered only by mundane things now, while the more bizarre developments left it flat. We’d been slogging around underground for miles, me in wet sneakers, and my feet felt like they were freezing and burning up all at once. Maybe that was good for a little chuckle.

“There.” Jonathan pointed to a branch in the tunnel. We walked what felt like a couple more city blocks and turned. A metal sign, like the kind they use for street signs, caught my eye. “To City Hall.” It wasn’t like those triangular safety signs, warped with age and rusted to the wall, either. It was new.

Or sort of new. We both approached it, and Jonathan wiped away about half an inch of oily dust from the corner with the side of his cuff. “At least we can get our bearings,” he said.

I closed my eyes and searched some more. No, I definitely did not feel any people around. I would have bet my last Slim Jim on it.

“The light seems a bit brighter at the end. We should look and see for ourselves what is there.”

I shrugged and let myself be toted along. I imagined I was a balloon, bobbing behind a young Jonathan, riding in the breeze as he strolled along the beach. Did they have beaches in Hungary? I didn’t know. Probably not.

The tunnel opened into an oddly shaped room, with two more tunnels branching off it and a big metal doorway set in some concrete that looked newer than everything else. It was a different color, anyway.

It was the first place we'd seen in the old tunnel system that had something in it other than a few ancient signs, or some broken brackets where copper cabling had once hung. There were benches there, those molded, plasticky fiberglass ones they used to have at bus stops when I was a kid, the ones the Transit Authority got rid of because they were always getting spray painted and it cost less to replace them than it did to keep them clean. Except these didn't have Latin Kings pitchforks painted on them. They were clean. Or should I just say unadorned? They were covered with a layer of grime, just like that sign.

The sound of metal hitting metal caught my attention, and I turned to find Jonathan trying to break a padlock with his bare hand. Showoff. The lock hung from the side of a dumpster-sized metal box that probably had something interesting inside, being locked and all. But the padlock was too butch even for Jonathan's vampire strength. He ended up taking the little screwdriver to it to pry it open. The screwdriver prevailed—I knew it would. After all, it could start cars and perform surgery. What couldn't it do?

Jonathan opened the giant locker and his eyes went wide. He'd probably found some tools, I figured. Stuff for laying cable, stuff we could use somehow. I went up to get a peek at the gear, maybe make some sort of play on the word "tool", when I saw there weren't tools in the locker at all. There were blankets sealed in plastic. And first-aid kits. I reached in and pulled out some blankets. Beneath them were boxes that said TVP (a meat substitute I had a brief flirtation with during my vegetarian phase, a time in my life that I since treated like an unfortunate one-night stand), gelatin, powdered peanut butter and instant coffee.

Jonathan had pulled out the first-aid kits and unearthed an inflatable mattress, a lantern, a dozen canteens and some plastic dishes that snapped together into a big, stout tube.

"Something tells me this isn't for the cable guy."

Jonathan shook his head. "Someone planned to use it as a fallout shelter."

"I guess it makes sense. Why dig a new one if you've already got a bunch of tunnels you're not using?"

Jonathan dug out a packet of crusty batteries and then pitched them over his shoulder. "They must have done it a while ago—ten years, maybe more. No one has checked on it lately. The batteries are useless."

I pulled out the air mattress with high hopes of giving it a rough initiation, but as I read the label, I saw it was supposed to self-inflate with the help of some batteries too. Damn batteries and whoever invented them.

Jonathan was busy scrutinizing the back of a food box. "This expired two years ago," he said, "but it was made to last forever. It is probably still safe to eat."

"When was it made?"

"Nineteen eighty-six."

"God. I was still in high school."

It did turn out that there were some tools in the locker we could use. Swiss Army knives that would be the envy of any boy scout. Can openers. Clothes. There was even a tap and a small shop sink set in the wall that looked like it matched the “new” construction of the eighties. I turned the tap but it seemed to be either locked somehow or oxidized shut. Jonathan tried turning it, and it worked. At least he didn’t gloat about his kung-fu grip.

He cupped some water in his palm and sniffed it. “This seems fine, as far as I can tell. The danger is that there could be microorganisms in the supply.”

“Which you don’t have to worry about since the virus would flush them out of you.”

Jonathan nodded, looking guilty that his virus was in high gear and mine wasn’t. “Yours might too. Or it might mutate more quickly if it perceives a threat.”

“Now you’re anthropomorphizing it. Are we gonna call it George and give it its own email address?”

Jonathan didn’t dignify that question with an answer. He just gave me some canteens to fill while he made a pack out of one of the blankets.

“We will take what we can carry, set up a camp, and then come back for more. We must close this up as if we have never been here.”

I thought the cloak-and-dagger wasn’t necessary. No one but us had been down there for years. I could feel it. But I’d allow Jonathan his paranoia if it was gonna give me a blanket to sleep on and a quarter-century-old food ration.

“There’s chocolate in here,” Jonathan said, bent over the side of the metal bin at his waist with his fine ass in the air. “Do you like chocolate?”

And chocolate. Life was looking up.

We hauled a load of goodies to another tunnel a few city blocks away. Jonathan wanted to keep going and find a dead end where we’d be less exposed, but I thought he was exhausted enough to allow me to convince him otherwise. “Let’s sleep.” I shook out a blanket, folded it in half, and spread it on the ground. I hadn’t doubled it up only for the padding—I wanted to make sure Jonathan had to lie right up against me when we collapsed. I certainly hoped he wasn’t going to suggest one of us stay awake and keep watch, since I’d already proven how well that arrangement would work out.

Jonathan sat down and chugged an entire canteen, then pulled out the Wesson Oil and took a long pull. He shuddered. “I have been spoiled by those shakes. They cover up the texture.”

“Not much.” I recalled how the one I’d tried had slid right down. I sat on the edge of the blankets, intending to find some of the chocolate and see whether it had gone bad, or if maybe I was lucky and it had the potential to age like fine wine. I briefly wondered which pack it was in, but my body distracted me by continuing to sink until my head hit the thin woolen pad.

“You should drink something,” Jonathan was saying through swigs of his oil. His voice sounded weird with his larynx all lubricated. “You don’t want to get dehydrated.”

That sounded like a fabulous idea. I'd be sure to get right on it.

"Mark? Did you hear me?"

It seemed like so much effort to reply to him. Maybe if I ignored him he'd go away. Or try to get my attention by having his wicked way with me. I sort of wanted to laugh at that idea. Only laughter seemed like too much effort too.

Through the haze of my exhaustion he did finally touch me, though it was only my forehead. "You still feel hot," he said. I tried to pretend he'd actually told me that I *was* hot, just to have something to amuse myself with. "Can you hold the thermometer under your tongue? I will help you."

Thermometer? Oh yeah, first-aid kit. Would the Band-Aids still be sticky after so many years?

"Damn, it's high." He unbuttoned my coat and then started undoing my flannel shirt. My T-shirt was long gone—hadn't survived the surgery, I imagined. And then I realized what he'd bound me up with. Resourceful, that Jonathan.

Jonathan prodded at the bullet hole, which hurt, but not as badly as I would have thought. "I don't understand. This is not infected." He smelled it, as if he was one of those cancer-smelling dogs that could find the tumors that were invisible to MRIs, and then slapped some twenty-year-old antibiotic salve on it just to be doing something.

He crouched over me and put his ear to my chest. "Your lungs sound clear." Well, I guessed I didn't need an HMO since I had Jonathan. "Do you have any other cuts, any sores?"

I'd been running through underground tunnels for God knows how long. I must have had something. I twitched my limbs a little to see if anything bothered me aside from the bullet wound. I had a scrape on my knuckles, but other than that, nothing really bothered me except my feet. Which were on fire.

"Feet."

Jonathan broke the laces of the sneakers in his hurry to remove them, and I screamed as he pulled the wet shoes off. You'd think that, being stretchy, the socks would have hurt less. You'd be wrong. Jonathan said something in Magyar that I didn't recall hearing on any language tape, and I didn't ask him to translate. I could tell by his tone that it wasn't good.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I'll assume whatever happened next was a dream, since I was flying and everything. I had this gorgeous long hair whipping in the breeze, and it was really thick, especially on top. I was sad when eventually I realized that I couldn't actually fly, and since I knew it was all just a dream, I might as well open my eyes.

Jonathan sat across the small tunnel from me with his back to the wall and his nose buried in a book. I couldn't make out the title from where I lay. "Oprah's book club?" I asked, and my voice sounded rusty.

"Medical Care in a Shelter. It was in the first-aid kit."

"Great. I'm being treated by a doctor who's learning from a manual and isn't a native English speaker."

Jonathan smirked. "And it's only translated in Spanish and French. I don't expect it to be in Magyar, but where is the German? Where is the Russian? My French is awful, but I read German very well."

"Cold war, Doc."

"Ah. We will just have to hope my English is...ehm...how you say?"

"Quit it. You'll make me laugh and then my feet will fall off."

Jonathan put the book down and came up beside me, folding the single blanket back from my feet. He'd wrapped them loosely in gauze while I was out. "And how are your feet?"

I wiggled them. "Better, I guess. It helps that they're dry."

"I think the virus saved you from a very bad infection. If you want to look at it that way."

"I'll take all the optimism I can get at this point."

"There's phenobarbital in the kit. If you want to sleep some more."

"Can I trust it after twenty years? Wait, don't answer that. I've slept long enough. I think I want to sit up." I leaned into Jonathan some—okay, a lot—as he got his arms around me and pulled me upright. And then I decided I didn't much feel like letting go of his shoulders. I held on until he realized he wasn't going back to what he'd been doing anytime soon and settled against me, a little stiffly, I thought.

"You should eat," he said.

"What, are you nervous?"

"Of course I am. But you should still eat. It's been a couple of days."

I tuned in on my stomach, and it did seem like it would welcome something even as nasty as dehydrated applesauce, but I also had Jonathan up close, alone, quiet, dry, and as safe as we could expect to be. I pulled him against me more tightly. “In a minute.”

He must have resigned himself to being hugged. He situated himself more comfortably and rested his head on my shoulder. His hair smelled like subway tunnels. I couldn’t imagine what I must have smelled like. In fact, I wouldn’t have had to imagine, if I’d chosen to take a good whiff. But I didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I wanted to tell him to shut up and not ruin it. I’d waited too damn long for a moment to happen. “Don’t.”

“I thought I would not infect you if we were safe...”

“And that’s why you were always touching everything with your bare hands.”

“The hands. You cannot catch it from that. And besides, I knew you were wiping things off. You could take care of yourself.”

We both sat and stared at the opposite tunnel wall. “I guess that’s not the point,” I said eventually. “We hadn’t counted on my being shot at.”

“Maybe I should have.”

I sighed. “If I told you I forgave you, would that help?”

“Not if you didn’t mean it.”

I let go of his shoulder and put my hand over his where it rested on his thigh. The back of his hand was cool to the touch, but not unpleasantly so. As my fingertips touched his bare skin, I could imagine a wave of sadness washing over me, something I felt with the same awareness that I could use to feel water seeping, or the presence of strangers. It was a vague, lost feeling, something too nebulous to even put into words. This thing was definitely real, though, and whatever it might be, I was somehow siphoning it from Jonathan. I gave his hand a little pat and decided I wasn’t really ready for skin on skin with him. Not yet. Not if that’s how it felt.

“It’s okay.” I wished I could come up with something more than a lame platitude. “We’ll figure something out.”

~ * ~

Jonathan must have kept slipping away to raid the ancient fallout shelter supplies while I slept. When I woke up, there was always something new to be seen. A tin of something called “survival biscuits” that seemed best appreciated on the kitsch value of their dramatic-looking can rather than their dubious nutritional potential. A sealed packet of syringes, which allowed him to take my blood and feel horribly guilty for doing it. Even a toilet seat that fit atop a cardboard tube lined with a garbage bag. Seeing as how it was better than squatting, I’d settle for it.

“How do you feel?”

I started thinking that I’d be able to set my watch to the frequency of him asking me that. He looked fine. Competent, in control. But if he got within a foot of me this wave of nauseated worry swept over me so intensely that I’d say whatever it took to make him leave me alone.

My feet were still sore, but better. I’d actually feared gangrene in that horrific moment that Jonathan gasped at first sight of them—but that fear had been totally off the mark. The hemovore virus would never allow something as plebian as gangrene to trouble its host.

Jonathan treated my water with iodine tablets from the shelter supplies, then he rehydrated my food with the iodine water, which left everything with an off, chemical taste. He didn’t waste the iodine in his own water. His well-established virus soldiers would take care of any nasties that might be lurking within it themselves.

I slept a lot, a hell of a lot. Maybe he was slipping twenty-year-old Barbs into my food and maybe he wasn’t. Maybe my body was exhausted from trying to fight off the vampire virus. I would’ve told the old mortal coil that it was a losing battle, to just sit back and enjoy the ride. But I don’t think it would’ve listened.

“Mark? How do you feel?”

God. Not that again. “Fine.”

“I made you chocolate pudding.”

Great, another of my most cherished comfort foods to be remembered with revulsion. “Did you put in extra iodine, just the way I like it?”

He sat beside me with the bowl, and palpable waves of weariness emanated from him and washed over me. Good thing I was too proud to let him feed me, since he probably would’ve been too wiped out to hold the spoon. I took it from him and tried a spoonful. It was reminiscent of chocolate, if not dairy—and maybe I was getting used to the iodine. “It’s not too bad,” I said, and the upturn in his aura nearly knocked me out. If I ever got out of there, and I wasn’t hallucinating the whole Psychic Friends Network thing, I’d need to find a tailor who specialized in lead suits.

“Maybe if you watered it down enough, you’d be able to drink it,” I suggested. “Can’t be any actual food in here.”

“Soy,” Jonathan told me. So, he’d been reading labels.

“Maybe you should draw some more blood,” I said. “You know. Before I get clotty.”

I felt his momentary elation plunge into a black hole of guilt. Crap. A couple of ounces of blood to sustain the only decent companion I’ve had in years. What did I care? I’d gotten so used to the needle I didn’t even feel the stick anymore. I could’ve told him that, but I doubted he’d believe me.

What about when I did get clotty? What then? He wouldn’t be able to drink from me. And I’d need to start drinking blood, myself. I’d starve to death before I’d turn myself into a rat man. We still had some

money, enough money to hop a cab and take us...somewhere. Some neighborhood where we could score a couple of sunhoods, hotwire a car and drive to...I don't know. Utah? I wondered what Mormons thought of vampires. But then again, we're also gay, and they probably didn't take too well to queers. At least as far as I knew.

Maybe some Unitarian V-positive church would hide us out. Now there was a thought...

I rolled just in time to avoid spewing on Jonathan. Nothing against church, but something just wasn't sitting right.

"Oh shit." Jonathan was swearing in English. How novel.

I puked some more. The pudding was about the same coming back up as it was going down. Not bad. But the glob of bile at the bottom of it? Not so tasty. And then I continued to heave.

Jonathan wadded up a wool government-issue survival blanket and tucked it under my head. "Just relax as much as you can." He stroked my hair. I didn't really want Jonathan touching me while I threw up, even though he had a scary five o'clock shadow, hair that smelled like a subway and clothing stiff with gunk. Because in my mind's eye, he was still that sexy guy who was hypnotized by his own paintings on the wall of Beacon Gallery. Who would touch everything I'd just wiped down without even knowing he was making me completely crazy. Who'd stay in his studio hours on end painting big, black canvases while I drove around the city, avoiding me as carefully as I avoided him, neither one of us with the balls to say how we felt.

"Water," I gasped, once the heaving subsided.

Jonathan continued to stroke my hair with feathery touches. "No," he said quietly. "Stage two is setting in. And you won't even be able to keep water down, not right after an episode."

I'd known in theory what stage two entailed. But no one had warned me how much my gut would ache with every heaving spasm that wracked my poor body. "Just a sip." I was dying to rinse the acrid taste from my mouth.

"Not now." He continued to stroke my hair.

I wanted to strangle him. If I could've sat up, I would have, even though I could tell he felt so guilty he would have welcomed me putting him out of his misery.

If I wasn't uber-sensitive, I'd sure developed a healthy fantasy life...one that didn't involve Eric Estrada and a Trans Am. I doubt it could've been my imagination. Every time I had an "episode", as Jonathan discreetly put it, I could feel anxiety, fear and self-loathing absolutely radiating from him.

It cooled down when he slept, if the intermittent periods of mood stability were anything to go by. I'd waited for him to drift off before I crept away down the tunnel to toss my cookies, too worried that movement and strained sounds would wake him, and too exhausted to care once I was done trying to eject something that didn't even seem to be there. When he finally woke up a couple of hours later, I found it

easier to pretend that I was the one who was asleep. At least the negative emotions stayed at a simmer that way.

One day I woke to find the pall that had been surrounding us was not quite as heavy as I'd made it all out to be, and I wondered if maybe the whole Edgar Cayce experience really was something I'd made up to keep myself occupied while the virus mutated me. Jonathan sipped from a canteen, and smiled at me as I opened my eyes.

But then I got this idea that while I'd slept, he'd turned into marble, or granite, or maybe lead. Which made no sense at all.

I also noticed his smile was just a little tight. And maybe didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'm thirsty," I said. "Think you can allow me my ration of water?"

Jonathan handed me a canteen and then sat back again, continuing to stare at me. I drank, so happy to have water that I fantasized that I'd even developed a taste for iodine. I watched his eyes while he stared at me, and thought I detected something a little less...heavy, for lack of a better description. Pleased would be too strong of a word. Satisfied, maybe.

"What?" I asked, as I tested him to see how many gulps he'd let me have.

"It seems you are up and walking," he said.

"How'd you know?"

"You have dust on your shoes."

Busted. "I didn't want to wake you with those wonderful noises my body's been making. So sue me."

"I am glad. Because we cannot stay down here forever."

"Gee. And it was just starting to grow on me."

"We are leaving tonight."

Well. That was sudden. "Okay. And did you plan out an itinerary for our little trip?"

Jonathan inclined his head. "There is a door that leads into the railway system under Grant Park about a mile from here."

"Oh."

"We will exit there, and then make our way to Beacon Gallery. I called Murray, and he is expecting us."

"Beacon? We won't be safe there. I mean, the FBI almost caught us when we had Murray wire us the money."

"And they will protect you."

I felt it again. Concrete. Steel. Iceberg. Nothing, absolutely nothing that I said or did would move him. "And what about you?"

"I will take care of László."

Crap. Iceberg meets Titanic. There was a hole in my hull, and I was sinking.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The night air slapped me in the face like cheap aftershave. I'd thought it was cold in the tunnels, whenever I wasn't throwing off the blankets in the midst of a fever, anyway. But outside, the air was frigid. And so fresh it smelled sweet, like a field of flowers or a Sunday morning bakery, or hair that's just been washed with expensive shampoo you can only buy from a salon.

It wasn't far to Beacon Gallery, fewer than a half-dozen blocks. Jonathan grabbed my hand and dragged me the whole way there. I couldn't run as fast as him, not yet, and I was weak from lack of food and still giddy with fever. He didn't seem deterred by my pace—he just squeezed my hand so hard the bones ground together and my shoulder went numb, and somehow my feet, which finally fit back into my stiff, crunchy sneakers again, scrambled to keep up.

"Jonathan, wait." He'd dragged me up a narrow flight of concrete steps, over a railing and into a nondescript stretch of snow belted by a killer wet wind from Lake Michigan. "Can't we talk first?"

Jonathan's eyes scanned the traffic and he pulled me across Michigan Avenue without even waiting for the lights to change. Luckily, it was late, maybe midnight, and not one of the rush hours. "Nothing we could say would change things. It would only make what we have to do harder, and I think it has been difficult enough for us already."

"Don't I get a say in this?"

He ignored me and dragged me like a water-skier over an icy patch on the sidewalk. Five more blocks to Beacon, maybe four.

"Is this the way I get to tell you I love you too? Thanks a lot."

He plowed on. Three more blocks.

"Goddamn it, Jonathan, you can't make me do this. I don't work for you anymore. I quit."

He towed me another block. Across the street, I saw a pair of disheveled men in long black coats making a scene. And then I realized it was us, reflected back from the dark glass of a skyscraper window.

A metal ventilation grate was coming up on the sidewalk ahead. If I was ever going to have a chance to stand my ground, that would be it. I allowed him to drag me along another few yards, and then I planted my feet on the textured metal grate and pulled.

The way he snapped back against me would've been funny if we weren't walking straight into the jaws of the enemy.

Jonathan turned to face me, head hanging down. “Mark.” He took my other hand, the one on the side where the bullet wound had pretty much healed up into a dull, aching scar. He led me gently toward a narrow asphalt gap between two tall buildings where delivery vans emerged during the daylight hours, and where bums might be found stealing an hour of sleep after dark when it was above freezing outside. He drew me into a deep, cold shadow, and even though I was sweating from running the Jonathan Drag-along Marathon, I shivered. I squinted in the direction where I expected he’d be, and then realized that once my eyes adjusted, I could see him perfectly fine, although in tints of indigo and sooty black.

He took both of my hands in both of his and stared up into my eyes. “Do this for me because I am asking you.”

“I can’t.”

“You can...but you don’t want to. I know, I understand. But put yourself in my place. You need a doctor. You need subcutaneous fluids...”

“We have almost five thousand dollars...” Except that I’d given a couple of stacks to Tina. “Okay, we have three. Still, we can find some kind of doctor for that much.”

He shook his head. “No, we cannot. Not with *him* watching. He has cornered us like rats, and the only thing that will keep him from killing us both is by putting the FBI between him and you.”

“How can you count on the FBI to be there?”

“They are watching Murray. If they think I am a serial killer, they won’t have given up so easily over the past two weeks. They will be there.”

“No,” I said, “I won’t do it. It doesn’t end like this. We drive off into the moonlight and we find a little cabin somewhere and drink the blood of a friendly trained bear.”

“Mark...”

“Rachel’s cousin or aunt or something has a vacation home. Remember?”

Jonathan shook his head. “He would find us.”

“Damn it.” I refused to wipe at my stinging eyes because I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. “I will not let you sacrifice yourself for me. Because if he kills you, you’re dead. And if you kill him, they’ll lock you away for good. And either way, I have to go on without you. So, no. I won’t. I’ve earned a happy ending. There has to be another way back to Kansas.”

A flicker of movement caught my eye at the far end of the alley by the loading docks. The silhouette showed a girl in a miniskirt, a streetwalker who’d drifted in from the main thoroughfares, maybe to give a five-dollar blowjob, maybe to squat and pee among the dumpsters.

I waited for her to move on, praying she wouldn’t come and proposition us, but she just stood there under the amber glow of an old-fashioned streetlamp that had never been upgraded to the sodium vapor bulbs that cast brighter light. As I watched her, more detail came into focus. Platinum blonde hair in a bob and big plastic sunglasses like a young Deborah Harry. A chill of recognition crept up my spine.

Witch Hazel.

"Jonathan," I whispered, and he swung around and saw her too. She didn't motion to us, just stood in the faint glow of the streetlamp and waited.

Was it Mona? Rachel? The Asian girl whose name I'd forgotten? Heck, it could've even been Tina, with my night vision painting her Caucasian.

"Let's go with her instead," I said.

Jonathan's eyebrows bunched up, and I could tell that he wanted to, even though it flew in the face of the ridiculous plan he'd sold himself while I slept. Because even though following Witch Hazel meant setting a course for the unknown, whatever she'd come up with had to be preferable to the two outcomes I'd just predicted.

"Come on," I said, and started toward her. After a few steps, Jonathan followed.

Once we neared Witch Hazel, she slipped around a corner. I trailed her with a fresh burst of adrenaline, and allowed the warm glow of hope to take hold somewhere in my chest. Jonathan dashed ahead. His passage made no sound but the flap of a long wool coat. I caught the glint of a security light off a platinum wig, and then Witch Hazel disappeared again, with Jonathan right on her tail.

I slid on ice and staggered a few steps, but luckily I didn't go down. I'd flung out my arms to keep upright, and my bullet wound complained by sending a gout of pain through my chest. My feet chose that moment to remind me how tender they were, and that they didn't appreciate being dragged all over the south end of the Loop, thank you very much.

I skidded through another frozen puddle, or maybe some oil, banked my elbow on a protruding steel buttress, and then careened on in fear of losing sight of Jonathan's coattails.

I took off running down an alley and a door swung out onto it, casting a faint semicircle of light onto the dark, ice-littered asphalt. Jonathan stopped running. His coat swirled around his legs, and he waited for me to catch up. I sprinted those last few yards with burning lungs, but a lightening heart.

Jonathan ushered me in and slipped in behind me. The door closed behind us with a secure thunk, and then I didn't hear anything but the sound of my own breathing. An overhead fluorescent light flickered on.

"Mark?"

Witch Hazel barreled into me, sobbing. "Oh my God, they said you were dead!"

I grabbed her by the leather jacket and backed her off, checking to make sure which "her" she was. "Be careful," I said quietly. "I'm positive."

Witch Hazel froze, and then slowly removed her sunglasses to reveal giant, eyeliner-smudged, tearstained eyes. It was Mona. Except she looked like hell, sickly pale and ten pounds thinner, and her teeth were chattering.

"How long have you been standing out there?" I asked her.

"I was waiting for Jonathan. I knew he'd come here eventually. I knew it. The papers said he shot you and fled. But I didn't believe it, not the way he always looked at you."

Gay vampire serial killer lovers' tiff ends in murder, juicy details provided by the ACN. I'm sure Aunt Trixie was very proud.

Jonathan conveniently ignored whatever sliver of humanity Mona thought she'd seen in him, pulled on his V-gloves, and began to prowl around the room. We were in a cramped and unusually clean shipping area filled with wooden crates and gigantic rolls of brown paper. I didn't even know if I still had my gloves. I checked a pocket and found the derringer. I stuck my hand in the other, and found my gloves. I pulled them on and flexed my fingers.

"I did get shot; we both did. But I guess we're not that easy to kill."

"And you're...positive?"

I nodded.

"How far along?"

"Stage three, as best we can tell."

Mona nodded, and fresh tears coursed down her cheeks. "Ben...didn't make it. He died right after...the FBI..." Her face screwed up and she let the blonde wig-hair fall forward to hide her eyes. I wanted to hug her, but had to settle for patting the arm of her leather jacket with my gloved hand.

"I...um...it was really hard." She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Losing him, and failing the two of you at the same time."

"Don't say that. You're the only one who's helped us."

She nodded, eyes bright. "I haven't been much help. But now I will."

"Okay, so you have a plan?"

She nodded again. "We need to get you guys out of here, out of the country. I'm coming too. Fuck, they're trying to stick me with the cost of Ben's cremation even though we weren't married. And they charge you more for everything when you're positive."

They. Us and them. I'd discovered that I really liked being part of an "us".

"And here's the totally cool part. Um. You know I really loved Ben, right?"

Well, of course she did. She cared for him through months on end of unrelenting stage three that finally killed him because he somehow couldn't absorb the blood properly. "Of course we do."

"So, like, I swear I wasn't looking or anything. I just happened to meet this guy."

For the life of me, I couldn't imagine what significance her social life should have for me. Mona went to an interior door and opened it.

"I don't think money's gonna be a problem," she said, and my head spun, wondering where her new beau fit in the puzzle. "Because Beacon's been holding onto Jonathan's painting, the one they always kept in the window, and turning down offers of hundreds of thousands of dollars. It's the only one left."

She led us into a hallway lit with tasteful, muted light reflecting from pewter wall sconces off a lightly textured ceiling, and I experienced a sudden jolt of recognition. We were in Beacon Gallery—we'd come in the back way, through a shipping area I'd never had any reason to venture into. She turned the knob to the door that led into the private collection.

"So we go down to Mexico," she went on, "Jonathan starts painting again, and we'll have enough money to buy asylum for you. Because enough money will buy you anything in Mexico if you know who to bribe."

A fireplace, situated so as not to detract from the paintings, threw off warmth and a faint odor of burning gas. I supposed I shouldn't have expected an honest-to-goodness wood-burning fireplace on the ground floor of a skyscraper, but I'd never given it much thought before. A pair of red velvet wing chairs faced the fire, and a single canvas was the focal point of the room. In the painting, a young man's head was thrown back in what I can only assume was swollen-lipped, post-coital bliss.

Yow. I wondered when Beacon started dealing with the world's most homoerotic nudes. Unless, of course, the artist was a woman. In which case it would just be...erotic.

"We would never get past the border," Jonathan said. He walked to the wall and his gloved fingertips skimmed the canvas. While I didn't want him raining on my parade, I suspected it was the truth.

"That's where Les comes in," said Mona. She walked up to one of the wing chairs and took someone's hand in hers—someone who'd been sitting there all along. "He's a pilot and he'll smuggle you in."

The name *Les* jangled my nerves about a nanosecond before the spiky-haired silhouette of the figure in the wing chair rose and put his arm around Mona. He smiled. His fangs were very sharp, and he had eyes only for Jonathan.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Hallo, János,” László said, and it sounded like Ya’-nosh, a weird combination of British and Magyar. Ever so happy. And that happiness seemed sincere, too, which made it ten times creepier.

Jonathan stared back, unreadable.

“You do look a fright, but I’ll bet you still clean up pretty.” He sniffed the air as if the sight of Jonathan weren’t enough; he wanted a scent too. “So I’ve broken you of that childish cat blood habit, I see. I hope you didn’t actually try to drink the clotted stuff. It’s no fun when it’s chunky.”

Jonathan cocked his head and continued to look blank.

“You know each other?” Mona asked. I wanted to get her out of there, bad, before anything happened to her. Of course she probably wouldn’t go, because she’d been on the rebound from Ben, and a dashing British vampire pilot had stepped in and offered to take care of *her* for a change and make all of her problems go away.

“János and me go way back.” László let go of Mona and strolled toward the painting. “This one’s Istvan, innit?” He pointed to it.

Jonathan crossed his arms and shrugged.

“Yeh, I recognized him by the way you’ve got his head tossed back like that.” He stared at the painting, and smiled even harder. “Good likeness, really.”

I stared at the back of László’s head, and tried to piece together the story that Jonathan had told me. Istvan had the virus and slept with Jonathan. Who’d then slept with László and given it to him. And then Istvan died.

So when had László found the time to burn the image of Istvan with his head thrown back like that into his memory—especially if he was as obsessed with Jonathan as Jonathan had claimed?

He was probably just baiting Jonathan, trying to spook him. I squinted at the painting. It was a pretty specific angle, like you were looking up at the kid from right between his legs. Did I mention it was ferociously hot?

“Who’s Istvan?” said Mona. She scrutinized the canvas as if she were searching for something in the brushstrokes, maybe a signature.

Or maybe not. Maybe she was trying to see what we were seeing. Because we were looking at the hundred thousand dollar Varga—a painting that just a few short weeks ago had looked like nothing but a big, black square to me.

“Istvan was actually my first choice.” László took a few easy steps closer to Jonathan. Who was still—still!—completely unreadable. “He was fair where you were dark. You were both pretty, but you had this unfortunate tendency to keep secrets.”

I wondered if László was saying what I thought he was saying—that he’d come along and infected both Jonathan and Istvan at the same time. It didn’t seem like the type of thing he’d be unclear about. And then, later, when he’d rushed to Jonathan’s bedside to claim his prize, his very own vampire playmate who’d survived the virus with flying colors, Jonathan had been gone.

Who’s to say if László even knew that Jonathan thought he’d been the one to pass the infection along? I can’t imagine how László would become privy to that knowledge, but if he had, there was no doubt it would’ve made him very, very happy to have Jonathan carry a needless burden for so many long years.

It changed everything, if László had infected Jonathan and not the other way around... I tried to read Jonathan’s expression to see if the new evidence had just rocked his world, but he could’ve been a photograph, a painting.

Jonathan advanced a few steps himself, swaying toward László and then veering away at the last moment to consider his painting from another angle. “But I was the one who survived.”

“Survived? You fucking thrived.” László swung around. His loose arms mirrored Jonathan’s, and his eyes raked up and down Jonathan’s face like he couldn’t believe, after all these years, it was really him.

“You sound angry.”

I tried to place that slight lilt Jonathan had to his voice. Joking? Flirting? No, not flirting, it couldn’t be. I reached out with my greater awareness and it seemed to me that Jonathan was a coiled wire ready to spring, while László couldn’t figure out if he wanted to fuck Jonathan, or kill him.

A red burst of anger flared from beside me—Mona, who was realizing she’d just been a pawn in László’s game.

I grabbed her by the sleeve, but the leather slipped out of the grasp of my cheap gloves. “Don’t,” I begged her, as quietly and urgently as I could, hoping that I hadn’t shifted László’s attention over to us.

László, too proud to wear gloves, caught Mona by the arm, and her knees buckled from the force of his grip. He started speaking in Magyar...I’m not one hundred percent sure of the details, but, “We can go to Mexico. She will be your food,” was pretty close.

Jonathan looked at Mona as if he’d just been offered moldy Velveeta. “And your bald Renfield?” he asked, in English. “Where does he fit into all of this?”

László inched closer—with Mona doubled over in pain, forgotten in his vise-like old-vampire grip. “Slavomir?” He shrugged, and switched back to British-sounding English. “I’ve grown accustomed to him over the years, but he’s not near the looker you are.”

Jonathan’s lips twitched as if he were stifling himself from preening at the compliment. “Two vampires can’t bloodbond.”

László grinned wider—the happiest vampire in the world—and got very, very close to Jonathan. “Aspirin. Beautiful thing. Thins the blood, y’know.”

Jonathan’s eyes widened for just a moment, and then his mostly blank, bemused mask slid into place again. He leaned in toward László, whose eyes got pretty wide themselves, but instead of actually touching László, Jonathan took Mona’s free hand in his and eased back. László let go of her other arm and she staggered and stumbled behind Jonathan, which put him between her and László.

“I don’t know what to make of this,” Jonathan purred, and my hackles rose because it didn’t even sound like him to me. Then again, I’d known him for the past four years, and László only knew him for a couple of weeks sometime back in the eighties. So hopefully Jonathan could pull off...whatever he was attempting. “I thought you were angry with me, so I ran.”

“Maybe I was. A little.”

“And what if I don’t care for Mexico?”

“Just long enough to get a new name and buy your citizenship. And then Brazil. Or London. Or Budapest.”

Mona’d been creeping to the door since Jonathan got László to release her. She opened it, but László was too busy swimming in Jonathan’s eyes to care. Jonathan stared right back, wetting his mouth, tilting his head...fuck, it should’ve been crazy with his filthy hair and his month-old beard, except even dirty he was still beautiful. Maybe even more so.

“It has been years since we made love,” Jonathan said, and then his face was so close to László’s that his breath had to be dancing over László’s cheek, his lips. “I’m not so sure I still desire you.”

Oh, what a bitch. To say that while his eyes, at least on the surface, said “take me” and his thigh brushed László’s leg. It was such a good performance that my stomach turned, and I actually felt jealous, like I could just punch László in the nose and claim Jonathan was really my boyfriend and it would all be over.

But then László couldn’t stand it anymore, and he grabbed Jonathan by the head and planted a big, wet one on him. Jonathan’s hips thrust forward and he practically rode up László’s thigh, fingers weaving through the stiff blond hair, and they rocked together, joined by the mouth.

Except one of Jonathan’s hands wasn’t really in on the whole act. It had made itself into a gun shape and frantically pantomimed a shot to László’s head.

I stuck my hand in my pocket, and yes, the derringer was still there. I slid my gloved finger onto the trigger and it felt awkward and slippery, as if my aim wouldn’t have been bad enough. I pulled off my glove and let it fall to the floor, then grabbed the gun in my pocket again.

László and Jonathan came up for some air. “I was getting tired of Slavomir anyway,” László said. “He’s just not very creative. You know, in bed.” Then, for the first time, he glanced over at me. Blue eyes

like a fine summer day. You wouldn't know he was a complete psychopath just by looking into them, either. Which made it worse. "Plus I told Slavomir to kill that twat. And here he is, right as rain."

"I have no idea why you're obsessed with killing my valet," Jonathan said, arms slung easily around László's neck, attempting to get his back to me, and place me out of his line of sight once more.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" László laughed stiffly. I think the Magyar accent was leaking into his British one. "Look me in the eye and tell me you're not fucking him."

"Pff." Jonathan stroked László's cheek. "I have never slept with him. Never touched him. Never even kissed him."

László's shoulders dropped a little, and I felt a wave of relief come off him. "Good. I was worried. Because we need him."

Jonathan drew lazily on László's lips, his own eyelids heavy. "Who?" he said, between kisses.

"This valet of yours. He'll be Slavomir's last meal."

Panic spiked—mine or Jonathan's, I don't know. "What has Slavomir done to deserve this?" asked Jonathan.

"It's not about him, yeah?" said László. "It's all about you. See, you and me, we can't have things like them between us. So here's how it's gonna go. We leave this one here drained and full of holes. I take a snapshot of you over his body—just a bit of insurance, nothing for you to worry about, long as you play by my rules. Then you, me, Slavomir and the girl fly to Mexico...and maybe, if you're very nice, I see to it that Slavomir gets off the plane early."

And then Jonathan made his fatal error. He hesitated.

I felt László's obsession curdle, and my stomach churned.

"I'm hurt that you feel the need of insurance," said Jonathan. "But I suppose I can humor you."

My heart pounded. Jonathan didn't know László was on to him. And László kept playing along.

"There's not enough nighttime left to go tonight, so we'll need to leave tomorrow at dusk." László slid his leg forward. His inner thigh rubbed Jonathan's, and his hands roved Jonathan's body while they kissed some more. Jonathan's hand made its shooting gesture at László's head again, and I grasped the gun in my pocket...

And I couldn't. I just couldn't shoot a man, not on purpose. The rat man—I'd been startled. Even then I'd felt guilty as hell that he'd been traumatized by my shooting at him without even hitting him.

Me, shoot someone in the head? Kill him? Even if it was László. Nope.

He turned and smiled at me with his sharp, sharp fangs, lips swollen from kissing *my* boyfriend. He had Phil's Ruger in his hand.

I had one of those moments of clarity when I saw the gun. It wasn't brave, and it wasn't fair. But even if László put that gun to my head and gave me a warning, I still wouldn't be able to shoot him. We were

only a few steps away from each other, and though Jonathan had told me László wasn't a particularly good shot, I really didn't see how he could possibly miss me.

But just as I was about to let my life begin flashing before my eyes, my vampire sense tingled. Something didn't feel right about László. The way he hadn't quite disengaged from Jonathan. The way he'd met my eye, to be sure I was watching, and yet wasn't really aiming at me. My God. It was the classic, "If I can't have you, then no one else will," mentality. With Jonathan as the object of the obsession, not me, of course not me.

The gun in László's hand started rising, not to shoot me, but a target so much closer. It was like I could see it moving in time, where it had been, where it was, and where it was going, like I existed in several dimensions and saw them all at once. Like time was meaningless.

My hand came up and the derringer cleared my silken pocket lining with ease, and at the very last moment I changed my aim. Because I needed to account for the amount of time it would take the bullet to travel. I aimed for the future hand instead of the present one. And I squeezed the trigger.

The gunshot snapped everything back into present time, like a film reel jolting forward once a splice is made. At first I thought the whole room had jerked away from me, but it was the recoil of my gun, that ridiculous little pearl-handled pansy gun, that threw me back.

It was awesome to see it hit. Because it did—and László's right hand exploded in a rain of flesh, bone and blood, and the Ruger hit the carpeted floor with a loud and very satisfying thump.

"Dropthegundropthegundropthegun..."

That was the FBI, a bunch of men in black with bulletproof vests who'd begun streaming through the door just as I'd blown László's hand off. One track mind, law enforcement.

There'd only been a single bullet in my gun, anyway. Didn't they teach them anything about firearms at FBI school? I let the derringer fall.

Three men leapt as one and took me out, and my scarred shoulder was definitely not happy as they wrenched my arms behind me and slapped the cuffs on my wrists. "V-positive," I gasped as they swarmed me, because even though they were trussing me like a sacrificial lamb, I couldn't really blame them. After all, I was the one who'd had the smoking gun in my hand when they came on the scene.

It hurt like hell, but despite the pain, a languid calm had stolen over me. Past, present and future. I knew with certainty so absolute that I would've staked Aunt Trixie on it that Jonathan was going to be okay.

And László? Well, I supposed he'd clot.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Some people, when they see Chicago's South Loop, see potential. Real estate's cheaper there than it is by the Water Tower because it's still kind of tawdry and crumbling around the edges, delicatessens and parking garages interspersed with a few big, expensive buildings like the Harold Washington Library or historic landmarks like Dearborn Station.

MCC (short for Metropolitan Correctional Center) juts from the South Loop cityscape like a big, concrete wedge. I hadn't even known its proper name, not until they hustled me through the doors in handcuffs and—get this—leg shackles. They weren't unduly rough with me, at least I didn't think so, but the whole Hannibal Lecter treatment really seemed a bit much. I had to bite back a comment about fava beans and a nice Chianti since the men in black bulletproof vests didn't look like they could take a joke.

"Make sure you get László," I told them for about the hundredth time. "He's the one you want. And the other one—he goes by the name of Smith. Stanislav or Slavislav or something like that. Bald, short, maybe five nine, with a goatee, and sunglasses at night. Great big fangs. Him too."

I knew I was talking to the wrong guys. Their job was to haul in the unfortunate folks with smoking guns in their hands. They were the ones who got shot at, and diffused bombs, and had to tackle people with all kinds of nasty diseases. Well, at least I'd never shot at them, or planted a bomb.

Even though I was so exhausted I could hardly keep myself upright—and the leg shackles were certainly no help—I kept on repeating my story. Get László. He's the one you want.

I could tell that one or two of them might have believed me. They handled me with clinical brusqueness, but they weren't unduly rough. A couple of them had seen that I'd shot to disarm, and even saw the Ruger fall. Another had already put together that my weapons and Jonathan's were a different caliber than the one that killed Phil and Mrs. Jeffers. I would've appealed to him in particular, except I also got the impression—and not from his perfectly blank expression, mind you—that not only was he a major homophobe, but he absolutely detested vampires.

Unlike the Feds who brought me in, the intake guards actually met my eyes when they spoke to me. "You're V-positive?" said the no-nonsense, gray-haired black man who rolled my fingerprints onto a card.

"Yes."

"We'll be confirming that with a cheek swab, so don't think you can just say that to get off easier in the medical ward."

“Why would I want to go into a V-positive ward if I didn’t already have it?” I said, too tired to stop myself from arguing. “It’s beginning stage three. The cheek swab might not confirm it.”

“If it don’t, they’ll order a urine test.” He handed me a wipe to get the ink off my fingertips. I looked down at my hands, fingertips black, and thought of Jonathan with his hands covered in black pigment. I wondered where he was, and László. And Smith.

“Open up,” the guard said, and he swabbed the inside of my cheek. Such standard procedure now that they couldn’t even spare a medical professional to do it.

They call everything by a different name in the prison. Green ward, that’s what the V-positive areas were known as. They had different entrances and exits than the rest of the prison, different staff—all V-positive themselves, right down to the janitors—and of course different food.

I hadn’t needed to worry. My cheek swab had come up positive right off the bat, so I went from a sterilized, single-person holding cell the size of a port-a-potty to the green ward within fifteen minutes.

A black woman with chemically straightened hair and a “V” embroidered on her lab coat approached me. She looked into each of my eyes with a penlight, peered into my mouth with the world’s driest tongue depressor, and took my blood pressure and pulse. A clerk in a polo shirt that also had a “V” on it, a white guy with a scraggly mustache, started filling out paperwork. All the while, a man in an expensive charcoal gray suit, whose thinning hair might be considered a comb-over in a couple of years but was marginally okay at the moment, hovered around us, listening as if I might give something away by telling the doctor when the last time it was I’d eaten something, or the clerk that my middle name was Joseph.

The guy in the suit did not have a “V” embroidered on him.

“Is Jonathan here?” I asked the doctor.

“We can’t discuss that now,” she said, not unkindly. “You’re dehydrated. We’ll need to get some fluids in you.”

“I didn’t kill anybody,” I told her, and something in her general vibe—aura, if you will—kind of flickered. I think she wanted to believe me. And yet I think she would’ve had compassion for me even if I had blown László away. Who was she, Mother Theresa? Didn’t it wear her down, coming to work day after day, wearing a brand like a prisoner at Auschwitz, caring for people who’d committed crimes other than letting a virus sneak into their bodies too? Shit, I wanted to cry. I pinched the bridge of my nose like I was just tired, and jammed my thumb and forefinger into my tear ducts, hard. And then I realized that I was using the ink hand. Great, just great.

“Take him to an isolation med unit,” she told the guards, who had green vests over what I assumed was standard khaki prison guard garb. “Skip the intake shower for now.”

Prison showers. The stuff of gay pornos...not. But I was filthy. I wondered if I could play very, very sick and request a sponge bath.

The isolation unit was a compartment made of seamless molded plastic just like the holding cell, except there was enough space for a gurney and a person to walk around it—barely. A couple of V-branded techs took a look at whatever the V-doctor had scribbled on her pad, set up a hanging bag of fluid, stuck a needle under my skin—and not in a vein, as it might very well clot—and left me there to bloat. Once the techs were gone, Comb-Over Man came in.

“I’m Agent Meyers. Have you got an attorney?”

I shook my head.

“Frankly, I don’t think you’re going to need one. But if you want to lay here and wait for a court-appointed lawyer to show up before you tell me what you know, I can’t stop you.”

“Okay, is this the good-cop, bad-cop routine where you pretend you’ve got my best interests at heart, and then another agent comes in and threatens me, and then you stick up for me and I end up pouring my heart out to you?”

“You watch too much TV.”

“Tell me a half-dozen top criminal lawyers wouldn’t jump at the chance to defend me for the publicity alone.”

He sighed and crossed his arms and wished he could lean against the wall. How did I know that? Some subtle tilt of his shoulder? Crap, I could even tell from the way his fingers twitched that he wanted a smoke. Only he hadn’t had one in three years and he damn sure wasn’t going to start again now. Because his wife would kill him if she smelled it on him, and the last thing he wanted was to come home from this freak show and listen to her mouth.

I was starting to scare myself.

“Okay, listen. Answer me or not. We’re thinking Les Brown, AKA László Barta, is our guy. Any particular reason you shot him?”

Just like I could see that his lower back hurt, and he’d been awake for far too many hours, and he was disappointed that the custard-filled donuts in the break room were all gone and there was nothing left but jelly, I could see that he did, indeed, think László was his killer.

“He was obsessed with Jonathan. And he would have killed Jonathan if I didn’t do something.”

“Uh-huh.” Agent Meyers took out a little pad of paper and scribbled something down.

“But this other henchman guy was the one doing the horror-movie-style killings. He called himself Smith. But his real name was...” I waved my hand. Damn, but all those really foreign names sounded alike to me. “He was Czechoslovakian or something.”

Meyers looked over his pad at me. “That still a country?”

“Christ, I don’t know.”

“That’s it for tonight,” said the doctor from the admitting room. She might have strode into the room and moved some equipment around, but she wouldn’t have fit in there with both Meyers and the gurney. She did carry a clipboard that made her look twice as official. “Let him rest.”

Meyers didn’t look pleased, but what could he do? Plus he was tired himself, wanted nothing more than a quick, hot shower and a date with his own bed. “No visitors,” he said.

The doctor didn’t even acknowledge it, simply dimmed the light and told me, “Get some rest.”

I slept really, really well. Either my body was just overjoyed to be somewhere clean where the gurney was soft and the water didn’t taste like iodine, or they had sedatives in the IV. When I woke up, a young black man with his hair in thuggish corn rows was staring at me in the dim, ambient light. He wore a green smock with a “V” screenprinted on the left pocket.

“You shot that crazy motherfucker’s hand off?” he said, by way of greeting.

I rubbed sleep from my eyes and tried to sit up. Then I noticed my handcuffs were gone. “Seems that way.”

“Shee-it.” He lifted an aerosol can in one hand, sprayed a random spot on the wall, then wiped it down with a paper towel he held in the other.

“Hey,” I said as he turned to go. “Why’d you call him crazy?”

But the V-janitor just gave me a big grin, which showed off his naturally blunt but stunningly white fangs. Without a word, he went out to a cart in the hall, threw the paper towel in a big red biohazard bin atop the cart and wheeled the whole thing away.

There wasn’t much for me to do in my tiny plastic world except read. And not the newspaper, either—a tattered copy of *Gone With the Wind* whose written dialect was profoundly irritating. I claimed it was cruel and unusual punishment, but Agent Meyers was somehow convinced that Jonathan and I were going to manage to speak to each other and concoct a story. How Jonathan would communicate with me through the *Chicago Tribune*, I have no clue—but I guess if they’re allowed to sequester jurors, they can cut suspects off from the rest of the world too.

Apparently Jane Bowles-Neumann didn’t think much of my information dearth, either. I hadn’t heard of her before she stormed into my closet-sized plastic room, spitting orders to unhook me and threatening to sue the city, the state and even the federal government if I wasn’t released to a private hospital—immediately.

Jane was an attorney who specialized in high-profile defendants, preferably minorities. A few well-televised pro bono cases allowed her to charge fees to her other clients that were exorbitant even by attorneys’ standards. But what I could sense about her, the minute she came within a yard of me, was that she had more balls than my high school football team, and that she found it preposterous they were holding me when the evidence clearly pointed to László and an unknown accomplice.

“Excuse me,” I said. My throat was raspy with dehydration. “Aren’t you being just a little presumptuous? I haven’t formally hired you.”

She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow over her couture tortoiseshell frames. “For breakfast, would you prefer cottonseed oil that tastes like a can?”

My throat fluttered. I told it to quit. There was nothing left in me to throw up anymore.

“Or, I’d be happy to swing by your private hospital room while you’re watching cable TV with a V-friendly almond oil smoothie that my personal chef will whip up just for you.”

“Damn. I’d sell you my soul for a smoothie.”

“All right then. We have a deal.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The first thing I did when I got my private hospital room was take a long, hot shower. Then I almost wiped out on the bathroom floor, saved only by the fact that I hung on to the toilet seat like a lifeline. A hospital toilet seat. Shat on by God-only-knew-who before me. I upchucked a little bile into the back of my throat.

This temperature-regulation thing was going to take some getting used to.

I took a tepid shower to wash away the worse-than-public toilet germs, and then very carefully made my way back to my bed.

A plastic pitcher of water with sweat beading its sides sat on the tray table, and I filled my paper cup and took a long drink. Tap water, but it'd do. At least until I got hold of Jane and had her get me some Evian. And some real slippers, not the ridiculous papery things I was wearing. And pajamas with actual buttons that didn't leave my unremarkable ass flapping around in the breeze.

Then again, I probably wouldn't even recognize it as my own ass. I weighed in at 178 upon admittance. I hadn't seen that since college. I scoped out my belly but it didn't look all that much different to me. The big weight loss had to be all water weight. They said I was dehydrated. But even at 185 I'd still be thrilled. Because ever since I'd topped 200, I started leaning funny on my scale to make it read less, adjusting the set point, and taking more dramatic poses every time I passed a mirror.

Once I drank two cups of water, I started trolling around for the remote control. It wasn't in the little drawer in the nightstand. It wasn't on my tray. I felt really stupid calling the nurse just to ask her where the remote was, so I finished the rest of the water so that I could ask her for more, and just incidentally mention that the remote was missing.

Women don't really wear nurse's hats anymore, only actresses and drunk girls in Halloween costumes. The one who answered my buzz had chestnut hair in a ponytail. She wore coral pink scrubs and a white face mask that made her expression unreadable. The fact that I couldn't see her face alarmed me at first. But then I remembered that I didn't need something as mundane as an expression to tell me what someone was thinking. Not anymore.

I reached out a little with my senses and was nearly knocked over by a wave of fear and revulsion. She hated dealing with V-positives, and she was convinced the gay ones like me got it from being fucked up the ass. Even though all the evidence pointed out that the vampire virus and HIV couldn't both coexist

in the same host, she was sure it was just a matter of time before one or the other mutated enough so they could become symbiotes.

“Yes?” she said.

“I...uh...may I have more water?”

She took the pitcher, thinking that she’d have to just deal with losing her seniority and find a nice nursing home to work at. Sure, the patients shit the bed and called you “mom”, but at least you couldn’t catch “old”.

I stared at the ceiling while she came back with the water, singing the alphabet song in my head to keep her vitriolic thoughts from contaminating me any more than they already had. My own hang-ups and miseries were plenty for me. I didn’t need hers on top of them.

I’d been through the song about a dozen times when Jane showed up. “Knock knock,” she said, and walked in without waiting for my okay.

She set a thermos on my tray table with a look of anticipation about her, but then her face fell once she got a good look at me. “Hansen. You look like shit. I’ll call a specialist.” She flipped open her cell phone.

I was about to correct her but she held up her index finger between us. I stared at it. The crescent of a perfectly shaped nail peeked over the pad. “Yeah. Josephine. Get hold of that top V-internist and have him call me on my cell. What do you mean? Of course, now. Right.”

She flicked the phone shut. “What else do you need?”

“Forget about me. Tell me what’s happening to Jonathan.”

“I only took you on. Not him.”

“Can’t we be tried together? Don’t they do that when they suspect multiple people of the same crime?”

“That’s the thing. They’re not looking at you for the murders. They were holding you for assault with a deadly weapon, and I made the D.A. knock it down to self-defense since your shot was clearly non-lethal. And then what? They’d hold you for possession of an illegal firearm? Not without getting a ton—I mean a ton—of shit for it.”

I looked her right in the eye. “What about Jonathan?”

“What about him?” she said. “They still haven’t found a translator.”

“What?”

“Did you know that only twenty million people in the entire world speak Hungarian?”

Jonathan was lucky he was being held somewhere in a small plastic cell, or I would’ve used my vampire superpower to give him a psychic smack in the face. “He speaks English.” I was about to add something about German and Russian, but I decided that I didn’t want to hang all his secrets out to dry just because I was pissed off at him for being a knucklehead. Not just yet.

“Oh. Really?”

“If you would just take his case too, I think it’ll all work out. I really want to see him. Or at least talk to him. On the phone, if that’s the best you can do.”

“You’re putting the cart before the horse. First we clear you, then you can worry about him.”

“They don’t think that he killed those people, do they?” Without thinking, I reached out with my mind and felt a jab of pity spike within her. “He was with me the whole time.”

“I don’t think you want to be his alibi right now.”

“It wasn’t him, it was László.”

“They think László Barta was the shooter. But the...biter?”

I tasted bile again. “Look for the bald Czechoslovakian who calls himself Smith. How many fucking times do I have to say it?”

Jane looked down at her French manicure. She wanted to believe me. But she also allowed for the possibility that I’d been tricked or used, or possibly even delirious.

“Come on.” I did my best to sound perfectly rational, even though what I really wanted to do was panic. “You’ve got connections. Have them grill László, make him think they’ve got Smith, and that Smith is blabbing everything. He’d buy that Smith is double-crossing him to get a deal—I know it.”

She looked at the blanket and I felt her pity swell.

“What?” I asked.

“László won’t be giving up any more information. They found what was left of him in the exercise yard this afternoon.”

~ * ~

A V-positive woman with a tag that read Dr. M. Patil sat in the visitor’s chair and explained various elements of the virus to me that I’d known for years, having kept up on all the latest research since I spent so much time at Jonathan’s studio. I let her words flow over me as she spoke. English wasn’t her first language, though I didn’t ask where she was from for fear of her taking it as some kind of criticism, red-blooded American outrage at being cared for by someone with an accent. I liked the rhythms of her speech, even if I didn’t necessarily catch every word. She had olive skin, brown eyes to die for, and straight black hair that hung down her back in a single, thick braid. India, I decided. Probably India.

She started in on diet, and how I’d need to weigh myself weekly and adjust my caloric intake to make sure I didn’t get too thin. I couldn’t help but smirk at that one, and she smiled back. How many weight-challenged Americans chose vampirism as an alternative to gastric bypass surgery? No one ever admitted it. But I’m sure it happened all the time.

“Are you allergic to peanuts?”

“Hm?”

“Food allergies might still be a problem. You will have to read labels very carefully if you are allergic to peanuts.”

“No, no allergies.”

Dr. Patil launched into a diatribe against processed foods, and I thought about Jane’s personal chef, wondered if he’d consider going in on a cookbook project with me. We’d clean up.

“That is all for today.” She handed me a sheaf of papers that’d been photocopied so many times that the text sat crooked on the page and looked like it’d been sprinkled with pepper. “Read that, and we will talk more tomorrow.”

She paused in the doorway and cocked her head. “I heard you came here from the prison.”

I’d be shocked if she hadn’t. “Yes.”

“It is good you are here. The prisons are not safe for those of us who are V-positive.”

Jonathan. A shiver went through me. I forced a smile and thanked her for her visit, grinding my molars until she left.

Jonathan was still there, but maybe he was being held somewhere special, seeing as how the whole case was such a high-profile affair. Then again, how much supervision could there have been if a couple of guards had managed to crisp László?

Security had probably doubled on Jonathan once that happened, though. If they were lumping Jonathan and László together, they were probably worried that Jonathan was going to be rubbed out too. But who knows? There were other ways to kill a vampire. Jonathan could be poisoned. Or starved. Or the temperature in his cell could go on the fritz. So many things could happen if the FBI just wanted the whole case to go away...

I grabbed the phone and started dialing Jane’s home number, which she’d scribbled on the back of her business card with the instruction to call her any time if I remembered anything that might help my case. What was I going to tell her?

Smith was real, goddamn it. Smith. Was. Real.

Except I’d said that a thousand times, and for all I knew, no one was even looking for him. Because they had Jonathan. And a vampire was a vampire was a vampire.

Okay. If they were going to be that way, then I’d need to find Smith myself. So what did I know about him? He got his blood the Hollywood way—by biting people. He was a good shot. He spoke English just fine. He had a leather blazer that made him look like an annoying little troll and he wore sunglasses at night...

I stopped myself from critiquing his fashion sense. But it was so hard to cobble together anything about him. Fuck, I hardly knew him.

Think, Mark. Think. Jonathan said he looked old. If László had infected him on purpose like Jonathan and Istvan, it would stand to reason that they’d been together quite some time.

László had told him to kill me, and he'd failed. I wondered if I could somehow lure him out to finish the job.

I'd need to arrange a few things. I'd have to be somewhere more accessible than the hospital. I'd also need to advertise, somehow, that I was going to be there. I scratched my head and stared harder at the phone. I'd need something to catch his attention, if possible. Hook him in. If I was smart, I'd make sure it happened in a place where he'd get himself caught—somewhere public.

I dialed Jane's number and took a deep breath.

"Hello?"

"Jane? It's Mark. I hope this isn't a bad time..."

"It's fine. What's on your mind?"

I sighed full into the receiver. "It's just...I was just thinking that I really need to go to László's funeral. Even if you can just get me out of here for a couple of hours."

"Funeral? There isn't any funeral."

"Why not?"

"No one's claimed his body. He'll just sit there at the medical examiner's office until they get enough bodies together to do a mass incineration."

How delightful. I suspected the powers that be wouldn't let me crash that party. "No, that can't be right. What if I pay for the funeral?"

"You want to pay for the funeral."

I did my best to sound like a melodramatic queer. I think Jonathan would've been proud. "I'm never going to be able to rest until I see him dead in a box, watch it lowered into the ground and covered in dirt." I breathed for a second, letting my throat catch. "Can you understand that?"

"Okay. I'll see what I can do."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I wasn't sure if I had Jane to thank, or her dauntless assistant whom I've never met, but I imagine as looking something like Marilyn Munster, intelligent in a non-threatening way, with a fresh-scrubbed, blonde, Midwestern charm.

Jane swept into my hospital room and said, "Here's what we've got." I marked my place in *Gone With the Wind* with a Band-Aid wrapper, and put the book down. A remote to the TV had never materialized, thanks to the FBI and the DA working to keep me as ignorant as possible, though as a suspect or a witness, I couldn't really say. They seemed to waffle back and forth every other day.

And speaking of waffles, Jane had brought me another shake. I knew who to thank for that. Her chef.

"László Barta has a sister in Budapest who hasn't seen him in over thirty years. We've convinced her that we just want to give him a dignified Catholic burial, and she's going to authorize the funeral home of our choice to take delivery of his remains."

"She's that religious?"

"Well, we're also giving her a thousand dollars to comfort her in her time of grief."

"A thousand dollars? That seems like a pretty puny bribe."

"I guess it's a lot of money by Hungarian standards." She moved my water from the tray to the bedside table, set down a laptop and fired it up. "And one more thing. One of my colleagues, Gerard Crandall, has taken on Varga. I guess Varga remembered how to speak English, but only in front of him."

Interesting. She'd thought Jonathan stupid, initially, some dumb immigrant who'd never picked up English. And now it sounded like she was...I dunno. Impressed.

She popped in a disc and pivoted the laptop so I could see the screen. "So Crandall arranged for this to happen. I know it's not as good as a phone call, but it was the best we could do."

A very low-tech, low-res video began playing. Off-white plastic walls, plastic table, plastic chairs, all bathed in a greenish-tinged fluorescent light. The camera jumped around and then settled on a very pissed-off young man in an orange jumpsuit.

Then I recognized the eyes. Jonathan. His hair was clipped short, curling on top, and he was shaved so close it looked like Sweeney Todd had scraped him within an inch of his life with a straight razor. It also made him look so fresh-faced he could've been about nineteen years old—which made the new estimate of his age I'd been adjusting to, mid-forties, feel even less compatible with what I was seeing. I figured his

lawyer wanted him to look as little like Charles Manson as possible. Smart guy. Now if Crandall could only wipe that scowl off young Jonathan's face, they'd have a much better chance.

"Per the agreement, a copy of this video will be supplied to the DA's office and will be admissible as evidence should you come to trial." The lawyer's voice was raspy, like he'd smoked a pack of Pall Malls every day of his life until smoking had been banned everywhere but his car, and then quit because it'd become too much of a pain in the ass to continue. There was also a hint of a twang to it, like he'd grown up downstate. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"All right. Say what you wanted to say."

Jonathan sighed and stared down at the table. He fidgeted with his own hands for a moment and then glanced shyly at the camera. "Mark." That familiar light roll of the "R" practically had me crawling onto Jane's lap and sobbing into her shoulder. "Mister Crandall has told me about this funeral." He looked all around, and his jaw clenched. "I beg you not to go. Slavomir is still out there somewhere...and you won't be safe. Do this, Mark. For me. Please."

"Right, that's his name," I murmured.

"Is that all, son?" asked Crandall's disembodied voice.

Jonathan shook his head, a single sharp jerk. His hair would've fallen over his eyes if it were still long.

"You have given László this funeral, and that is enough." His jaw worked some more. I could see the tendons bunching under the skin of his surreally smooth cheek. He gathered his thoughts and looked right at the camera. Right at me. "The loss of his hand...he would have found a way to make even that work to his advantage, so I don't want you to worry. The guards killed him. Not you. You owe him nothing."

Oh. It hadn't even occurred to me to feel guilty about the hand. Oops.

Jonathan stared down at the table again. "That is all," he said quietly, and the screen went blue.

Poor Jonathan. He'd bought the story that I was a total basket case, a drama queen who'd demanded a real funeral for László. And why not? Everyone else bought it too. Or maybe people thought that I secretly wanted a chance to spit on the grave—wanted it badly enough to risk my life. Come on, I know how to hold a grudge like anyone else, but not well enough to die for it.

I couldn't count the number of times I'd been warned that the mysterious bald vampire, should he really exist, may well show up.

Slavomir being there? I was banking on it.

~ * ~

The DA allowed Jane—or more likely her assistant—to grab a suit from my apartment, and the FBI was kind enough to supply me with a bulletproof vest. It just so happened to fit quite nicely under my suit since I'd lost yet another five pounds.

"That thing won't do you any good if you get shot in the head," Jane advised me. She was ever so helpful.

I turned sideways and did my best to see as much of myself as I could in the lavatory mirror. I had to stand in my hospital room outside the bathroom door to do it. As far as I could tell, nothing screamed, "Bulletproof vest."

I did my best to ignore the hack job that the visiting hairdresser had done on me, but my whole head was starting to look like "not me." I think that when you lose weight on purpose, at a normal pace, you don't really see it in yourself—not like other people do. Because you're looking at your same damn face in the mirror, day in, day out. Combing your hair. Brushing your teeth. Making sure nothing's hanging out of your nose.

I hadn't seen many mirrors lately. So this guy with high cheekbones and a quick haircut looking back at me was kind of a stranger.

Jane snapped her cell phone shut after a monosyllabic cell phone conversation that I'd tuned out since my hair was far more interesting, and said, "I think we'd better get going."

I looked through the new toiletries Jane's assistant had bought me. Mousse. She'd bought me mousse. I would have preferred something more like a gel, but it would do. I shook up the can and squirted a dab into my palm, and was shocked when it swelled up to the size of a baseball. Mousse was so 80's. Maybe I could enjoy it for its kitsch value.

Or maybe I was just nervous as hell and trying to distract myself.

"Mark?"

"Yeah, in a sec."

"It's turning into a circus outside the funeral home," she said. I imagined elephants in costumes. Midgets. Androgynous Chinese tumblers. "Maybe you should just skip the viewing and go to the burial."

"No!" I snapped breathlessly, which was kind of fun, and as a bonus, it cemented my reputation as a melodramatic queer. I had to maximize Slavomir's chance of finding me. What if he showed up to the viewing and I wasn't there? He could say goodbye to László, the lover who'd been planning to throw him out of a plane, and then troop right back to Europe. Whichever country he was from. "I need to go to the wake and make sure László is dead."

"He's a shriveled-up raisin. He's dead."

I stooped in front of the mirror and pushed the sides of my hair into place, plumped up the top. I was thinking I kinda liked the mousse. "Yeah? What if it's not really him?"

"You've seen too many spy movies."

I sighed and let her usher me off to the car, where the pair of us were flanked by no less than four Feds.

Jane's cell phone rang in the car, a black sedan driven by a pair of very quiet and frighteningly interchangeable agents. Her end of the conversation went, "Yeah. Okay. Right. Yeah." And so I couldn't help it. I reached out with my new senses to try to figure out what was up.

She was worried. Really worried. Underneath her cucumber-cool exterior she was a wreck. And maybe a little bit excited. Because she'd wanted publicity, and we had it in spades.

It was well after sundown when we pulled up outside the funeral home. Well, actually we coasted to a stop around two blocks away. I wouldn't have called it a circus. It was more like a riot.

The Chicago PD was there, with some mounted patrolmen who were trying to hem in the crowds. Every fucking kook in the city'd turned out for the event. ACN's pet puppets, Moral Grounds, were there with signs that read "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" and other witty anti-gay epithets. Which was funny, since I thought their big beef was with the virus, and not our sexuality.

I picked out another sign, "Christ gave us his blood." Whoa. The moderate V-Christians were there too. They were a smaller group, but incredibly vocal.

Another mob held up signs that said, "Thou shalt not kill," and pictures of mangled fetuses. I had no idea where abortion came into the whole thing, unless it was because V-positive mothers spontaneously aborted within a few weeks, and so women who came up positive had to kiss their fantasies of being Donna Reed goodbye. Either that, or adopt—though the courts made that damn near impossible since positives weren't deemed to be "fit" parents.

And then there were the people looming around the periphery. They hadn't brought signs or bullhorns, they hadn't arranged any chants or planned to pull any stunts. Regular people, V-positives and their friends, their families, dozens...no, hundreds of them, stony-faced and angry that mobs of fanatics were calling them evil and getting away with it.

When one agent opened my car door and another pulled me out, the mass around me surged, knocking over crowd-control sawhorses and pressing into the line of black-clad policemen with their checkerboard-trimmed hats. Flashes strobed all around me and microphones thrust out above the shoulders of the straining cops.

"Mark! Channel 5 News here..."

"Did you actually witness any of the...?"

"Which stage of vampirism are you in at the...?"

"Do you think Jonathan Varga is guilty?"

That last one stopped me, and the crowds actually shrank back for a moment and seemed to hush as they waited for my reply. "Don't say anything," Jane hissed at me as she did her damndest to drag me toward the funeral home's entrance.

But I couldn't just say nothing. "Of course not," I told them. "He's a painter. Not a murderer."

Well, there was the sound bite for the early morning news.

The agents propelled Jane and me toward the doors, and the questions from the press and the roar of the zealots all blended together to form a wall of sound that I was all too ready to leave behind.

"I told you not to say anything," Jane snapped. "Now don't say anything else. You never know what the press can take out of context and use to make you look bad. Don't you think they're starting to sniff around the whole Gay Love Triangle aspect?"

I stopped and considered it. "Why? Is that what ACN's been pimping?"

Her face looked blank. Of course it was.

But really, wasn't it essentially true? Undoubtedly it would be made to sound a lot tawdrier than it actually was, and Jonathan and I would have been swinging from the chandeliers in the imaginations of TV viewers everywhere, when in fact I'd never gotten more than a kiss on the hair from him. Aunt Trixie was probably watching the news, and while I think she's suspected that I liked boys since she saw me watching Adam Ant videos with a little too much interest, I still didn't want her to form any opinions on my current lifestyle based on whatever rhetoric was selling airtime on ACN.

"Security's tight," Jane said. "And no one's been allowed in but the families of his victims. I think a few showed up, but not all of them. Everyone's got to deal with this in his or her own way."

Victims' families? Aw, shit. I really wished I'd gotten some kind of pamphlet on psychic self-defense. But then I would've had to explain the vampire superpower to someone other than Jonathan, and I didn't want to do that, since they already thought I was crazy and that Smith was a figment of my overactive imagination.

"Are you ready?"

To explain my superpowers? Oh, to go into the viewing. Of course I was ready. So why wouldn't my feet move? Victims' families—I'd almost been a victim myself, but the bullet refracted off one of Jonathan's ribs just enough to save me and infect me, all in one fell swoop. It could've been my family there. Aunt Trixie. My mom, my dad—Christ, my dad who would probably never speak to me again with what they were saying on the ACN.

"Mark?"

Fuck. Oh, fuck. I couldn't believe I'd deluded myself into thinking the whole, "I need to see László dead," thing was just an act. I'd been so focused on luring Smith out into the open that I hadn't dealt with my real feelings about László. Which suddenly had me in a Full Nelson.

Jane handed me a tissue. I took it in my gloved hand. Nice gloves her assistant picked out. Not so slippery. I crunched the tissue into a ball and squeezed it in my palm.

"Do you want to sit down?" Her voice was kinder than I'd ever heard it.

Did I? Would I ever be able to stand back up if I did? I shook my head.

“If this is as far as you can go,” she said, “that’s okay.”

No, it wasn’t. I needed to stand in front of that fucking coffin and make sure Smith would have a good shot at me. I walked toward the chapel door on wooden legs, while I remembered the remark Jane had made about the bulletproof vest not being able to protect my head. But I wasn’t scared. Smith—Slavomir—wasn’t very creative; László had said so himself. And Smith was also a very good shot. An image of Mrs. Jeffers in a ratty recliner with a hole in her chest came to mind. I didn’t really see Phil or the old lady in the elevator, but I had a pretty good idea they’d both had matching holes, straight through the heart.

Jesus. Smith was both the shooter *and* the biter. What did that make László? Just the puppetmaster pulling the strings? Maybe that was actually worse.

A murmur of conversation abruptly stopped as I entered the room, and a classical piano CD playing at low volume inadequately filled the space where the words had been. Not now, I thought, as tangible auras of emotions shot toward me. Not now.

Anger, because somehow I was involved in this whole thing, though nobody really knew exactly how. Disgust, for my lifestyle and my illness. Pity. Confusion. Hatred. Grief.

I locked my knees to keep them from buckling, and looked around for something, anything, to deflect the vibes that threatened to overwhelm me. Curtains—heavy. Wallpaper—tasteful, if bland. Flowers—perfunctory. Carpet—a bit cheesy, but where else can you have big fleur-de-lis on the floor, if not a funeral home?

Casket—black.

God, a casket. And I knew the guy in it. I’d helped put him there.

The casket was closed. The sun damage had probably been more than they could repair. Still, didn’t the morticians realize that I didn’t care if László looked fresh and serene or burnt and crispy? I just wanted to get a look at that face—even if the sharp, sharp fangs were all I could still recognize—and know for sure that he was dead.

I didn’t have the strength to tear the sealed casket open. Maybe I did, physically. But mentally, emotionally, I was completely tapped out. I had to settle for staring at that damn casket, while everyone else in the room stared at me.

And while I was staring, I felt someone else’s emotions welling up beside me: anger. But not directed at me—no, the emotion that was directed toward me was...maybe kinship’s the best word. The anger was for László. “Thank you for doing this,” said a girl, maybe twenty-five, brunette, dressed in a black suit that was so new I found myself looking for the price tag hanging off the side. “He killed my cousin Phil. My therapist says that coming here will help me get some closure.”

I wanted to say something that would shore the both of us up, help us both dust ourselves off and trudge on with our lives, but I couldn’t help but think that Phil’s real killer was still out there, wearing sunglasses at night.

I looked from her puffy eyes to the casket again. “I just needed to see that he was dead,” I said, and even though my voice was barely more than a whisper, I felt tiny spikes of sympathy pierce me from all around the room. “Phil was a real nice guy,” I added, and then the waterworks really did kick in. I jammed the tissue ball into my right eye and staggered away from her.

A middle-aged priest who’d been talking to someone in the corner turned toward me, could possibly have tackled me if he’d been quick enough, but I held up my hand and he stayed where he was. Jane stayed behind. I guess she didn’t want to see me cry.

Four agents moved as one, like points of a compass, and I was the needle in the center. Even though they stuck to me in that formation, they kept their distance; they had no desire to interact with me, only to protect me.

The five of us spilled out into the foyer, where I nearly knocked down the funeral director. From there I could see through the modern, geometric, pastel-tinted stained glass: the mobs, the hordes, the video cameras, the ridiculous signs. I turned and went through another door, looking for a bathroom, an office, anything.

“It’s okay,” the funeral director told the agents. “Give him a moment.”

I blundered into a room that was larger than I’d anticipated, half office, half showroom, with about a dozen caskets arranged along the far wall, end to end, a couple of feet apart. Each casket had its own special backdrop and coordinating arrangements of silk flowers. A desk and a couple of chairs beside the door gave the bereaved somewhere to make all the necessary arrangements. There was a chart sitting on top of the blotter, a sample board that displayed various wood stains on tiny wooden squares. I approached the desk and picked up the card. I centered myself. I breathed. Let’s see. Shall we go with the golden maple or the warm oak? Perhaps a traditional mahogany.

Crowd noises carried, even through the brick walls of the funeral home, and I heard the crackle of a bullhorn as the police attempted to thin the crowd. Fat chance. Those people weren’t going to stop hovering until they’d gotten their fill of staring at the bereaved, and then tracked the hearse to the cemetery.

I wondered if László’s grave would end up being a huge, morbid tourist attraction. Probably so, at least the first couple of years. I had no idea what kind of headstone we were buying for László, and what could possibly be inscribed on it. I’d need to ask Jane.

“Step away from the building,” floated above the crowd din, amplified through a bullhorn. I heard helicopters in the background. God. How had things come to this? I wanted Jonathan, and that was all. I missed him so badly that I could hardly think of anything else. If he weren’t in prison, would he have come to the viewing? Probably so. He’d need closure, just like everyone else. But how would he feel about László’s death? Sure, he’d been pantomiming that gun thing at László’s head, but that kiss, that sexy, sexy kiss. I’d never had that with him. László had. And more.

“Hansen,” said a voice behind me, and I flinched. I’d expected it with that clipped Czechoslovakian accent, but even though it was only the one word, two syllables—my name—I realized as I was turning to face the speaker that it hadn’t been said with a Slavic lilt.

The accent was British.

“Funny,” I said, with no idea how I was staying so calm. “You don’t sound dead.” I turned to face him as quickly as I could without seeming rushed, rotating smoothly with my new V-tuned muscles that I might never have a chance to put through their paces on a dance floor.

It took just a moment for recognition to click in. Yes, it was indeed László.

A drop-ceiling panel behind him sat askew, and a dark triangle of empty space showed that led to wherever he’d come from. He’d dyed his hair auburn, and it looked natural with his pale vampire skin and his summer-blue eyes. It was parted on the side, conservative, old-fashioned even, like horn-rimmed glasses and short-sleeved dress shirts. His smirk made the hairstyle seem ironic.

He wore electricians’ coveralls and a pair of gloves. The right hand looked natural hanging by his side, but it might look fake when and if László moved it. I imagined him doing a Queen Elizabeth wave with his new prosthetic hand, and decided that I must be giddy in the face of my imminent death.

He had a gun in his left hand. A few shots to my torso to knock me down, then another in my head. It had never even occurred to me that a bullet would knock me down, because I’ve never needed to know things like that. That’s what *he* was thinking—he could see the bulletproof vest even through my suit. Damn. I had to stall.

“It was more important to come back for me than it was to get out alive?” I asked him.

“You flatter yourself. I came back for Slavomir, yeah? Getting to knock you off.” He shrugged. “It’s just a good bit of luck.”

His gaze flickered to something behind me, and the ironic twist of his lips turned into an actual smile. He said something that sounded like a string of consonants—Czechoslovakian, I take it—and I didn’t need to look behind me to know that Slavomir had made his appearance, right on cue. Scary thing was, adrenaline had my psychic vampire sense so acutely tuned that I could pick the movements out of László’s mind, along with his pleasure at seeing a display casket lid whisper open, and bald-headed Slavomir sit up like Nosferatu.

Great. Now I had two vampires to deal with. And if Slavomir was aiming at me, he wouldn’t miss.

Maybe I could get them to fire at the same time and then duck out of the way so they’d accidentally shoot each other. Right—and maybe V-positive monkeys would fly out of my butt.

“You’re his second choice,” I told Slavomir, in hopes of making him doubt László and swing around to my side. “He really wanted Jonathan, not you. Came all the way to America to get Jonathan to come back to him.”

“Pop psychology,” László said, “only in America. If you only knew how ridiculous you sound.”

“Seriously,” I said, because I wasn’t entirely unsuccessful. I could sense this cold pit of dejection hanging around Slavomir, like he knew he was only the consolation prize. “László was going to throw you out of the plane.”

“What, you think you’re going to make Slavomir cry like a little baby? He’s not had the posh life you’ve had. He isn’t going to go mental over a bit of waffling.”

My consciousness groped at the coldness that surrounded Slavomir and pulled back fast, like it was scared of getting sucked in. The glimpse I got of it felt steely and strange. I hadn’t really peeked into many minds since my newfound skills emerged, but it looked like László’s assessment of Slavomir’s mettle was right on target. The only person who’d seemed nearly as strong to my senses was Jane. Even she was mostly bark and very little bite.

Slavomir definitely had bite.

If Slavomir decided to get back at László for almost dumping him—and that was a big if, since Slavomir was quite accustomed to things not going his way, and hardly expected anything different—he’d do something later, sneaky and quiet. He wouldn’t have a melodramatic hissy fit at the funeral parlor and perpetrate a murder-suicide, no matter which buttons I pushed.

Fine. There were two vampires in the room. If I couldn’t crack Slavomir, I’d have to try László. I swung my focus to him. Chaos. His mind was a cacophony, with thoughts flying fast and wild. I held my face as still as I could, worried that he could see it in my eyes, that his twisted soul was threatening to override my awareness. I sifted through his crazy thoughts and searched for something I could use, and strangely enough, I saw the complexity of them, and the beauty. His mind was like a symphony, dozens of pieces working all at once. Only the music it played would probably be my death knell.

Slavomir. László. And me, horribly outgunned and mentally outmaneuvered. I needed to get back in myself and say something, or else they might suspect that I’d picked up mind-reading along with the virus. What were we even talking about? Oh, yeah. That Slavomir could deal with being second-best.

“I’m just reminding him,” I told László. I’d only paused for a second—awkward, but within a range of normalcy.

“Of what?”

“Of the reason he came today.” I felt a cascade of László’s mental music as a bunch of tumblers rolled into another position. I could make him doubt Slavomir. Because if he couldn’t trust Jonathan—his one true love, at least as far as László saw it—he couldn’t trust anyone.

“I came because I thought you were dead,” said Slavomir. I heard the creak of the casket on the table as he swung his legs over the side, and the gentle pat of his feet as they touched the carpet behind me. He spoke to László in Czech again.

László shook his head, a tiny, economical movement. “Just a moment,” he said to Slavomir, who’d probably been asking if he should kill me.

“We’re in cahoots,” I said quickly, because while László could think in English, Slavomir had a lag where he translated to his native language, especially if I used big words. “What kind of megalomaniac would you be if you weren’t present at your own funeral?”

I could feel László trying to figure who to aim at. I was unarmed, and Slavomir had a gun. I might be lying. But what if I wasn’t?

“The men in black are working with your follicle-challenged friend here to lure you out. They made him an offer,” I told László. Slavomir had shot several people and munched on several more, and no matter how dangerous László was, the American justice system would never do a deal. But László didn’t know that. Not for sure, anyhow.

I felt a spike of panic behind me as Slavomir figured out what I was doing. “Les,” he said, and then a bunch of stuff in Czech with a definite pleading tone to it.

The orchestra of László’s mind with its dozens of stray thoughts narrowed down to a single note, a decision. Kill both of us, then escape. Slavomir first, since he had the gun.

It’s hard to say why I decided to fall backwards to avoid the bullet. After all, I could have leapt in any direction. So I must have wanted to save that bald little pissant’s life. Subconsciously, or something. Maybe I felt sorry for him for being the ugly one in a world of pretty.

Things went slow-mo for me again when the gun fired, so I had enough time to get both me and Slovy out of the way. The left-handed shot was a little wide, but it probably would have at least winged Slavomir if I hadn’t knocked him over, especially since he still trusted his lover, László, to refrain from making bullet holes in him.

The door burst open the nanosecond the shot was fired, and FBI agents poured in behind me. Slavomir would have been able to take a few of them out, maybe even enough to escape, wiggle up through the ceiling or crash out through the stained glass window and get lost in the crowd. Except that I was sprawled on top of him, nearly a foot taller and a hell of a lot bulkier despite my recent weight loss, and I’d managed to knock the wind out of him while I was saving him from László’s bullet.

I don’t recall hearing the Feds tell László to drop his weapon, though I did testify later that it was entirely possible they had. I claimed to be too traumatized to be expected to remember anything clearly.

In my own way, I really was pretty shaken. Bullets sang over my body, each one with its own sure trajectory that centered right on László.

The first two hit him in the chest. Tiny holes popped open on his blue polyester jumpsuit. Blood splattered behind him, but not much, not like a V-negative person would have bled. Another pair of shots whistled by the place where his head had been a fraction of a second before, and still his gun was high. He squeezed the trigger again. His return fire landed somewhere among the agents.

Another shot pierced his chest, right through the center “o” of the name “Bob.” The lights went out in his striking blue eyes then, just before the shot that put a hole in the middle of his forehead.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

After a number of hours in the police station interrogation room—which I couldn’t count, seeing as how I hadn’t seen my watch since they took it away back at MCC—things started going a little sloppy around the edges and I stopped answering the detectives and the agents, and just stared up at the fluorescent light in the ceiling. I could feel it humming.

All the men in their boxy, unattractive suits seemed to be questioning me as if I’d known that László managed to bake one of the V-positive security guards in the exercise yard, and then pay off the cleaning crew to screw up the initial DNA testing. That I’d planned to meet Slavomir at the funeral home, and the three of us were all V-positive bedfellows. That maybe I’d been in on the whole series of murders and not Jonathan.

Ridiculous.

“I just wanted you people to see that Slavomir is real,” I told them. “I had no idea that László was still alive.” I didn’t blame them for being confused, but answering question after question was getting tedious. I think my answers were consistent, because I was telling the truth, after all. But I was starting to feel kind of loopy.

Jane’s voice came to me through the two-way mirror in shrill, angry snatches, though I’d been aware of her presence in the station for quite a while. She was pissed, incredibly pissed, and worried too. I couldn’t imagine why she was so worried about me. They had Slavomir locked up and László was really dead. She needed to take a chill pill.

But still she kept going. “My client is ill...immediate medical attention...the city, the county, the whole damn bunch of you are looking for one hell of a suit if you don’t...”

One hell of a suit? I hadn’t seen a decent suit since I met Slavomir for the first time at Beacon. Oh. My suits wouldn’t fit me anymore. Even if I had them taken in. And then I realized Jane was talking about a lawsuit...and that I was feeling the fluorescent light through the back of my head, that hum that had its own special frequency, different from the lights in the hall and the lights downstairs. And my face was pressed into the table, which had soaked up so much anger, and guilt, and mostly fear over the years. Even though it was plastic, and even though I intuited that plastic didn’t hold those things very well...still, there’d been enough of it washed over that poor table since it had been in that room to leave an indelible psychic stain.

Jane was about to burst a blood vessel. Figuratively, not literally. I tuned in on her. She was actually in pretty good shape. I imagine she had her chef to thank for that.

And then things scrambled a little—the pitiful table, the singing fluorescent tube, Jane’s voice, comforting in its shrewishness. Hands on me, panic. But it wasn’t my panic, and I could just observe it, just be.

An ambulance ride. Subcutaneous fluids. A paramedic, V-positive herself...strong girl, very strong. Been through hell and back. I liked her.

“Can you swallow, Mr. Hansen? I need you to swallow.”

Copper taste of blood. Had I bit my tongue? A jumble of strange images—a golden retriever, a woman’s flushed face, a house I’d never seen. My belly warmed like I’d had a nice shot of Tanqueray, and I kind of understood, and yet didn’t want to think about that. Not right then.

The siren whooped and I tried to ask the paramedic her name, but she’d covered my face with an oxygen mask and was busy adjusting the tubing stuck in my arm.

A blanket was thrown over me and I wondered if I’d be declared dead. Before anyone started reading me my last rites, the doors flew open and I could feel the sun peeking over the horizon—damn cops asking the same questions till sunup—and it’s not the UV light that’s the problem, something else close to it that the ozone might filter out...except the ozone’s getting thinner, splotchier, and eventually we all might be wearing protective fabric.

But my gurney skidded into the building soon enough. Same hospital, different area. ICU, vampire section.

“Administered one oral unit O positive en route,” the paramedic said as a nurse rolled off the protective fabric.

I figured as much. I’d actually been dreading my first real Bloody Mary. It wasn’t so bad, not really.

I passed some time in the ICU, slept, got hydrated, and was eventually wheeled back to my room. I felt Jonathan before I saw him, like a giant bonfire of worry and anger and fear raged in the corner of my room, but nobody felt it except me. And then relief, like a floodgate had opened. He stood as they wheeled me in, dropped the rails and slid me into the bed.

“You’ll need to come back another time,” the doctor was saying.

“Just a few minutes,” I said, and I think I formed the words pretty well. “Please?”

I think I’d convinced him that I was a little more lucid than I actually was, because the doctor left, and once they got me situated and hooked up, the orderlies trooped out and left Jonathan and me alone.

And then he was there, all giant, dark eyes, and he wrung my hand between his so hard it hurt. “You’re so thin,” he said.

“I know. Isn’t it great?”

He clicked his tongue. “I could kill you for that funeral stunt.”

“It’s wonderful to see you too.”

“Damn it, I mean it.” Oh, he was angry, I know. I could feel that. But it was better than the martyred self-loathing he’d been broadcasting down in the subway tunnels, when he thought his virus had killed Istvan...thought it would eventually kill me. I preferred the anger.

I shifted myself and tried to find the least uncomfortable position I could in the hospital bed, reminding myself that it was better than sleeping on the ground. “You greet László with a big round of tongue wrestling, and I get swearing and death threats. Thanks a lot.”

Angry turned into seriously pissed for a second. I wondered if I’d overstepped by mentioning László. Jonathan gave me a look that could wither a philodendron, and then sighed. “If I ever get to kiss you, I promise I will not be motioning for someone behind you to pull the trigger.”

“This kiss you’re referring to—you make it sound so tentative. What’re you waiting for?”

Even then, he might not have; his anxiety spiked above his anger, and he started scrambling for some kind of excuse to pull back. But he still had my hand in both of his, and I pulled him toward me before he could figure out a good enough reason to back away.

Jonathan fit his lips to mine gently, as if he were afraid of hurting me. I just felt him there, holding his breath, and I took his lower lip between mine, tried to coax him a little closer. Once the contact between us was solid—a roar in my head, his longing singing through my veins, taking my own desire and amplifying it, magnifying it, doubling, tripling...and oh God, it was like mainlining love heroin.

He felt it too, he had to have. He was suddenly bent in half over my bed’s guardrail, clutching my head in both hands as if it could get away from him. My hands were free now to pull at him—clothes, all these clothes in our way. The pop of the IV ripping out, and there, I could get at him a little better. Buttons, belt, zipper, too many clothes between us.

His tongue was deep in my mouth and I moaned into his. It was like I could come by just twitching my hips up into the hospital blanket if I’d wanted to. But I didn’t—I wanted it to last, wanted him to do it.

Hands, mouth, I didn’t care. “Please,” I said, hoarse and desperate as he pulled his tongue back long enough to rake my lower lip with his fangs.

He exhaled. His breath filled me, and his hands ranged down my body, not gentle at all anymore. His concern for my fragility had been washed away by waves of pure, ruthless need. He kept one of his hands in my hair, holding me down, while the other one dug under the blankets, and learned my body quickly with the flat of its palm, pressure hard enough to bruise. He grabbed my hipbone and squeezed, and my back arched at the white-hot sensation of pleasure and pain at his touch. “Do it,” I said. I was worried I’d finish without him. “Touch me.”

Jonathan pressed his forehead into my temple and closed his eyes, his shallow, quick breaths tickling my cheek. His hand moved and he grasped me through the hospital gown, and we both groaned as my hips rose to meet his hand.

“Please,” I kept saying, like my mind was stuck on that word, even though he was stroking me now, and that thin cotton fabric between his hand and my body was all that was keeping me from the brink.

Jonathan’s body heaved on the guardrail, and my hands had proven useless at getting even the first stitch of his clothing off, and had settled for just running up and down his body through the clothes, over his shoulder, down his chest—was that a nipple? Can’t tell through the fabric. Try to find it. Crap, a button. Ohmigod, his abs like marble even through all the clothes. Muscles heaving as he ground into the side of the bed.

His ribs, his hips, everything rock hard and solid like I always knew it would be, from the hints I’d seen rippling there under silk shirts and jeans for four long years. I tried to grab him lower but the guardrail got in the way, and I grunted out my exasperation while Jonathan just exhaled on my cheek and slowed his stroking so much it was almost like his hand wasn’t moving anymore. Except the pressure, the exquisite pressure of his grip—that remained.

“Please,” I said for the millionth time.

“Not yet,” he breathed, pressing his lips to my eyebrow, my cheekbone, my jaw.

I banged my hand on the guardrail straining to grab something on him and managed to snag his jeans pocket. I dragged him into range and groped at him like a drunken whore, finally found it and oh yeah, he was into the whole thing as much as I was. And I hated where we were, wanted to be in his bed or my bed or any bed at all that didn’t have railings and wheels on it and nurses outside and a sick stranger on the opposite side of the wall.

Except that maybe the danger, the urgency of it all was hot, like those stories about Hungarian soldier boys he’d told me down in the subway, the stories that’d nearly driven me mad.

His breath shuddered into my hair as I traced the shape of him through his jeans, and smoothed my thumb over a tiny spot gone damp. He stopped stroking me and went at the blanket with a crazed urgency, his other hand still locked on my hair as if I even wanted to get away, and then he was burrowing under my hospital gown and...

Oh my God.

I turned my head even though doing so nearly ripped my hair out by the roots, he’d been clutching it so hard. His mouth found mine, tongue found mine, and he swallowed my breaths as everything crested. I closed my eyes, couldn’t keep them open anymore, not even to watch his dark cat-eyes watching me, while his hand grew slippery, his grip gentled, and the hand in my hair stopped pulling and instead smoothed my hair back in a tender caress.

I floated there on that bliss for a long moment, my mouth still moving with his, but my body wrung out and limp, and then I realized that we didn’t have the luxury of basking in my afterglow. I grabbed his jeans pocket and tugged. “Quick,” I said, “unzip.”

Jonathan just continued his languid petting of my hair, his lazy kisses. “I have waited this long,” he said. “I can wait until we are home.”

“But why should you?”

“I can imagine the scene when your doctor comes in and finds you with your mouth full.” How did Jonathan know I’d been angling to blow him? He must’ve had a touch of the vampire-telepathy himself. He gave my hair one final caress before pulling back. “She would probably ban me from visiting you.”

I thought he was kidding, but then I felt it—Dr. Patil, the V-specialist, was coming up the hall fast. I pulled the blanket up just in time to cover the glistening smear on my flat belly as she came through the door.

“Your chart says you have successfully reached stage four,” she said, and then she looked from me to Jonathan, and gave him the once-over.

I looked up at him, and Jesus, if he’d ever come home all flushed and swollen-lipped like that while I was working for him, I’d have had to quit on the spot. Damn, but he was hot. And no hair to hide behind, either. He met her eyes calmly and then looked down at me and took my bare hand in his, and shook it. “Congratulations,” he said.

I chewed on the inside of my lower lip and tried not to laugh.

“And this is...?” the doctor asked.

“My...” Damn. I wished we’d ironed that one out once and for all already.

“Partner,” Jonathan said, as if it were just an inadequate vocabulary we were battling.

“Oh. I’m very sorry, sir, but this is not a good time for you to visit. We do have special evening hours for positive visitors. You may return tomorrow.”

I stared at Jonathan, and his ripe, just-kissed lips curved in a half smile. I couldn’t have looked any more innocent than he did...and that would be not at all. Shit.

He shrugged a little, let go of my hand and gave me a tiny wave. “Tomorrow, then.” He pulled his overcoat shut and veered around the doctor, then shot me a naughty smirk from over his shoulder on his way out the door.

I turned my attention back to Dr. Patil, trying to imagine how I could possibly arrange my expression without looking insanely guilty, and praying that she’d have no reason to ask me to lower my blanket.

But she was busy looking somewhere to the side of my hospital bed. “Mr. Hansen, what has happened to your IV?”

Chapter Thirty

Given that our whole fiasco had been the lifeblood of every trashy news show since the moment it'd begun, it made sense that the initial trial took place nowhere near a courtroom. In one corner, there was Jonathan, the baby-faced painter who paid his taxes and never had so much as a parking ticket. In the other, Slavomir, the bald Slovakian vampire who looked like Anton LaVey, covered in gunshot residue. Once they took those glasses from him, I think that from the brief glimpse I caught on the news, he was even a bit walleyed. Unfortunate for him, in the court of public opinion.

The medical testing for the whole case was now being triple-checked for accuracy, given how easily the guard's body at the prison was misidentified. The medical examiner's office had made a cast of Jonathan's teeth—he said it was an experience he didn't care to repeat anytime soon, with stinky plastic threatening to seal up his throat—and did the same with Slavomir. Once both of the teeth casts were compared to the photos of the bite wounds on the victims, Jonathan was released without any fanfare. They were running Slavomir's DNA to compare to the saliva found in the wounds, but that would take a couple more weeks. I think they might have kept Jonathan that much longer just to cover their asses, except that Gerard Crandall was making such a stink about things that the DA asked for Jonathan's release on the evidence of the teeth castings alone.

The Slovakian government was insisting on repatriating Slavomir so he could stand trial for war crimes. Since the U.S. didn't want to look like they were hoarding all the bad guys for themselves, they shipped him off in an orange jumpsuit and leg irons.

Once I was stable enough to leave the hospital, I'd felt funny about going back to my old apartment. Even though my neighbors hadn't been sniped at by László and Slavomir, they all knew what had happened at Jonathan's studio, and it just seemed easier to send some movers to get all of my dusty stuff than to face any of them.

Jane had managed to free up my meager bank accounts. I pity the people at the bank who had to deal with her. I ended up withdrawing everything and opening up a new account with their competition. That was easier than wondering if the teller I was talking to knew that I was the Mark Hansen who'd caused their insurance to go sky high.

Jane reminded me that it wasn't my fault they'd released all my money to László based on a fake passport and a poorly imitated signature. But I still felt bad for the clerk who'd done it.

I had enough, barely, for a down payment on a small brownstone in New Town, a cab ride away from the bars, which undoubtedly I still wouldn't find any time to go to, and a short walk from the smaller, hipper galleries. Supposedly real estate is a good investment, especially if you can snap something up when it's a buyer's market. It seemed more secure to me than a savings account, in light of recent events.

If I felt weird about going home, you can imagine how awkward Jonathan felt about his studio, since it was his obsessed stalker who'd killed the doorman. Well, his obsessed stalker's lover. Though one could argue that it was really László who did the killing and Slavomir was just his weapon. Either way, Jonathan was ready to simply leave all of his paintings, equipment and furniture there and call it a loss.

But since I was the one with the house, I made him send for his things. He did get just over 100k for the painting of Istvan, but then the cash cow tipped. The price of a Varga canvas plummeted once people realized that Jonathan wasn't a serial killer. Even so, as a group, his paintings were worth a small fortune, and since even the imposing Gerard Crandall hadn't been able to straighten out the quagmire that László had made of Jonathan's finances quite yet, I didn't think the paintings should be left to languish.

Plus, I wanted to see them. Now that I could.

I'd asked Jonathan why he'd let that portrait of Istvan, the steamy one, hang in the window at Beacon. It seemed too personal. He told me that I'd grabbed that canvas at random and he'd taken it as a sign. A sign of what? He didn't know.

Sometimes I think that the guilt kept him painting, the thought that he'd infected an innocent in a small Hungarian village all those years ago and then fled the scene. Then László had turned out to be patient zero, and he certainly wasn't innocent.

Just because Jonathan wasn't guilty of anything didn't mean I was going to let him slack off. We'd had the basement drywalled, a nice golden oak flooring put down, windows bricked up—and if I had to give up my dreams of having a pool table so he could have somewhere to paint, he'd damn well better keep painting.

I ducked my head to avoid braining myself on the soffit and then took the stairs down two at a time once I'd cleared it. I made noise on purpose. Because when Jonathan worked, he'd get really lost in the twenty, thirty shades of black he smeared on the canvasses. Not to mention the heaving chests, jutting hipbones and gracefully curved spines set in landscapes of deliciously muscular backs. Can't say I blamed him.

I found him kneeling over a canvas on the floor, practically elbow-high in black paint. If I squinted, I could make out a rib cage, nipple, shoulder, jaw. "That better not be me."

His hair, chin-length, shielded his eyes from me. He'd decided he didn't like short hair, regardless of how modern it was or how young and hot it made him look. He said it reminded him too much of being in the army.

He left the hair hanging there between us. His energy was focused, vibrant. I didn't need to see his eyes to know that. "But you're my muse," he said, still half-entranced with the primitive act of setting marks on canvas to leave a footprint of his own devising on the world.

"I need to see a couple of openings tonight. Want to come?"

Jonathan sat back on his heels and looked at his painting, then back up at me. It took him a minute to shift his mind back to the flesh-and-blood world once he'd been in the land of line and gesture so long. I'd never known that about him, back when the Gates of Hell separated us. He smiled once he was fully with me. "I don't know. What are you wearing?"

"To the opening?"

Jonathan nodded. There was something impudent about the look of him that made me want to fling him down on the wet canvas and tease his secrets out of him.

His grin spread. "Do you have anything new?"

"I don't know." I mean, I got new stuff all the time. The curse of a ripped bod and too much money. One can never own too many fabulous suits. "I suppose."

He grinned hard enough to flash fang.

"What?" I wailed the word and then hated that I'd sounded like such a sissy.

He shoved his hair back and left a black streak across his cheek that I conveniently omitted mentioning. He pointed to a stack of *Tribunes* beside his turpentine can. "Look at the top page."

"Vampire Cookbook a Runaway Hit. So? I could've told you that was long overdue."

"Not that—the Style report."

I found the column. Chicago Theater hosts AIDS benefit. Foreigner kicks off Taste of Chicago. Local art critic Mark Hansen shows off the latest Valentina Versace suit in Vampex™, the new linen/rayon blend developed specifically for the heat-conducting needs of the V-positive consumer.

There I was in a photo, all broad shoulders and cheekbones, and Jonathan beside me with eyes that looked like they'd been Photoshopped to remove a reflective glare. The caption read, "Hansen and longtime companion, artist Jonathan Varga."

I read it three, four times, then just stared at the picture of us together.

"So what is it tonight, oh great trendsetter? Gucci? Prada? Armani?"

"You'll just have to find out for yourself," I said as I straightened up and headed for the stairs. Because a strange chill had raced up my spine and I needed to be away from Jonathan with his paint-stained hands and cat eyes to consider what it might mean.

~ * ~

First, I felt Jonathan come upstairs. Sylvia, my psychic trainer, calls it “auras” that I sense, though I don’t know if that word really sat right with me. Made me think of halos. But I guess it’s as good a word as any.

Then I smelled him, because he’d been scrubbing up with turpentine and mechanic’s soap—that gooey, gritty stuff that comes in a can. He’d still have black pigment wedged under his cuticles and ground into the creases of his knuckles. But as someone who didn’t much care for gloves myself, I could hardly ask him to wear them while he worked just so his hands could stay pristine for my viewing pleasure. Besides, in a way, I think I kind of liked his painter’s hands. They were Jonathan, just like that petroleum chemical smell and the cat-walk.

He slithered through the doorway of my second-floor office and pressed his mouth to the back of my head. It was very difficult to concentrate on my datebook with him breathing on my scalp, which I’m sure was his intention. “We should do the blood before we go.”

He was right. Though I’d meant to arrive at the first opening early enough to miss the brunt of the crowd, spend some time with the actual work. But I could hardly tell Jonathan I wanted to do it quickly—that would’ve been like blurting out, “Are you through yet?” while someone’s screwing you.

“Right,” I said, “let’s.” We went to the white-tiled bathroom where little red accidents were most easily wiped away, where I’d wedged a chair between the sink and the wall in place of a clothing hamper, since doing it all on a closed toilet seat seemed too tawdry. I sat down and watched Jonathan peel off his black T-shirt. My eyes went to the scar on his side where that bullet had grazed him, even taken a chip from his rib, we’d found out later.

“You’re worrying about being late,” he said, weight on one leg, opposite shoulder dropped, showing off his incredibly defined chest. He couldn’t see auras, at least that’s what he claimed. But he could read me like a pulp novel.

I shrugged.

“Don’t,” he said. “I won’t make you late.”

Um. We’d see. Because I was already thinking of playing hooky altogether. But a job’s a job, and if I wanted to stay “local art critic” of the largest city in the Midwest, I needed to show up when I was supposed to.

Jonathan had the tubing wrapped around his upper arm and was already flexing his fist. It made him look like a junkie, which of course opened up the possibility of all kinds of lurid fantasy scenarios. But not now, I told myself. Two art openings. Three, if all went well. And if I was lucky, maybe I’d have a little energy left at the end of the night.

He plunged the needle into the small bottle of anticoagulant and drew in a half cc of the pale yellow liquid. I always thought it looked like the whey that collected on top of yogurt that’d been in the fridge too long. That tiny bit was the minimum amount it took to keep his blood from turning to pudding the minute it

left his vein, and once the platelets started clumping together and releasing all their mysterious proteins, whatever it was I needed to digest from it would transform into something else.

Of course he could've also taken more aspirin, but I was uncomfortable even with the pediatric dose he was on. I think it upset his stomach. But staying bloodbonded meant so much to him that I figured I'd save my breath for a battle I had some chance of winning.

He sank the needle into the crook of his elbow and straddled me while he drew, wetting his lips, his dark eyes flickering up to meet mine. That knowing little smile—for someone who'd once compared the drinking of human blood to cannibalism, he sure got into it when he was on the same side as the pot roast.

Jonathan pulled the syringe out, unscrewed the top and handed it to me. He put both of his hands palm down on my chest while I tipped it back. His blood roared through my system, and infused me with his strength, his energy. Yeah, I know that physiologically it takes fifteen to twenty minutes for a vampire to absorb blood, mostly in the esophagus but some as far down as the stomach. But I've learned the hard way that there's more to life than bones and sinews and molecules and cells.

I'd closed my eyes to savor his blood coursing through me, and then I felt his lips ghost over mine. I opened my eyes and tried to thread my fingers through his hair, but he slipped away, leaving me with a blood high, an open syringe and a piece of rubber tubing draped over my knee. "I'll go have mine," he said, halfway out the bathroom door. "You should be getting dressed."

Damn. He wouldn't make me late after all.

Jonathan could get away with paying a college student to visit a phlebotomist once a week. I'd tried that route, but ended up fixated on chocolate, and plagued by thoughts of failing calculus. I really couldn't deal with staring at the phone, waiting for some guy I'd never even met to call me.

I think that from all the years of living with the virus, Jonathan somehow knew that there was more to it than just bleeding. He needed to give the blood to me, no conditions, no strings. If it was to become truly part of me, he'd need to let it go. And he did, even when he was tired, or his current painting was pissing him off, or we'd been harping at each other all night over nothing. He could hand that syringe to me and truly want me to have it.

"I'll be ready before you," Jonathan called. "Are you sure you want to go?"

I sighed and threw the syringe in the red bio-trash bin under the sink, rolled up the rubber tubing and stashed it in the vanity.

Jonathan was holding up the wall in the hallway, waiting for me. He gave me a lazy half-smile that said he'd rather be in bed, but enjoyed building the anticipation by submitting to the rigors of daily life—but only if he absolutely had to. I passed by him, trailing my finger across the forearm he had draped casually over his middle, and went to get dressed.

I ended up pulling a summer-weight brown Prada from my closet, with a new shirt designed just for V-positives that looked like a regular dress shirt without the shirtsleeves. It even came with a pair of cuffs to arrange peeking out of the jacket sleeves just so.

“You’re wearing a jacket and a shirt?” he asked.

“Demi shirt.”

He snorted. He’d changed into a gauzy, long-sleeved blouse that was cool enough for the late summer evening air without looking ridiculous with gloves. Though it was only a matter of time before gloves and short sleeves would look perfectly fetching on everyone, and we’d all wonder why we ever thought the two looked atrocious together.

Jonathan didn’t say much on the cab ride there—he was busy staring out the window at the streetlights and the shop lights and the people milling around on the street. Sometimes I thought he just pretended to want to stay in, because once I got him out the door he seemed so happy to be part of the world from which he’d hidden for so long.

I can’t say I minded having a social life, myself. Though I found talk of summer homes and high tax brackets pretty surreal after having lived in an underground tunnel for several weeks eating Slim Jims and emergency rations. But we traveled well enough in those circles that I could write my column and Jonathan could sell his work. Exclusively through Murray, not me. That time when Jonathan was dragging me across Michigan Avenue I told him that I quit? I’d meant it.

Jonathan’s hand came down on my knee with a none-too-gentle slap. “Are you still with us?” he said. “We are here.”

I paid the cab driver and stepped onto the curb, taking in the feel of the building slowly, as Sylvia had taught me. Spikes of drunkenness pierced the general hum of excitement, a little sexual energy but nothing too predatory, and a few sincere art aficionados.

“Just come in.” Jonathan took my gloved hand in his and turned to face me, walking backwards. “Don’t you get bored without a little surprise in your life?”

“No thanks, I’ve had enough surprises to last me till I’m fifty.”

We vampire-walked into the gallery like that, hand in hand and taunting each other as usual. It’s not as if flash cubes went off upon our arrival, but there was a sudden hush in conversation that filled in as people tried to act natural, like they didn’t want to glom onto Jonathan, or to me, to be able to say they knew someone famous...artist, art critic, vampire or crazy trial survivor. Take your pick. The agendas were all there. They just varied a little from person to person.

Jonathan dropped my hand belatedly and turned to have a look at the paintings by himself. Unless the work was really disappointing, he always found something to capture his interest. Sometimes I came upon him like that, just staring, while the people drinking and schmoozing all around him parted like a river to flow past as if they knew, instinctively, that they weren’t real to him, at least not at that moment.

The gallery owner introduced herself to me, and I shielded myself from need she radiated like Sylvia had taught me. I wasn't great at it yet, but it'd do. It was pretty rough, trying to put visual or tangible words to an ability that was neither of those things. But we were working on it.

I said hello to the artist, and then quickly moved on to her paintings, doing my best to focus on the work. I had always assumed I'd be a curmudgeonly bastard of a critic, but the first time I sat in front of an abstract painting that I was prepared to write a pithy little dismissal about, I stopped. I thought I should at least fix in my mind what it looked like. And as I studied the brush strokes, and the texture of the canvas showing through in thin spots, and the bristles that clung in the paint, preserved like spiders in amber, I realized that I understood. That the color was drawn from a memory of long, long ago. A favorite shirt. The color of the night sky on a stormy night. Clay on the riverbank near *abuelita's* house.

Jonathan said I sat there for three hours and just looked. And then I edited for three days to get my column down to seven hundred and fifty words.

The day my column ran, the artist, a seventy-two-year-old Cuban, called the Style section's editor in tears and said that no one, not anyone, had ever understood him like I had.

At this particular event, I'm not sure exactly how long I stared. The works were portraits, and the figures were attenuated and oddly colored. It's hard to say if the color cast had been done on purpose, since I was looking at the paintings with vampire eyes.

"So what do you think?" Jonathan said at my elbow. I blinked, and he pressed an icy bottle of water into my hand.

"Hard to say. I'm not sure she has a specific reason she's painting."

"And the color?"

I'd meant to ask him if the hues seemed strange to him too, but when I looked over to him I had an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. Maybe it was that article he'd shown me, where we were standing in much the same position, me with a water and him holding his gloved fingers like he wished there were a cigarette dangling from them. I thought about the caption. Hansen and longtime companion, artist Jonathan Varga. It struck me as strange.

"Do you think we've been together a long time?"

Jonathan peered at me through his hair. "Is this a trick question? And anyway, compared to whom?"

"It's just...longtime companion. That's an odd phrase."

Jonathan took a pull on his bottled water. "I thought it was just a more civilized way of saying 'gay lover.' Right?"

I stared at the painting in front of us without really seeing it. Eastern Europeans have a way of getting a grasp on slang with every language they learn. "Yeah. I guess so."

Longtime companion. The two words swirled around in my head until they lost all meaning, and they turned into awkward consonants and vowels. I stared at Jonathan, puzzled, until slowly, it dawned on me.

Being outed in the Style section, of all places, didn't bother me. Heaven knows that the trial coverage was explicit enough and if people weren't aware that we were lovers, they'd been living under a rock somewhere. And the accuracy of the phrase "longtime companion" wasn't the issue. Because we were companions, and I supposed it did feel like we had been for a long, long time. And Jonathan was right, it was the politically correct way of saying that we were lovers who lived together, since we couldn't actually get married without moving to Canada.

The part that jarred me was that I was the subject of the sentence. And Jonathan was the adjunct.

"This work is not holding your attention." Jonathan pitched his voice very low to spare the artist some embarrassment. "Do you have all the notes you need?"

I stared down at the palm-sized notebook I'd slipped from my pocket and scribbled in. My gloves were carefully folded in the pocket that had held the notebook, since I found it impossible to read my writing even if I was wearing the thinnest gloves on the market. And the suit was so form-fitting, even wisps of gloves made the pocket bulge. "I suppose I've got enough to go on."

"Can we make one more opening, or do you want to go home?"

I looked at him, at his amazingly dark, slightly tilted gypsy eyes, and wondered if it bothered him to play second fiddle. And yet I didn't even need to ask; his blood coursed through my body, feeding me, sustaining me, and I knew with certainty that he'd never give it a second thought. It made me have to face the fact that when he was the famous one and I was laboring away in the wings, unknown and unsung, I wouldn't have been nearly as gracious.

"They listed me first," I said. I have no idea how I thought he'd understand what I meant. But I suspected he might.

Jonathan looked into my eyes for a long moment, then took the water from my hand and set it down on a red tray. He winked at me and said, "You're taller." And then he took my hand and pulled my arm until I'd bent low enough for him to press his lips to my ear. "You're in a strange mood tonight," he whispered. "We should go home now."

I nodded, and followed him out the door and onto the sidewalk where cool, late summer evening air bathed us, and he slipped off his glove to take my hand in his, skin against skin.

About the Author

Jordan Castillo Price's influences include Ouija boards, *Return of the Living Dead*, "light as a feather, stiff as a board" and boys in eyeliner.

To learn more about Jordan, please visit www.jordancastilloprice.com. Send an email to Jordan at jordan@psycop.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Jordan http://groups.yahoo.com/group/JCP_update/. Join Jordan's monthly newsletter, [JCP News](#) and visit her [livejournal blog](#) for more info on Jordan and her upcoming works.

Seduction is his only chance for freedom...and love is a death sentence.

Feral

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Even among shifters, Ethan is a rare breed. So rare, he's spent the last eight years in hiding from the werewolves who once captured and tortured him. Now a tranq dart has cut short his feral existence. Waking in human form in a locked room is more than a living nightmare...it's reliving his worst one.

Yet in the troubled eyes of one of his captors, he senses a weak link. One he can use to escape—by seducing his jailer.

Bram's life as pack omega isn't easy. As long as he obeys his alpha he is protected. However, there are some things he just can't bring himself to do. Keeping a precious cougar shifter prisoner is one of them, especially one who has somehow managed to capture his heart.

Setting Ethan free could be a death sentence for both of them, for Bram's pack doesn't take betrayal lightly. And the alpha is set on revenge.

Warning: Explicit m/m sex and violence.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Feral:

Ethan didn't react to Bram's entry, even when he approached the bed. Bram stared down, wishing he knew what to do.

Let him go free.

It was the obvious answer and Bram didn't trust it. If Bram opened the doors and let Ethan walk out of the building, he wouldn't get far. There was a razor-wire fence that surrounded the pack's headquarters. Yes, a legacy from Gabriel's paranoid rule, but the thing was, Doug had never seen fit to tear it down. *One day it might protect us from the government* had been his last explanation.

Bram retreated and sank down into the corner, directly below the camera and out of its eye. Sure the camera was switched off, but under the circumstances, it didn't hurt to be overcareful.

"What are you doing?" Ethan spoke to his arm still covering his face.

Bram tossed several answers around in his mind and couldn't find anything he liked. He settled on, "I don't know."

Lifting his upper body so he rested on his elbows, Ethan looked across at Bram, then glanced up at the camera. He briefly closed his eyes before he rolled off the bed and came over to Bram on all fours.

Stalked over, Bram thought, and there was grace in it.

Day-old stubble adorned Ethan's jaw and his badly cut hair stuck up haphazardly. The bones of his face were too sharp, even if he had put on a bit of weight since staying here. Bram thought he was so beautiful and could never tell him.

"Are we out of sight?" Ethan asked softly.

Bram nodded. He had hunkered down in the corner with his knees up, his legs blocking Ethan, who had stopped just out of reach.

"My cat wants out, out of this room, out of this body." Ethan's gaze burned, which made Bram feel hot. "But I think that might be a death sentence here."

"No one is going to kill you."

Ethan's mouth twisted. "That's what Gabriel once told me."

"Doug is no Gabriel."

"And yet, I am still his sacrifice, no?"

Bram wanted to shake his head, but he remembered that there were people out there who Doug said would *take care* of Ethan. Was that a sacrifice? "I don't think so."

"I suppose I should take some comfort from the fact that *you* don't appear to want me to be a sacrifice."

"I don't," Bram whispered.

"What do you want, Bram?"

The air seemed to thicken, a tension, and Bram didn't know where to look. Ethan's gaze refused to let go and while usually it was a good thing to look away from someone and cede way, that wasn't the case here and now. Ethan was no werewolf. Instead he was a captive cougar asking for something Bram was in no position to give. Freedom.

Pulling himself up into a crouch, inches from Bram, Ethan reached out a hand and placed it on Bram's knee.

He tried to stifle his reactive shudder but didn't succeed.

Ethan waited until Bram got used to the heat of his hand on his knee.

"Bram?" asked Ethan in a low voice.

Bram gave up pretending he was unaffected. "It's hard to breathe."

Cocking his head, Ethan regarded Bram as if trying to interpret a foreign language. "You held me, not that long ago. You held me repeatedly."

"That's different."

"Okay." In one movement, Ethan turned and slid sideways in between Bram's knees, a surprising invasion that Bram couldn't resist. Then Ethan turned so they had their familiar embrace, his back resting against Bram's chest.

He should push Ethan away. It was the right thing to do, but slowly and carefully Bram wrapped his arms around this thin stranger who jerked in the hold even while moving deeper into Bram's lap. They were awkward and difficult with each other, but Bram did not want to let go. Neither did Ethan, for Bram could smell his desire.

"Your cat is...?" Bram didn't know how to ask if Ethan's cougar was desperate to get out.

"Okay. For now, anyway." Ethan turned his head to lay his cheek against Bram's chest.

"You're okay, you mean."

"I'm not okay, you must know that. But...this is better. Can you tell me why I like to hear your heart beat?" It was an oddly wistful question and Bram felt completely out of his depth. Was he supposed to even answer? Well, he couldn't. Ethan gave a shuddery sigh that echoed something inside Bram. "I don't really think you're okay either, Bram."

Bram held Ethan tighter, and breathed in Ethan's scent. There was something a little wild and foreign, something cat, or maybe just Ethan. It turned Bram on.

Ethan had to know, had to feel his erection pressing against the small of his back. Bram nuzzled Ethan's neck in apology, and Ethan repeated, "Okay."

"Okay what?"

He didn't answer, simply leaned back, head against Bram's shoulder to rest there. Bram shouldn't, but he raised one hand and stroked that long neck. Ethan groaned, turned his face into Bram's neck and licked the skin.

Bram jittered in reaction and Ethan said, "Shhh. Settle down." Before Bram could declare that was impossible, Ethan slid his tongue along the dip above Bram's collarbone, and Bram jumped again.

"You have me at a disadvantage." Ethan spoke against Bram's throat. "So many disadvantages. You can smell my arousal, but my sense of smell is not quite so acute. On the other hand, I can hear your heart beating too fast, your breath going in and out quickly."

Bram clamped down hard on Ethan so he couldn't move.

"Why are we like this together?" There was a kind of wonder in Ethan's voice.

Bram cleared his throat. "I'll let you go."

"I don't want to be let go. But I need you to help me. You know that."

"Doug," began Bram, but didn't know what to say beyond that. Doug was in charge, not him.

"Doug is going to kill me."

"No." Bram didn't believe it, and wouldn't allow it.

"Like Gabriel."

"Doug despised Gabriel. They're not at all alike."

"I think you're wrong."

"You haven't been hurt," Bram pointed out.

“Not physically, but this containment is hurting me. I need out, Bram.”

“Even if I let you out of here, you wouldn’t escape. We’re at the pack headquarters.”

Ethan’s entire body stiffened. “Oh God. Not here again.”

“It’s not like last time,” Bram insisted.

“No. Because last time someone helped me get away.”

Despite himself, Bram stroked Ethan’s face. A kind of silent promise because Bram couldn’t say anything. While he hoped his loop of tape was still running, there was always the awful possibility that Doug had returned and was listening.

“Oh,” said Ethan, voice toneless. “I really thought you might help me. I thought I could be more persuasive than this. Out of practice. Out of practice with a lot of things.”

“Patience,” Bram mouthed, subvocally, and Ethan jerked his head around, trying to make eye contact.

“The camera has sound?”

Bram let his eyelids fall in assent.

Ethan fought to turn full around to face Bram, fear in his expression, in his scent. “Doug has made it clear he will punish me.” His voice rose. “Doug—”

Bram cut him off with a kiss. Not very elegant, not like how Ethan had kissed him earlier, it seemed almost a fight, a clash of mouths, and Bram angled his body away to prevent Ethan from leaning into him.

But Ethan had to shut up.

Breaking the kiss, Bram met Ethan’s gaze and mouthed, “I’ll take care of it.”

“By fucking him.”

“Enough.” Bram glared. He should get out of here, but Ethan looked a little crazy with fear. Suddenly the cat turned away, sliding his sweats down as he settled back against Bram again.

Bram watched as Ethan brought his right hand down to his own hard cock to jerk himself off, and Bram’s dick turned to steel.

“Hold me while I get this out of my system,” murmured Ethan and Bram slung an arm across Ethan’s ribs and held fast. “I need this. God knows I need something.”

Ethan’s dick was weeping pre-come and he began to pump himself.

Bram couldn’t speak, he just breathed Ethan in and nuzzled the cat’s neck and didn’t let him go. He’d never held on to someone while they jerked off. In fact, doing so had never occurred to him though his skin suddenly felt electric.

All hell's about to break loose. Literally.

An Inner Darkness

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Bay City Paranormal Investigations, Book 5

After more than a year as a couple—and plenty of bumps along the road—Sam Raintree and Dr. Bo Broussard are finally settling into life together. Bo has come to terms with his sexuality, their business is thriving, and Sam has begun to accept his role as a step-parent of sorts to Bo's sons, Sean and Adrian. The only real dark spot is Bo's ex-wife, Janine.

When eleven-year-old Adrian begins exhibiting signs of psychokinesis—the same ability which allows Sam to manipulate interdimensional portals—the friction between Sam, Bo and Janine escalates. Sam and Bo have reason to believe Adrian's raw, uncontrolled talent poses a danger to him and those around him. Janine, however, believes Sam and Bo are encouraging dangerous delusions on Adrian's part. Common ground is nonexistent, anger and hard words ever-present.

Caught in the middle of the conflict and burdened with an ability he can't yet control, Adrian is soon pushed beyond his limits. With Adrian's mind—and the lives of everyone around him—hanging in the balance, Sam and Bo race against time to save both boys and keep an otherworldly horror from breaking free.

Warning: This book contains graphic language, explicit male/male sex, family drama and scary monsters.

Enjoy the following excerpt for An Inner Darkness:

Adrian fell asleep in the truck halfway to Sam and Bo's apartment. Bo carried him inside. Sam trailed behind with Adrian's duffle bag. He set it beside the bed while Bo pulled off Adrian's sneakers and tucked him under the covers. Bo pressed a gentle kiss to the boy's forehead before following Sam out of the room and closing the door.

They brushed their teeth and changed out of their clothes without speaking. Sam had to remind Bo to take his anti-seizure medication. Bo took the capsules without argument, but it worried Sam that he'd forgotten. He'd been taking them ever since his seizure back in May, and hadn't forgotten once until now.

When they switched off the light and climbed into bed, Bo still hadn't said a word. Worried by Bo's silence, Sam slipped his arm around Bo's waist and molded his body to Bo's back. "Are you all right?"

"No. I'm afraid, Sam." Bo turned to look at Sam. His eyes glittered black in the low light bleeding through the curtains. "He's safe tonight. But what about tomorrow night? And the night after that? What's going to happen to him and Sean, if we can't protect them?"

Sam's heart twisted. He tightened his arm around Bo. "We just have to take it one day at a time. Do the best we can."

Bo nodded, his hair tickling Sam's face. "I know you're right. It's just so tempting to take them and run. Just get them both the hell out of here before..."

He didn't finish the thought, but he didn't have to. Sam kissed the shell of Bo's ear. "You know we can't do that. It'll just put the kids in worse danger in the long run."

"I know." Bo drew a shaking breath. "God, I don't know what to do. I've never felt more helpless in my life."

A great fist seemed to close around Sam's chest. He wished he could take away the despair in Bo's voice.

"Try to sleep," Sam whispered in Bo's ear. "Things'll look better in the morning." It sounded false even to himself.

Bo let out a harsh laugh. "I can't sleep. Right now I feel like I'll never be able to sleep again."

With no idea what to say or do, Sam buried his face in Bo's neck and rubbed his hand in soothing circles on Bo's chest, as if he could erase Bo's fear with nothing but his touch.

Maybe you can, he thought when Bo's heartbeat quickened against his palm. *For a little while, at least.*

Sam trailed his fingers lower, over the threadbare cotton of Bo's T-shirt to the drawstring of the ancient hospital scrub pants he always wore to bed when he felt in need of comfort. A sharp tug loosened the bow. Sam slipped his hand inside and reached between Bo's legs, cupping his balls in his palm.

Bo moaned. "Sam. I don't know if—"

"Shhh." Sam nuzzled behind Bo's ear. He ran his fingertips over the head of Bo's cock, which began to swell in his hand. "Just relax. Let me touch you."

A tremor ran through Bo's body when Sam's fingers closed around his shaft and began to stroke. Hooking a thumb into the waistband of his scrubs, Bo shoved them down to mid-thigh. The drawstring dragged over Sam's prick where it pressed against Bo's ass. The thin material of Sam's boxers did not a damn thing to reduce the sensation.

Wanting to feel skin on skin but unwilling to let go of Bo's cock, Sam used the arm he was lying on to wriggle his boxers down as far as he could. When the garment was out of the way he squirmed until his erection lay nestled between Bo's buttocks. It felt wonderful, just as it always did. His cock fit perfectly in the warm, welcoming crease of Bo's ass, and his thighs molded to Bo's as if they were parts of one whole.

Bo's hand curved over Sam's on his cock. "Sam. Please."

Realizing he'd been lying there simply holding Bo for a couple of minutes now, Sam chuckled. "Sorry." He began stroking again, swiping the pad of his thumb across Bo's slit just to hear Bo's near-silent gasps when he did it.

Letting the movement of his hand fall into a rhythm so familiar it was second nature, Sam rooted into the thick tresses pooling around Bo's neck and breathed deep. Bo's hair always smelled so good, fresh and clean as a spring morning. The underlying musk of sexual desire added a familiar lusty kick, the two blending into the scent Sam loved more than any other.

Fastening his mouth to the juncture of Bo's neck and shoulder, Sam sucked the firm flesh. A hint of salt caressed his tastebuds. He pressed his tongue flat against Bo's skin to gather as much of the sharp flavor as he could.

Bo shivered, his body arching against Sam's. "Oh, God," he whispered, thrusting into Sam's hand. "Harder."

Electricity shot through Sam's insides. He obediently tightened his fingers around Bo's shaft and pulled harder, faster. Bo growled and pushed his ass against Sam's groin, and *fuck* but it felt good. Slipping his free hand beneath Bo's neck, Sam curled his arm around Bo's skull. His fingers dug into the silken warmth of Bo's hair and tugged Bo's head back, baring his neck for gentle open-mouthed kisses. Bo moaned, the sound low and sweet. His hips rocked, forward and backward and forward again, fucking Sam's hand and rubbing his ass against Sam's cock, until Sam was lost in a haze of heat and sensation.

For a while, the only sounds were their panting breaths and the faint squeak of the mattress with the movement of Sam's arm. Excitement spiraled tight in Sam's belly. There was something deliciously illicit about lying mostly dressed under the covers, humping against Bo's ass while he jerked Bo off.

Bo's breath hitched. His prick pulsed against Sam's palm. "Oh fuck. Sam. Close."

"That's it," Sam breathed, his fingers flying over Bo's cock. "Come in my hand."

Mafia hit man. Vampire. The criminal underworld just got a whole lot darker.

Blood Vice

© 2009 Keith Melton

The Nightfall Syndicate, Book 1

Business has never been better for hit man Karl Vance. Boston is awash in mafia blood, and Vance has a certain fondness for blood. He's a master vampire—one of the most powerful of his kind. Having sworn to never again feed on the blood of innocents, Karl preys instead on Boston's criminal underworld. Which makes him a valuable asset to those who deal in death.

Maria Ricardi intends to use that asset to its full extent in order to gain power within her patriarchal crime family. Vance thinks he's been hired to keep track of the family's princess, but she's got a plan to get her hands dirty and earn the respect she deserves. And she's not above using their instant attraction to get what she wants.

That driving ambition draws the attention of a rival clan's newest and most dangerous "consultant." Alejandro Delgado, Vance's centuries-old nemesis. Delgado zeroes in on the one chink in Vance's armor—his fondness for the headstrong Maria.

When she becomes enslaved by Delgado's unnatural kiss, only one thing is certain. Vance has to decide which he wants more. To settle the score—or rescue her soul.

Warning: Intense, graphic mafia-related violence, profanity, gangster slang, assassinations, fang punctures, explicit vampire sex, betrayal, greed, murder, gangland warfare, pervasive supernatural mayhem, large-scale explosions, and extremely expensive Italian suits.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Blood Vice:

Karl smelled the other vampire first. The stink of death was hidden beneath a mix of other scents—cinnamon, old blood and a darker, more animal smell. The musk of the lion's den, of the stalking wolf pack, of the lone predator stealing through the jungle. Not a human scent by any stretch.

Karl closed his eyes and focused all his power and senses on the night. He could sense the vampire a half mile, maybe more, to the southeast. The vampire was partially shielding himself, so that in Karl's mind the sensation of him was a cold, black pulse sweeping across Karl's senses like radio waves from a pulsar.

He set out toward the southeast, focusing in on that pulsing darkness. A young vampire, almost certainly. No experienced nightwalker would ever make so careless a mistake as to hunt without completely concealing his presence. Unless it was a trap.

It took only minutes to cover the distance, sprinting across rooftops and power and cable lines. He slowed down as the feel of the other vampire grew close. He could smell only the one—a male. Again,

unless it was a trap. Scents, like that cold black presence, could be masked with skillful use of a vampire's powers.

Karl crouched at the edge of a large auto parts store above the twin security lights that blazed down into the adjacent parking lot of a chain motel. The second vampire felt very close, hidden in the shadows somewhere in the half-filled parking lot.

He heard the high heels first. *Clack, clack, clack* on the asphalt. A jingle of keys, quickly silenced. A moment later, a young woman came around the corner of the motel. She hurried along, increasing her pace. Her hair blazed a sunset of yellow and orange when she passed briefly under a lamppost, and he saw how pretty she was, how young. Nineteen, twenty at most, dressed in a dark suit that accented her figure, elegant and tasteful. She glanced left and right and behind her as she walked. Her keys glinted as they poked out from between her fingers. A cautious girl, and that was good, but keys wouldn't save her from what waited in the shadows.

Karl scanned the parking lot again, his vampire sight piercing all darkness. Nothing. But the sense of that other vampire was stronger than ever. He glanced at the young woman. Her face was the face of every girl who had mysteriously disappeared—of every girl he'd ever found pale and dead through the centuries.

He stood to his full height. Hundreds of smells continually flooded his senses, everything from the stink of death from the other vampire to the thick scent of spilled motor oil. In the distance rose the long mournful howling of dogs. Perhaps that was what had made the woman cautious—the howling, a sound that shivered down the spine like an icy finger drawn slowly down the back.

There. The other vampire was crouched in the shadow of a black SUV. The vampire's pale red eyes glowed from the heart of the shadow, tracking the young woman with the greed of a lioness eyeing a gazelle.

Karl jumped from the roof of the auto-parts store, landed silently in a crouch and then sprinted toward the girl. When he moved this fast, the world scrolled in fast-forward in front of him, while the woman's movements were slow, advancing frame by frame.

The vehicles opposite her provided him plenty of cover as he slowed and changed direction, moving parallel to her. She hadn't seen him, he was certain of it, but she began to move faster. Her heels *clack-clack-clack-clacked* now, almost as fast as her heartbeat.

The woman would pass very near the SUV. Karl changed course again, cutting directly toward her, pushing himself harder, faster.

The other vampire saw Karl approaching his prey and his eyes flared a deeper red. His lips pulled back from his gleaming fangs. He crouched, gathering strength to spring.

From this close, Karl could smell the blood in the young woman's veins. Warm. Rushing through her body as her heart thundered away, life in liquid, a heart-blood sacrament.

The woman glanced back at Karl an instant before he reached her. Her eyes widened, poured full of sudden terror, and her mouth dropped open. The spiked fistful of keys came up. She drew in breath—he could hear it skating across her white, even teeth.

Karl launched himself past her and into the leaping vampire, driving him into the asphalt, rolling, tumbling, shoving a hand up under the vampire's chin to force back those striking fangs.

The woman staggered backward, key-spiked fist still held high, her other hand lifted as if to push them away, back into the darkness from which they'd come.

Karl looked her in the eyes. "Run."

She kicked off her shoes—one spike-heeled pump sailed past like some strangely shaped bird and hit the side of the SUV with a clunk—and then she sprinted away as fast as any human he'd ever seen.

The vampire made another wrenching lunge toward her, trying to free himself of Karl's grip. Karl grappled with him, twisted around and shoved the vampire's arm upward at a vicious angle and heard bone shatter. The vampire grunted, writhed like a snake and tried to sink his teeth into Karl's throat. Karl drove his head forward, smashing his forehead into the vampire's lips, splitting them open. Thick black blood seeped out of his mouth.

The vampire twisted again, ripping its arm away. Karl felt the arm dislocate, but the vampire gave no sign of noticing. Karl shot out his other hand and seized the vampire's ankle.

"You fucking traitor," the vampire said, claws scrabbling on the asphalt as he tried to drag himself free. "She's mine!"

The vampire yanked free of Karl's grip with a snarl and started after the woman. Karl sprinted after him, shot his hand out and seized the back of the vampire's neck.

The vampire thrashed as if he were a feral cat held by the scruff. Karl spun, wrenching the vampire around, and hurled him into a cinderblock wall. The vampire turned in midair. Instead of slamming into the wall headfirst, he impacted with his feet and launched himself back at Karl.

Karl dodged aside and slashed the vampire's face, opening that pale skin with his claws. The vampire shrieked, setting all the dogs to howling louder than ever. A moment later several lights came on in the motel rooms.

The vampire tumbled away, rolled to a crouch, and then stood slowly. The deep wounds in his face seeped that stinking black blood. If Karl had brought one of his silver knives, this would've been over already. The hard way always took longer, and there was usually a bigger mess in the end.

"Those fingernails of yours fucking sting," the vampire said. His ghostly pale hands and face seemed almost to glow against the night sky. His cheeks were flayed open and one lip hung in tatters, turning what might have been a plain face on a human into a grotesque nightmare on a vampire.

"Where's Delgado?" Karl asked.

"Never mind him. That bitch was *mine*."

Karl considered him. “What do they call you?”

“Farrell.” Big grin, showing off his teeth. “I’m a nasty bastard.”

“No doubt.”

Farrell heard the contempt in his voice. “You fucking kill-stealing piece of *shit*. They told me about you.”

“Who told you?” Karl took a step toward him. To his credit, Farrell didn’t back away.

“The Master told me. He tells all his children about the Traitor.” Farrell began to laugh—an empty, echoing cackle that might have come from a crazy old man. “The Master has plans for you.”

“It doesn’t matter what he said. I’ll slaughter all his children and then cut out his silent heart.” Karl paused, cocking his head. “I’m sure Delgado mentioned that we don’t get along...?”

Karl smiled, and Farrell stepped backward. Sirens had begun to wail in the distance, and they joined with the howls of the dogs, filling the air with a soundtrack for the end of the world.

The glow in Farrell’s eyes had lost some of its shine. “I never hurt that girl.”

“I wonder how your blood will taste?” Karl said, ignoring him. “No matter how sour I find vampire blood, I always relish it far more than human blood.”

Farrell’s claws cut black crescents out of his fingers. “You act like a savior, but you’re really just another killer, just like us. You feed on the cattle just the same.”

Karl said nothing. Watching.

“You can’t save anyone,” Farrell continued. “Not the humans. Not yourself. The Master is laughing at you, Traitor. He killed all your friends, and he wants you to know that now he’s here for you.”

Farrell lunged forward, claws slicing the air, fangs bared. Karl leapt to meet him head on.



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