



Changeling Press

jordan castillo price

Channeling Morpheus:
REBIRTH

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Jordan Castillo Price

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Jordan Castillo Price

Michael has never put much stock in clichés, but there's one he probably should have listened to: You can never go home again.

His family assures him that plenty of young people take a few semesters off between high school and college, that a year of travel is practically a prerequisite nowadays. His father can pull a few strings, and he'll be a freshman at ISU by September.

Michael's neglected to tell them that he's not just driving around aimlessly, stopping only to have sex with his chain-smoking boyfriend -- that in fact, he's hunting vampires.

After a disastrous family reunion, Michael unearths a vampire commune where he and Wild Bill can settle down. But Michael is the only human in residence, and the other vampires can't stop themselves from sniffing around him.

In the words of Wild Bill, "This can't be good."

Chapter One

"We all know how hard losing Mary was on you," my mother said.

How could she? I stared at the wall, fixed on a point over her shoulder, anything to avoid her eyes. Her kitchen felt small and strange. The curtains were new, I noticed, though I couldn't have told you what the old ones looked like if my life depended on it. But the things that had stayed the same, while looking slightly different from the way I'd remembered them -- the refrigerator magnets, smaller, slightly faded, the spice rack, now dark with age, with its single mismatched jar that replaced the paprika Julie and I had knocked over when I chased her through the kitchen with a foot-long night crawler -- those things filled me with dread, and also with the realization that a road trip to Terre Haute, Indiana, had not been my most stellar idea.

"This doesn't have anything to do with Mary." I realized it wasn't true as soon as it was out of my mouth. Me, tracking down vampires and keeping them from hurting people? It had everything to do with Scary Mary.

"You're not the only one who's ever lost someone. For the last two and a half years, I thought I'd lost a son."

My mom is such a bitch. She was glad to see me for maybe ten seconds, and then her face hardened, and her lips got so thin I thought they'd disappear. This was the look that said, "I was picking up laundry in your room and I found this magazine." *HotBoyz*, to be exact. I'd told her that Scary Mary had left it there. And Mom claimed she believed me. But she'd given me that look that conveyed she was none too pleased that her son jerked off to pictures of naked men.

"It's not unheard of for people to travel before college." Mom started out tentative, but picked up steam as she went along, selling herself the idea. "I read an

article that says lots of students think of a travel year as an unofficial prerequisite nowadays.”

“I’m not thinking about college right now.”

“Your test scores were so high. It’s late to apply for the fall, but your father could talk to the dean. You’d think that after, what is it now, ten years? Eleven. After all these years at the university, he’d be able to ask one little favor.”

“Some things are more important than college.”

“And the tuition would be taken care of. That’s part of your father’s benefits package.”

“Do you even hear words when I talk?”

That stopped her, finally. She pressed her lips together so hard they went white around the edges. The back door slammed, and feet pounded through the laundry room. “Is he here yet? Did I miss him? Stupid accident on the tollway. I was behind this dump truck for an hour and a half, and my phone died...”

Mom and I both stared at Julie as she burst into the kitchen. She sounded just like Mom. Exactly. Same cadence and rhythm to the words, like a car without a parking brake rolling downhill. She stopped when she saw me, though -- staggered as if I’d backhanded her. “Oh my God.”

She mashed herself against me and buried her face in the front of my shirt. I patted the back of her hair, which smelled amazing. She and I had never been huggy -- unless you count the photos of us playing *Beverly Hills 90210* when I was eleven and she was nine. That was before she started high school and realized that her big brother was the antithesis of cool. That the jocks went out of their way to shove him into the lockers when they passed by him in the hall, and call him a fag -- which he already knew, and suspected that one or two of them might be as well, the way they stared at his lips when they thought he wasn’t looking.

“You smell like a frathouse buried in ashtrays.” She shoved back and looked at me. “And what’s with that scarf?”

I swallowed, and hoped it hadn’t slipped out of place. “You look good...”

"No, seriously. You smell. Are you homeless or something? Did you come here for money?"

"Julie," Mom said. Just her name, but the tone was, "That's enough, young lady."

"I don't want money," I said. I didn't need it. I had Wild Bill.

"No? You have a job?" Julie scoured me up and down with a look that said she doubted anyone would hire me.

"I've had jobs. We're traveling right now."

"We? Who's we?"

"Michael brought his friend," Mom said.

And this is where I realized that the whole idea that I could come home again was seriously twisted. Not only was I finally coming right out and telling them I was gay, I was breaking the news that I had no plans to go to college, and have a neat little apartment, and work a safe little job.

But I couldn't tell them why.

When Scary Mary died, everyone was insisting that the fang marks were some kind of put-on, some bloodplay gone wrong. But I knew they'd been left by vampires. Real vampires. Because Scary Mary told me they were when she called to ask me which shoes she should wear on her date.

My insistence that somebody find the vampires before they killed again had netted me a half-dozen appointments with a child psychiatrist and a prescription for Zoloft.

A child psychiatrist. At eighteen.

Julie ducked her head into the dining room, then stomped back and planted herself in front of me. She'd always played softball religiously, and still looked like she could crush me with her thighs. "What friend? I don't see anyone."

"My boyfriend, Bill. He went outside to have a cigarette."

There. I'd said it. Boyfriend. Julie looked even more pissed off. Whoever said that honesty was the best policy? They obviously lived alone.

Julie clucked her tongue in disgust. "Nobody smokes anymore."

Maybe not. But Wild Bill had his own demons to grapple with. Parts of him were still stuck in the eighties, when he'd had a one-night stand a lot like Scary Mary's, except that he'd come through the other end of it alive. If I said that aloud, he'd probably add, "If you call this living." I think he was under the impression that if he ever admitted he was happy about something, the hand of Fate would come and sweep it all away, so it was better to adopt a pose of jaded ennui.

I took a breath, and did my best to look that way myself, even though I wanted to grab Julie by the shoulders and shake her until we both laughed and cried and said we loved each other and missed each other, and that we were both sorry.

"So who's the girl," she said, "you or him? I'm guessing you. Since you're wearing makeup."

"Julie," Mom snapped. She'd probably been thinking the same thing.

My ennui slipped like it was lubed with silicone. "Just because you live out in the middle of a cornfield doesn't mean that everyone else in the world is either a cheerleader or a quarterback. There are gay people in the world. And black people. And Buddhists."

"Michael..." Mom said.

"Ohmigod, you're sleeping with a black Buddhist?"

I clenched my fists and ached to smack some sense into her, but she was too hard-headed for that, always had been. "No, I'm trying to tell you to stop living in a bubble. How can you go around judging people when you've never been more than five hundred miles from home?"

Julie stared into my eyes for a good long moment, and I saw the corner of her mouth curl up. I wondered what was so funny. But it wasn't actual pleasure I'd picked up from her. It was grim satisfaction, because I'd just given her the rope she needed to hang me.

"You know how French Club goes to Paris every other year? And you remember how badly I wanted to go? Well, I couldn't. Because right before my senior year of high school, my stupid fag brother ran away. And my stupid bleeding-heart parents spent all

their whole stupid savings to hire a useless private investigator to track him down. So pardon me if I'm not as worldly as you are."

She flicked the edge of my scarf in disgust and stomped out of the room. I tried to look at my mother, and couldn't. "You didn't have to do that," I said finally. Which didn't help me feel any less miserable.

"If you had children, you'd understand."

I'm sure I could've dug deep into the tone of her voice and unearthed whatever she was actually trying to express, that I'd never give her biological grandkids, not in the traditional manner that most sons would -- but really, was it worth it? I'd disappointed her on so many levels I'd probably be able to track shades of meaning on a never-ending Möbius strip of disappointment.

I went after Julie, caught up with her on the porch. She stood at the top of the stairs with her arms crossed, watching. Wild Bill leaned against the van like he didn't have a care in the world, lighting one cigarette from the smoldering butt of another. And when he does that, I know something's not right, because he's trying so hard to look like he doesn't give a damn. My father was talking to him, gesturing for emphasis. Dad's hair was grayer, and the lines around his mouth looked deeper than the last time I'd seen him. And maybe he'd lost a few pounds, while my mother had gained them. He spoke very earnestly to Wild Bill, who looked like he might have been listening, or might have been daydreaming about the Ramones' lyrics. But I'd bet he was listening.

"You're definitely the girl," Julie said.

I turned on her and got ready to tell her she was just the type of ignorant, inbred, Indiana hick that I'd been trying to get away from all my life, but her face was red, her chin was trembling and her mouth was all screwed up, and despite her best effort to come off angry, a tear had squeezed its way out and was trailing its way down to the corner of her lips.

My boot heels rang louder against the wooden porch stairs than I'd intended, and I imagined that all up and down the street, everyone had a good earful of Professor

Davies' family, and that boy of his... and Lord only knows how he ever turned out that way, though what can you expect with such liberal parents?

"We're out of here," I told Bill, and I flipped him the keys because I didn't trust myself not to "accidentally" back into my mother's Volkswagen. Wild Bill moved fast, just short of blurring, and kept the keys from dropping into the sewer. His heavy-lidded, mostly-bored expression never wavered, though an ash did fall from the end of the cigarette that dangled loosely from his lips.

"Michael, wait," my father said.

Wild Bill slammed his door, looked at me, and raised an eyebrow. I shook my head. "Go."

Chapter Two

We drove. There were maps in the glove box, but Wild Bill wasn't in the habit of looking at them. He'd stare at the big "you are here" signs next to the soda machines at the rest stops and fix all the routes in his head so that he always had a sense of where we were, even while I was frantically folding and unfolding, only to discover the route I'd meant to take was closed off with construction.

I pressed my boots against the dash and shoved back hard until the seat creaked. I couldn't take my frustration out on Bill, and it was useless to talk to my family, so I did my best to show the van how angry I was. The van didn't seem to care.

The seat felt strange, and I realized I'd left my jacket hanging over the kitchen chair. I felt for my wallet. It was in my back pocket. Screw it. I was sure Bill would be happy to vamp me a new jacket.

We drove for an hour, or maybe it was only an excruciating ten minutes that seemed like an hour, and then finally, Wild Bill said, "Arboretum sound like a good place to hole up for the day?"

I wanted to yell at him, ask him how he could act like nothing had happened, that everything was normal. I said, "Sure."

We approached a two-stoplight town with a gas station garishly lit against the flat, dark landscape. "Gassing up," said Bill. "Need anything?"

"A sister who's not a fucking idiot" may have slipped out. I glanced over at Wild Bill to see if he'd heard -- of course he'd heard. He's a vampire. He would've heard it if I'd whispered it into the headrest.

His mouth twitched.

"It's not funny," I said.

The van creaked over the steep driveway on its worn struts, then Bill pulled up alongside the pumps, where one of the dozen overly-bright lights slanted through the windshield and lit the two of us with a light so green we looked like we were underwater. He turned to me, and looked at me very hard. "Tonight?" he said. "Forget about it."

"What, are you gonna vamp me, take away the pain?" Oh my God, I really needed to shut up if I had any intention of keeping him around, but I just couldn't seem to help myself.

Wild Bill seemed to take the question at face value. "Don't know if I could, and I'm not planning on trying. But I have had everyone who's ever cared about me tell me that I'd ruined their lives. Usually with more swearing. So I know that it's not nearly as bad as you think."

"My mother kept talking and talking like nothing had happened to me the past couple of years, like I was just gonna move back in and gear up for college in the fall, and everything would be exactly like it was before."

Bill cut the engine. He swiveled to face me, and propped his boots on my thigh, ankles crossed. "What did you think she'd say -- happy hunting? That she'd been waiting all her life for the day she could pass the ancestral machete on to her firstborn son?"

"I didn't tell her... about that."

"Right. What did you tell her, then?"

"That we were traveling. Seeing the country."

"I'm guessing you also edited out the fact that I was old enough to appear in her high school yearbook."

I didn't answer that. Thinking about his age that way gave me vertigo.

Wild Bill tapped two cigarettes out of his pack. He lit them both at the same time, then took one out of his mouth, twirled it between his fingers so that the filter faced me, and handed it over. I took it, and held it.

"And how's that sound to you? A couple of young pups, driving around with no destination in particular, other than getting down each other's pants when they're too tapped out to drive for the night?"

"But that's not what we're..."

"You take out all the vamp slayer details, what else are you left with?"

I stared down at my cigarette. It was trembling.

Bill pulled his legs off my lap, straddled the center console, and pressed his mouth to my ear. He'd moved so fast it was more like a series of staggered snapshots. "I've got to refill two gas tanks -- the vehicle's, and mine. And then I'm coming back for a chaser. If you just so happen to be good and naked when I get here, I promise I'll make you forget everything... for a few minutes, at least. And not with vampy tricks, either."

He slammed the driver's side door, which had more than its fair share of rust on it and would probably fall off completely one of these days, and got the gas started. Despite all the warning signs, he never bothers to put out his cigarette first. Maybe he's hoping to "accidentally" blow us both up someday.

Once the pump was going, Wild Bill stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets and strode into the mini-mart. Great. He would come back with the dregs of someone else's blood in his mouth and act like nothing totally messed up had just happened. I crushed out my unsmoked cigarette and glared at the scuffed toes of my boots.

It takes a few minutes when he drinks deeply. He doesn't like to leave his benefactors sprawled on the floor from sudden blood loss. I used that time to imagine what I could have done with myself that wouldn't have let my family down. I even tried to picture myself in my old room, which I hadn't visited. I wasn't sure which would have been worse -- if it had been left untouched, a shrine to the son who started walking one night and never turned back, or if they'd cleared out my old stuff and installed a treadmill and a flat-screen TV.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Bill knocked on my window. I rolled it down, and he propped himself on his elbows in the window opening. "I take your current state of unnakedness to mean that I can't interest you in a tumble."

"You can't solve everything by fucking."

Shit. Had I actually said that? Out loud? What the hell was my problem?

In my peripheral vision, Wild Bill was motionless. I chanced a look. He didn't seem annoyed with me -- and even better, he wasn't giving me a condescending, I'm-your-parents'-age, I've-seen-it-all-before smirk, either. He reached into the van, took me by the forearm, and pried my hand away from my body where I'd been clenching it over my chest. He fit his hand over mine, palm to back, then meshed our fingers. His hand was warm.

"It's a decent night," he said. "Why don't you come out here and stretch your legs?" He let go of my hand, opened the door, and sketched a theatrical, after-you bow. I stepped out of the van and glared at the parking lot, the mini-mart. At Wild Bill.

"Here." He slipped his jacket off and tossed it to me. It jingled. "Don't want you to catch a chill."

I slipped my arms into the sleeves. The jacket felt strange. He'd worn it for so many years it had conformed to the shape of his body. It settled on my shoulders differently than mine did. And while he'd never modified the lining to hold sharpened hickory stakes, parts of it were so threadbare and tattered I was sure I'd feel it tear if I moved the wrong way.

I rolled my shoulders and settled the jacket by its lapels, and then Bill took my hand again. He was warmer than me, for once. And I hated that the only reason he was warm was because he'd sucked some hapless gas station attendant's blood. I hoped that whoever that guy was, he was old. And fat. And chewed tobacco. Because that would make me feel better about Bill tapping his veins. Slightly.

Wild Bill threaded his fingers through mine. He started walking. I walked beside him. It was either that, or let him walk away with my arm. "Smells like the start of summer," he said. "Beneath the diesel and the carbon monoxide, anyway."

We'd walked beyond the perimeter of the gas station into a scrubby field, past the reach of the lights in the parking lot. "Would you stop trying to be chatty?" I said. It was easier to be cruel to him when I couldn't see his face.

"Okay. So what do you want to talk about? The big, gay family reunion? I'm a grand champion at the woulda-coulda-shoulda game. I play it over and over like a broken record. But I thought you might be sharper than that."

I yanked on Bill's arm, hard, and he snapped around to face me. The night sky was overcast, and we could hardly see each other in the distant illumination of the parking lot lights. I could hardly see him, anyway. Hard to say what he saw.

Wild Bill backed me up a few paces, and my butt pressed into the edge of a picnic table. He touched my cheek with his free hand, then tilted his head for a kiss, and leaned toward me.

It was hard to fathom, not only that he'd be willing to give so much comfort, but that I'd be too angry to accept it. I felt his mouth on mine, warm with someone else's blood, and I told myself they were vampire lips. Why? Because I was already so miserable that it seemed like the only way to go was down. I inhaled, seeking out the graveyard scent that all vampires share, to prove to myself that my lover was one of the living dead...

But Wild Bill didn't smell like earth. He smelled like whiskey.

"How much did you drink?"

"Not nearly enough." He slid his hand back, wove his fingers through my hair -- and grabbed a fistful of it, hard, to keep me from turning my face away. He kissed me again, forcefully now, pried my lips open with his and skirted the edge of my teeth with his tongue.

And I'd be damned if maybe he couldn't distract me. The feel of him holding my head, forcing a kiss from me, was so heady, so intense, I couldn't have articulated what the problem was that had seemed so insurmountable mere moments before. My back arched as my body sought him. A desperate noise rose from my throat and mingled

with the clash of our teeth and the jingle his jacket made when the buttons, studs and safety pins rubbed against his chest.

When our kiss ended, it was on Wild Bill's terms, not mine. He gave his hand a twist and my head turned so he could put his whiskey-sweet mouth to my ear. "You wanna pout, or you wanna get your rocks off?"

I inhaled again, searching for that elusive whiff of vampire that I knew was lurking under the alcohol. My nose touched his jaw. Even though he was no longer wearing it, he smelled like his jacket -- old leather.

He tongued my ear. I was hard already, achingly hard, brushing my crotch against his fly, eager for stimulation. He fucked my ear with his tongue. My breathing went harsh and ragged.

My fingers were numb from squeezing his when he let go of them and slipped his hand between us. He jacked me through my jeans, and my pulse hammered in my groin.

My scalp tingled where he held my hair taut, numb like my fingers, until he gave my hair another jerk and pulled my head back to arch my throat towards his mouth. My cock twitched. "I hold back so I don't hurt you," he murmured, just below my earlobe. "I can stop pulling my punches... mostly... if a little roughhousing can make you forget."

I know the difference between pleasure and pain and, vampire bites aside, don't generally confuse the two. But I had no doubt it was Wild Bill jerking me around by the hair that had my jeans wicking pre-come from the tip of my cock.

He snagged my scarf between his teeth and yanked. I felt the cheap polyester catch at the slim scabs on my neck. They prickled as some of them pulled free. Bill pressed his face against my neck and gave a languorous sniff.

Usually, Wild Bill's fairly guarded. He hides it well, of course, but it's there. Tonight it seemed like his true emotions were a little closer to the surface. I wondered how much whiskey he'd managed to drink. A shot, maybe? Not enough to get him

drunk, therefore not enough to make it worth his while. But I thought I could tell the difference in him, even after one drink.

He dragged his tongue across my throat, perpendicular to the slash marks, and a shiver coursed through me. He opened my fly with a deft one-handed maneuver and shoved my jeans down without letting go of my hair. The weathered wood of the picnic table dug into my behind.

"Some hick gonna wander out for a smoke and catch me doin' you?" Bill said against my damp, sluggishly bleeding neck. "Hear those fucking sounds you make while you're peaking, and wish it wasn't so damn dark, so he could get a better look?"

My breath hissed in without my conscious control, as if my body could reply to him without any intervention from my mind. Wild Bill let go of my hair and my head jerked forward. He grabbed me under the armpits and hauled me onto the table, then gave a shove to my chest that sent me sprawling on my back with my legs dangling over the side, and my cock pointing up toward the murky night sky.

Bill yanked my jeans down around my ankles and pushed my knees apart. It was a mild night, but the air felt cool against my inner thighs, and the sudden exposure made my testicles pull toward my body.

As if he knew it was the most sensitive spot he could have touched, Bill grazed my scrotum with the backs of his fingers.

Another sound escaped me, half-breath, half-sob.

"Just like that," Bill said. He crouched, and followed the touch of his fingers with a long, slow lick, thigh to thigh, across my perineum. My breath shuddered. He'd short-circuited my brain, and my cerebellum could no longer perform even the simple autonomic function of breathing.

Bill stood and stared down at me, and even if there had been light enough for me to see the look on his face, I doubt I would've been able to read it. He peeled open his jacket on me, drew a fifth from the inner pocket, then pushed my T-shirt up to my ribs.

He unscrewed the bottle cap. A single cool drop of liquid landed in my navel. "Mazel tov." He bent and sucked the drop of whiskey from my body, then kept on tonguing my navel until he drew another gasp from me against my will.

He trailed slow kisses down my stomach to the base of my cock, then worked his way up the shaft. I made a grab for his hair, but he caught me by the wrist and slammed my arm against the picnic table -- and damn, that *was* where my head was at, rough and nasty, because my cock twitched so hard it nudged him in the mouth.

Heat and wetness engulfed me. My hips rocked up, and Bill slid a hand under my butt, encouraged me to thrust into his mouth. One hand on my wrist and the other cupping my ass left no hands for him to touch himself. Discomfort always tinges the encounters where he brings me off without coming. But then, as the insides of Wild Bill's fangs glided up and down my shaft, I realized something. The imbalance was the point of it all. Him giving without taking. Me thrashing and struggling while he was cool, calm and in control. Yin and yang. Opposites.

When Bill let go of my wrist, I was so wrapped up in my own head I hardly even noticed -- until he reached up and slipped his forefinger into my mouth. His hand tasted like cigarettes, gasoline and whiskey. And blood. Some stranger's blood. I caught him by the wrist -- he could have pulled away anytime. Obviously, I could never overpower him -- and I sucked.

He grunted. I felt it on the underside of my shaft.

He squeezed my ass hard and sucked me harder, while I went through the motions of going down on his finger. But really, what I was looking for was another elusive taste of copper, to see if I'd really tasted blood, or if it was just something I'd dreamt up to torment myself.

Bill pulled his hand back, and holding onto it would've been as futile as grabbing at a passing SUV. He slipped his fingers between my legs and teased my hole with his damp fingertip.

He eased his finger in.

My hips thrust up again, and I wished it was his cock inside me -- and damn Julie for telling me I was the girl. Maybe if she'd ever had a good, stiff dick up her she wouldn't be so quick to judge. I saw red-gold sparkles around the periphery of my vision even with my eyes squeezed shut, and I realized I'd been holding my breath. I gasped, and Bill snaked his finger higher and stroked my balls with his thumb.

Damn her for crying, and making me realize how much I missed her.

Bill slurped his way off my cock, let go of the ass cheek he'd been squeezing, and licked his palm. He started jerking me off, wet and fast, while he fingerfucked my ass.

"Plenty of Jack in that bottle for both of us," he said.

My stomach churned at the notion of swallowing room-temperature bourbon straight up. "No thanks."

"You sure?" His hand moved expertly on my cock, dragging me closer to the brink, even as he spoke to me like we were just driving down a long, straight road, shooting the shit because we were boycotting the local radio stations that didn't play anything but the cheesiest of country ballads. His wet thumb swiped my slit.

"Yeah," I managed. It sounded more like a gasp. No doubt Bill got off on that. His finger stroked me inside, and I gasped again, and steeled myself to hit that brink, the point of no return.

"Suit yourself. 'Course, I never thought there was anything valiant about hurting. Numb feels a hell of a lot better than pain, any day."

He pushed another finger into me, and it hurt -- and I guess that was the point. But maybe he was wrong, because it felt amazing, too, and I was just about to crest. Wild Bill had somehow managed to drive home the exact opposite of the point he'd been trying to make with his two probing fingers.

My back arched, and I felt my whole body tighten. More sounds escaped me now, desperate sounds. I didn't care, because Bill was making me come, was loving every last gasp and twitch he could wring from me. I bucked, and I cried out, and my semen painted his lips and his knuckles, and the weathered wood bit into my bare

bottom while his fingers plunged in and out. And for just that moment, everything was good again.

Chapter Three

I scrolled through my email. Mostly junk. Hoodia. Home typists needed, no experience necessary. An email with a wisc.edu suffix and an re: subject line -- Jim again. He doesn't write often, but when he does, he acts like I never turned down the scholarship deal. I checked my own email, which he'd left tacked on to the bottom of his reply. There it was. He never trims his emails.

"Thank you for the offer, but I won't be settling in Madison." I couldn't imagine any clearer way of declining. But when he updated me on his latest experiment, he talked about me and his research as if it was just a matter of time before I was there assisting him in the flesh.

I saved that email in case I needed to reply, then deleted three penis enlargement offers and a letter from someone in Zimbabwe who had a great business opportunity for me.

And I saw I'd been approved to join the V-Friendly Forum.

Yes.

I hadn't known whether I'd get in or not. I'd been required to submit a webcam photo of myself holding a current newspaper with a "V" drawn under the date to establish my identity. I couldn't imagine what it would prove -- that I wasn't some scary, middle-aged troll? Or someone playing games behind multiple identities? Or a cop? Whatever it proved, I guess it had done its job.

Something about the sparseness of the website, or the understated intro page that I couldn't figure out how to hack past, had made me curious enough to want to know more. And now I was in.

I logged in and scanned people's introductory posts. They divided themselves into V or NV -- vampire or not. The posts were as spare as the website. First name, last

initial, location. It reminded me of personal ads, at first. I imagined what mine would look like -- *NV-GWM, 21, slim build, seeks V for walks in the moonlight and saliva-borne pathogen* -- and I was not amused.

But the more I read, the more it seemed to me that not everyone on the V-Friendly Forum was looking for Mr. or Ms. Tall, Pale and Vampy to come and sweep them off their feet.

Nancy L. V-66, Albuquerque. Do you remember Woodstock?

Jason R. NV-16, Orlando. FL Vs, email me.

Tasha W. V-41, Chicago. Other black Vs anywhere? Will relocate.

I scanned down the list. They were all like that, vampires and their human supporters desperately seeking connections. How much should I say? How much *could* I say, given the fifty-character limit of anything beyond the username.

I typed in my info.

Michael D. NV-21, Midwest. Want V community for me & V partner.

It was vague enough. Right? And if Wild Bill wasn't interested in being part of a community, a family, then we wouldn't have to follow up on it.

My finger hovered over the enter key. If Wild Bill wasn't looking to fit in somewhere, then what had he been doing with the vampire coven in Minnesota? Too bad most of the vampires had since drifted apart, which meant that now it consisted mostly of humans with vampire fetishes, and a couple of vamps who figured it was easier to hold court over them than to reestablish themselves somewhere else. They'd probably see Bill as a threat, since he did that whole territorial hissing thing at Damien. And they'd see me as... I don't know what they'd see me as. The one who'd managed to break up the big happy family just by showing up.

I'd gotten pretty good at doing that lately.

I took a deep breath, and I hit enter. Then I shut the laptop, propped my feet on the dashboard, and watched the sun hover low over a chest-high cornfield while I waited for Wild Bill to wake up.

* * *

A pale glow was still dissolving from the sky when Bill lifted the rubber flap, an industrial anti-skid floormat in another life, that separated the cab from the lightproof back. "I hate June. Feels like all I do is sleep. Fucking solstice." He lit a cigarette and slid into the driver's seat. "How long have you been up?"

I shrugged. "Three hours. Maybe four."

"Shit." He rolled down his window and blew an impossibly long stream of smoke from the left side of his mouth. Half the smoke drifted back into the van, and half of it scattered on the wind. "You still mad about the parental units?"

"It stings a lot less than it did yesterday," I said, and I was surprised to realize it was the truth. Mom's kitchen had felt strange, as if a very detailed set-dresser had tried to replicate it with a stage set, but had gotten some details wrong that wouldn't be noticed by the audience. The van, the air mattress, the ratty motel blanket wrapped around me and Wild Bill -- that had all felt right.

I opened my computer, silently thanked a nearby farmer for not password-protecting his wireless, and scanned my email. I won a new car -- right. But then a subject line I'd nearly skimmed over caught my eye.

V-house.

"Momsie and Dadsie probably cooled off overnight, too. People can only take so many shocks to the system at once, you know. Not that I think you'll ever be able to fill them in on all your grisly details. But you can probably wrap things up on a less self-flagellating note."

"Uh-huh," I said, without really digesting what he was getting at. I was too busy reading the email, then reading it again.

4 V outside Romeoville IL in farm/commune. NV varies. Liberal. Safe. Reply for prelim. screening.

"... so that's how I finally learned to suck myself off," Bill was saying.

I looked up, blinked.

"And now that I have your attention." He cut his eyes to the mini-PC. "Do I need to be jealous of that thing? 'Cos your heart just started going pit-a-pat about a million miles an hour."

"Ever been to Romeoville?" I asked.

"Been through it. Cool name, ugly town. A suburb's a suburb."

I tried to choose my words carefully, but then I wondered why I even bothered. Wild Bill could tell what was going on in my head by the sound of my pulse. "I want to go there."

"Jesus H. Christ fucking a bike. Already?"

"Already... what?"

"Didn't you give up killing people for Lent?"

I, however, usually had to work pretty hard to figure out what was going on with Bill. "Lent was over two months ago... and I don't want to kill anybody." I sighed, and shut the computer. "Okay, look. I was thinking."

He refrained from making a derogatory remark, but just barely, I suspected.

"I love you. I love being with you. But just the two of us, day after day? It gets lonely. And maybe it was so hard to see my family freak out because I missed being around other people."

Bill lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of the one he'd just sucked down to the filter. He nodded. Hopefully he was with me so far.

"The Minnesota group -- it's too bad we couldn't have stayed. I don't know how many vamp communities there are. Maybe more than we think, if they leave their donors alive and they don't take enough blood at one time to turn them. There's a group in Romeoville, a commune. I'd like to check them out. See if maybe... we fit in."

Wild Bill sprawled in the driver's seat in nothing but a T-shirt and jeans, partly because the night temperature had gotten milder, and partly because he could feel like my knight in shining armor if he let me commandeer his jacket. It surprised me, how thin and vulnerable he looked without it. More vulnerable than when he was naked, and I could see all his muscles and tattoos.

He smoked, and he thought. And eventually, he said, "We're social creatures, just like chimpanzees. I guess even the vampire virus couldn't evolve that out of our DNA."

* * *

I forced down a bite of overcooked hamburger and followed it with a long swallow of Coke. Wild Bill fidgeted. I think he would've normally had a cigarette going -- maybe two -- but we were close enough to a major metropolitan area that smoking bans were in effect, and flagrantly disregarding them would have drawn more attention to us than we wanted to risk. Today, anyway. Because today we were meeting our vampire connection.

"The minute hand's not moving," Bill said. He picked some of the silkscreened design off the front of his T-shirt, jiggled his knee, and looked at the cheerfully plastic diner clock. "You coulda, I dunno... made me stop so you could take a leak."

He could have driven less than ninety miles an hour, too. But the "coulda-woulda-shoulda" game wouldn't do us any good. "Think about something else." I pulled a few napkins from the chrome dispenser and slid them over. "Draw something on a napkin. It's the best way to kill time in a diner. I promise."

Bill rotated the pile of napkins, as if it made a difference which way it was facing. "Right. I'll score a pen." He stood up and walked toward the cash register. His posture had a peculiar forward tilt, as if it was compensating for the weight of the leather jacket that was no longer there. I ran my fingers over the lapel, which was textured with badges and safety pins and tiny pyramid studs with an age-old buildup of grime between the metal.

I should probably give it back.

"Excuse me?"

A female voice, timid. I turned, and found a diner customer standing about a yard away from the booth with her hands clenched together, fidgeting against one another, pressing and tugging so hard that one of her knuckles cracked, loudly.

"I... um..." She glanced around as if she could draw inspiration from the diner, and blinked rapidly. I wondered if she was going to cry.

She was younger than me, younger than Julie, I think. Eighteen? Seventeen? She was thin, but an awkward thin that high school boys probably never gave a second glance. Her hair was dyed black, and she had a bar through her left eyebrow. "I wondered if you were... meeting? Somebody?"

I desperately wanted to take her by the hand and tell her to stop ending all of her sentences like they were questions, but I suspected I couldn't wipe out a lifetime of self-doubt with a stray piece of advice. "Yes," I said carefully.

She glanced over each shoulder, then lunged forward so we could speak more privately. "I knew it," she loud-whispered.

I lowered my eyebrows in a "huh?" kind of way.

"Sorry... sorry. Can I..." She nodded toward the other side of the booth. I gestured for her to sit. I hadn't expected the ambassador of the vampire commune to be so young. And eager. And nervous. And if she was this nervous around me, I couldn't imagine how she'd react to my vampire boyfriend.

I turned and craned my neck to see what Wild Bill had gotten up to. He was still near the front door, chatting away with the manager behind the register, who looked to be counting out a nice stack of bills for him. Probably twenties. I pretended I didn't see that, and focused on the girl.

"So," she said. "How long have you been... y'know."

I didn't.

"Been... what?"

She indicated her neck with some exasperation. "When did you make the change?"

"Oh. No. I'm not a... I'm NV. Bill's the... V."

The girl did a triple-take at me. "Are we talking about the same thing? You are the one from the commune. Right?"

I sank back against the booth. Bill's jacket squeaked against the molded plastic. "No. I'm meeting them, too."

She stared at me so hard I found myself focusing somewhere over her shoulder to avoid eye contact, just like I had with my mother. "I thought for sure you were one of them," she said. "You look like you'd belong."

"To what?" Bill said brightly. He gave me a shove with his hip, and I slid over to make room for him so he didn't try to cram himself onto my lap. "Chess team? Glee club? Ooh, I know. A/V club. I totally bet you were in A/V. Or maybe drama." He leaned forward as if he were confiding in the girl. "Lotsa promising young boymeat in drama club."

Either she couldn't follow what Wild Bill was saying a hundred percent, or she thought he was mocking her. I felt well and truly sorry for her either way. "I'm Michael, this is Wild Bill. He's one of the, uh..."

Bill nudged me with his shoulder. "One of the what? The promising young boymeats? Why thank you, Mikey. You flatter me. Really."

There was a moment of intensely awkward silence, and then the girl said, "I'm Lenore."

Bill left his glass of water in front of Lenore, but stretched himself across the table to wrap his lips around the end of the straw and suck. Lenore froze as his upper body impinged on her personal space. He hovered there, even after he'd stopped drinking. "May I ask what compels you to go rapping, tapping on the chamber door of the ghastly grim and ancient?"

Lenore stared. Her mouth worked. I felt even sorrier for her.

And the waitress chose that moment to check back with us. "Warm up your coffee?" she asked me. She didn't add "hon" like the waitresses in deep farm country do. The lack of "hon" evidently went hand in hand with the smoking ban.

I swallowed a few sips to make room for her to top it off, and slid the cup past Bill toward the edge of the table. The waitress poured. All three of us stared at the dark

stream of coffee. The waitress glanced at the coffee cup that sat untouched, still upside down, at Wild Bill's original place setting. "You?" she asked Lenore.

"I don't drink caffeine," Lenore said. Bill found this funny enough to compel him to squeeze my knee. "Do you have any herbal tea?"

"Chamomile and peppermint."

"Peppermint? And soy milk? If you have it."

The waitress left. Lenore looked spooked. I could only imagine what kind of zingers Wild Bill was cooking up. I decided to try and steer the conversation somewhere normal. As normal as it was going to get. "So, what're you looking to do, live there? Do your parents know?"

"Who's the pot," Bill asked, "and who's the kettle?"

I pretended he hadn't said anything. "They'll look for you. Believe me. It might be easier in the long run to just tell them what you're doing. I mean, not the V part, but... let them know you didn't move to New York and start turning tricks, you know?"

"Or you can fake your own death," Bill suggested. "Because really, that's the most cathartic resolution -- if all your friends and family think you're dead. Everyone cries, they have a little rant about all your potential going to waste, they put on a memorial service and you can hide and see who bothers to come -- and if you're really lucky, they bury an empty coffin. When they couldn't even be bothered to spot you a twenty 'til payday. You know how much booze you could buy for the cost of a single coffin?"

That awkward silence we'd had earlier? That was a picnic compared to the one that followed. Because I wondered how much of that was serious. Given that he'd been in high-sarcasm mode, I was guessing most of it. All of it.

The waitress reappeared and set a tiny metal teapot on the table. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Bill said, "your hamburgers suck."

My first impression was that he'd vamp her mind into bringing me a new entree. He wasn't usually so scathing about it, but she'd probably only have a patchy recollection of what he'd actually said to her, anyway. But the waitress didn't seem mind-vamped. Far from it.

"They smell worse than they taste. So I've heard. If your NV friend has a problem, I'm sure he'll say something. He seems perfectly capable of speaking up for himself."

I looked, really looked, at the waitress. She appeared to be maybe forty -- slim, compact, with graying hair in a no-nonsense ponytail, and a navy polyester uniform that did a great job of camouflaging her perfectly etched physique and translucent skin. She wasn't exactly pretty, but she was so poised and controlled, she looked both plain and exquisite at the same time. And her eyes were the exact navy of her uniform. I think. Either that, or they reflected the color she was wearing. I thought better of staring too long into the eyes of a strange vampire. I knew full well that was how the mind games always started.

Lenore shrank back to the far side of the booth. Wild Bill gave the waitress an even stare. I assumed he knew all along she was the vamp. He had to have smelled her. "If working odd jobs is part of your hazing ritual," he said, "you might as well count me out. Living sunless entitles me to forgo gainful employment."

"I'm not here for the tips," the waitress said. "This is my way of keeping an eye on the community. Not all of us blend in, so I work it to my advantage. I haven't decided yet whether you blend or not. The cigarette stench is an interesting touch."

She looked Lenore up and down. "I'm Miranda. We spoke on the phone."

Lenore nodded vigorously, too vamp-struck to speak.

"You've been a vegetarian for how many years?"

"Five? And the past two? Vegan."

"And you didn't brag to anyone about our meeting? Nobody?"

Lenore nodded even harder, then processed the question and changed the direction of her nodding to a vigorous headshake. Miranda stared deep into Lenore's

eyes. I hoped I wouldn't end up under that gaze. Simply witnessing it in action made me uncomfortable.

"We need to be careful," Miranda said. "It's a dangerous world we live in." She offered Lenore her small, white hand to shake. "All right, then. I'll be happy to sponsor you. My shift ends in half an hour."

Lenore was trembling visibly when she reached for Miranda's hand. I watched them shake, and tried to come up with any advantage vegetarianism might impart to a blood donor. None that I could think of, given that my continual slow leak had left me anemic. I'd have to ask Jim, the next time I replied to one of his untrimmed emails.

Miranda swung her attention to Wild Bill. "We're always looking to expand our numbers, especially with older, more experienced vampires. Swing by, spend the day, and decide if you want to settle here. Sharing the burden really helps -- more than you'd think."

Wild Bill cocked his head and said nothing.

"Your... friend... would be off-limits to anyone else, of course. Unless you make other arrangements."

"Sounds like a veritable swinger's party." Wild Bill stuck a plastic straw in his mouth and chewed. When he set it down on the table, the end had been ground into a lumpy tatter. He cut his eyes to me. "We'll talk about it."

"Of course. If you decide to come, just follow the blue Prius."

Wild Bill and I both got into the van carefully. We both stared hard at the windshield. Neither of us said a word. And eventually the silence in the van grew thicker than the haze of cigarette smoke. Finally, when I couldn't stand the quiet any longer, I said, "If you don't want to go, we won't go."

"I didn't say I didn't want to go."

That made me feel optimistic, if cautiously so. "I just wouldn't want you to get involved with them on account of me. I need to make sure it's something we both want to do."

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. We’re not marrying them in a big Moonie ceremony or anything. We’ll just go and see if we dig the vibe -- and if either of us gets the heebie-jeebies, we steer clear of the Kool-Aid and hit the road. Simple as that.”

Okay. Simple as that.

Chapter Four

"Window's boarded up from the inside," Wild Bill said. I was busy inspecting the door lock. It looked too sturdy to breach from outside our room. I'd been leery of spending the night under someone else's roof, so Bill must have felt doubly apprehensive. And yet everything about the room -- aside from the fact that our hosts knew for a fact that Bill was a vampire -- was as safe as if we'd rigged it together ourselves.

"Unless there's something really elaborate like a sliding panel or a secret door, we're as safe here as we'd be anywhere," I said.

Bill pressed his fingertips to the wall and cocked his head. "Nope, no subterranean passages. It's as solid as it looks. What a shame -- no "Cask of Amontillado" reenactments tonight."

We were more likely to find a pellet stove and a sump pump in the basement than a wine cellar, anyway. The vamp commune was twenty minutes outside Romeoville, between a cornfield, a soybean field, and a few acres of open pasture. The old white farmhouse was gigantic, five bedrooms at least, plus outbuildings -- a freestanding garage, a couple of sheds, a chicken coop, a barn.

Bill wandered into the adjoining bath and turned on the tub faucet. "Lookie here, running water and flush-turlets."

I stuck my head through the bathroom doorway. The plaster on the ceiling was cracked, the paint on the molding was bubbled with age, and the fixtures were all ancient porcelain. I'd never had an opinion one way or the other about clawfoot tubs, but ever since Sioux Falls, I've found them creepy. I reminded myself that I used to like creepy. But there's a difference between scream-queen horror movies and a jar of glass eyes with your name on it.

Bill let the water spill onto his palm and flow through his fingers. "You look as enthused as a kid who got a stocking full of oranges and walnuts for Christmas when his heart was set on a BB gun. Thought you'd be more jazzed about the bathtub. 'Specially since little sister said you stink."

"Unbelievable -- you heard that from the street?"

"Her voice carries."

"Tell me about it." I ran my hand through my hair -- none too clean -- and sat on the edge of the bed. Wild Bill's jeans hit the chipped wooden footboard. They weren't any cleaner than my hair.

The sound of the running water changed as it got deeper, and then the gentle plink of Bill stepping in broke the monotonous sound of the tub filling.

I checked in and found Wild Bill staring down at calf-high water.

"Room in there for me?" I asked.

"Always, Angelcakes."

Bill picked up a few mostly-empty bottles from a nearby ledge and sniffed them while I stripped, and by the time I was naked, bubble bath was climbing the sides of the tub. The foam made the water look a lot deeper than it actually was, but the room was drafty, and I sat down to get as much of myself submerged as I could. Bill followed, all elbows and knees, and fit himself around me awkwardly.

"You hate water that much?" I said.

"So far it's all right. But that doesn't mean I'm gonna turn my back on it." He wedged his feet between my hips and the tub wall, so that we both faced each other with our knees bent, his legs on the outside. "It helps that it's warm."

"Tubs of cold water aren't high on my list of favorites, either." I traced the snake tattoo on his neck with a wet fingertip, and he shivered. I leaned forward to kiss the spot of green-inked skin. The water sloshed between us, loud in the hollow between our stomachs and chests. The bath foam crackled against my thighs.

Bill tucked my hair behind my ears, then kissed my eyebrow and my temple. The foam bobbed higher and licked at my ribs while it concealed everything below the

surface of the water. I reached down into the secret space beneath the bubbles and cupped his cock with both hands. His eyelids fluttered half-shut, and he sighed.

The water felt silky, and my hands glided over him. His cock stiffened quickly and his breathing picked up speed. "Yeah," he said, "I guess the water's okay."

He closed his eyes and held onto both sides of the tub while I stroked him. Once the water was up to our stomachs and the suds were chest-high, I reached behind him and turned off the tap. The room was suddenly quiet, except for the fizz of the settling bubbles.

I stood Bill's cock up and brushed away the suds.

"Don't do it," he said.

I tried to quell a smile, and couldn't manage. While I didn't particularly mind it when we were both travel-worn after days on the road, even if it meant having gasoline-stained fingers stuck in my mouth, there was something precious about the warm, flushed, sweet-smelling bathtub skin we were in the process of cultivating. The ruddy tip of his glans broke through the white foam, and I bent my head to wrap my lips around it.

"If you drown on my watch," Bill warned, "I'm the last one who can save you. You know that, right?"

It was easy enough to suck him off in the tub if I was careful about the rhythm of my breathing. After all, the only thing that had kept me off the swim team was the fear of getting a really inopportune hard-on in the shower room.

Bill threaded his fingers through my hair and let his hand ride along on my head while my face bobbed in and out of the water. "That mouth of yours is sweet enough to give me cavities."

I forced myself not to laugh. A snootful of bathwater didn't appeal to me, no matter how much the bath foam smelled like ripe cherries.

His thighs tensed as I sucked. I slipped my finger inside him. He tightened his hand in my hair when I started fingering him in time with my sucking. Soon his legs started to tremble, and he pulled my hair hard enough to drag my mouth off his cock.

"I like looking into your eyes while I shoot," he said.

I felt myself blush, no mean feat while I was pink from the bath.

Bill knocked over a few plastic bottles on the ledge, and found some conditioner.

"That's not gonna work," I said.

"Oh ye of little faith. Arch your hips up out of the water."

Bill rose up on his knees and I lay back against the tub to poke my erection through the dissipating mounds of bubble bath. The conditioner felt cold, and it smelled like green tea. "Keep it up there," he said. "At least until we get the show on the road."

There was a lot of splashing, a few embarrassed laughs, and a significant amount of wrangling for position, but finally Wild Bill maneuvered himself over me and poised my cock against his ass. "You've got bubbles in your hair," Bill said. He bore down, and his tightness was intoxicating.

My job was to stay still and keep my hips high so the bathwater didn't rinse the conditioner away. Bill was in charge of the gyrations. Of course, he'd never be anything less than drop-dead sexy while he worked my cock with his body. But the sight of his abs flexing, his tattoos shifting as his muscles bunched and released, was enough to make me forget my own name.

Bill stared me in the eye, and I did my best to give eye contact right back to him. He deserved that much. He'd put up with a lot more lately than I'd ever imagined he would. It had never seemed like I should plan too far ahead with him, given what he is, and what I do. But now... he'd actually met my parents. That was beyond weird.

Water splashed as Bill pushed down. He clenched, and I gasped. All the sloshing and breathing was loud and echoey from the sounds bouncing off the porcelain and plaster. "You close?" he said, breathy-voiced.

I shook my head helplessly. All I knew was that he was hijacking my body.

He clenched harder and undulated on my cock. "Oh God," I forced out through clenched teeth.

"You sound close." He smiled. A real smile. Fangs and all.

And yeah, I was. I held onto the tub tighter and strained to keep my hips up while he rode me. He grabbed me around the waist, and the water that had seemed so silky before, perfect for jacking him off, had turned into a maddening slipperiness that wouldn't allow him to get a grip on me, and also kept my grasp on the tub tenuous at best. His fingers left pink trails on my sides as my hipbones clapped against his inner thighs, and the water splashed up and beaded on his chest and cheekbones.

"Let go," he said. "We got enough jam left for the big finale."

I allowed my hips to drop underwater and Bill pressed down. Waves splashed over the sides of the tub. I grabbed his cock and stroked it hard, and he sputtered as he tried not to breathe in the splashes.

My hand had whipped the last gasp of the bath foam into a new mound of bubbles between us, but even though I couldn't see him shoot, there was no mistaking it when he came. He gave a harsh moan and shuddered, and he tensed around my cock, deliriously tight. But mostly what tipped me was the look on his face -- gasping, eyes wide.

Vulnerable.

A few hard shoves and I joined him in a long, joyous stretch of ecstasy. The final few thrusts splashed up more water, everything smelled like bubble bath, and we were both warm and wet, and safe.

My orgasm ebbed, and I eased my back against the tub and watched Bill watching me. We stared for a while. And finally, he said, "Right about now, most people would look like a drowned rat. But you? You're even jizzable when you're wet."

"My eyeliner's probably halfway down my cheeks." I eased out of him, and thought about adding some more hot water to the tub. Our splashing had reduced the water level by nearly half. I hoped it wasn't staining the kitchen ceiling.

"Yeah, well." Bill wiped some of the foam off his chest. "How's about I get a look at you... naked?"

"This is about as naked as it gets."

"Is it?" He groped the ledge until he found a washcloth. Fitting it around his finger, he licked the terrycloth point. "I'm treating myself to a peek at the man behind the mask."

I looked up at the cracked ceiling while Wild Bill ran the washcloth underneath one eye, then the other. His touch was firm and sure. He gave the corner of my eye a final swipe with his thumb, and then he cupped the back of my head through my wet hair and stared at me hard enough to make me squirm.

"Son of a bitch. You're barely old enough to drink."

I stared back into Bill's eyes. He was just as naked as me. Maybe not quite as young, not chronologically, but nowhere near as old and tarnished as he thought he was, either.

* * *

The sun was still up, so the house was quiet when I woke. Even though the other vampires were probably just as comatose as Bill, I didn't want to take any chances by wandering around alone. There was a pile of slightly mildewed paperbacks beside the bed. I read the first chapter of several without really remembering or enjoying any of them.

Around nine, Wild Bill emerged from his blanket cocoon. "I slept like a baby full of codeine," he said. "But my ass is gonna smell like green tea for a week. Pass me my smokes."

I flipped the half-full pack in his general direction and dropped the paperback on the floor. "I'm nervous. No one else here has a human companion."

Bill reached under the bed and came up with a faded, dusty book of matches. He struck one. It still worked. He took a deep drag of his newly-lit cigarette and settled against the headboard. "Miranda didn't strike me as a liar when she said they wouldn't fold, spindle or mutilate you."

"Do vamps usually follow the rules they set?"

"We're people, kiddo. Do people follow rules? Some yes, some no. I don't see how having vamp cooties is gonna change that." His gaze turned inward, and I

watched him take several more lung-scorching drags. "But like I said. If Miranda is full of shit, I can't smell it."

There was a gentle knock on the door. I twisted the deadbolt and opened it. Of the four vampires in the commune, only one of them was male -- Jeremy. He looked like he'd rolled out of an early nineties hair-band video, skintight distressed jeans and all. His face was forgettable. He had pale eyes and dishwater-blond hair that hung in not-quite waves to the middle of his back. His gaze went straight to the left side of my neck -- the side where Bill cuts me when he drinks. Jeremy cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. "I've got this for your, uh..."

He handed me a large wine glass. It was full, but not with wine.

I stared at it stupidly.

Jeremy shuffled some more. "So, what's the deal with the two of you, anyway?"

Bill plucked the blood-filled glass from my numb hand before I'd even realized he was standing beside me. "The deal?" he said. There was a lilt to his voice that you might interpret as playful, if you didn't know him. "I hadn't realized we were playing poker."

"No... what I mean is... well, shit, I'll just come right out and say it. What's your arrangement? Blood?" He tilted his head back, and I realized he'd just sniffed the air. "Sex?"

"Back in my day," Bill said, "people didn't just walk up to each other and say, 'Hey, are the two of you fucking?' I guess getting turned changes more than just your diet. It chucks common courtesy straight out the window."

Jeremy held his hands up defensively. "I wasn't being a dick or nothing. I just wanted to know if he was... y'know."

"He" was me. I took "y'know" to mean *available*, presumably for blood, or sex, or all of the above. And his awkward question, which was growing more mortifying by the second, made me wonder if every vampire/human relationship necessarily involved the human being passed around like a dog-eared paperback.

"No one touches Michael," Bill said. His voice was so quiet, I barely heard it. It was all the more terrible for that.

"Seriously. Dude. Don't freak about it. I was just asking."

They moved, both of them a blur to my limited human vision. Jeremy had shrunk away from the door, while Bill took a grab at him. Bill was faster. He caught Jeremy by the leopard-print sleeve. The dark surface of the liquid in his glass barely rippled. "Hold your horses, partner. What's with the blood?"

Jeremy looked baffled. "You can't survive off a single person..." He looked at my neck again, as if he couldn't tear his eyes from it. "Can you?"

Bill ignored his question. "So this is, what? Hospitality?"

"It's your share."

"How thoughtful. Why don't you join me in a little nip? I don't need it all." He let go of Jeremy's arm and patted me on the ass. "I've got my private stock, after all."

I didn't want Jeremy in the room -- our room, where we'd made love, and kissed, and talked about how both of us were scared to hope that maybe this was somewhere we could stay awhile, before we wrapped ourselves up in that big, faded patchwork quilt and slept away the day. But I highly doubted that Wild Bill was inviting Jeremy to share blood with him for the sake of politeness. He was making sure it wasn't drugged.

Given the way Jeremy kept staring at my neck, I didn't blame Bill. If they knocked him out... well, I felt a little melodramatic for even going there. It was a commune, not a cult. The vampires only seemed scary because I didn't know them yet.

Wild Bill and Jeremy were eye-locked. The wine glass was between them. Bill didn't let go. He held it there, and Jeremy wrapped his fingers around Bill's. They moved closer still. It was almost a seduction, but not quite. There was something predatory in Bill's eyes.

Jeremy tipped back the glass and drank. I don't think he meant to take more than one symbolic sip, a communion of blood, but Bill kept on tilting the glass toward him until it was half-drained.

When the glass came down, their gazes hadn't wavered from one another. "Just wanted to get off on the right foot," Bill said. "My social skills need work, too. I thought *sharing* was as good a place as any to start."

Jeremy licked blood from his lips. "I never used to be hungry like this. Not before."

"Don't let it eat you up, Kimosabe. It's only hunger."

I closed the door behind Jeremy and waited until he'd be out of hearing range, if he actually did walk away and not plant himself outside our room with his ear to the wall. "Are you going to drink it?" I whispered.

"It's clean. He wouldn't have sucked it down like that if it wasn't." He swirled the glass. "Maybe you don't want to be looking at me..."

"No, I want to see. It's different when it's in that glass and not... you know." I shrugged. "Not inside someone else."

Bill knocked the blood back, expressionlessly, and set the glass on the bedside table.

"Was it awful?" I said.

He shook his head. "Clotty, but it tasted all right." He picked up the glass again, tilted a final drop to the edge, and licked it off. "Pretty good, truth be told. So that's all it would take? If I got a medical rig and learned to draw blood, then walked away from whoever I'm tapping before I drank it -- then you wouldn't feel like I was stepping out on you?"

I know he wasn't trying to make it sound petty, like I was splitting hairs, but yeah, I'd feel much more comfortable with that. And I already knew how to draw blood. From cats, even -- and they've got much smaller veins than humans.

I let that plan simmer on the backburner. "Is it true that you're always hungry?"

Wild Bill shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Who knows? It feels so much like craving a drink that eventually it all blends together."

Chapter Five

Bill touched up his black nail polish while I double-wrapped my scarf to make sure none of the cuts or scabs peeked out to titillate Jeremy. I slipped into Bill's leather jacket, and followed him downstairs.

Jeremy was watching TV, a show I didn't recognize where a car chase ended in a fireball. Miranda wasn't there -- probably at work. Tessa, a small, quiet vamp who'd been turned when she was about thirty, sat cross-legged on a beat-up recliner. Her coppery hair was pulled into a sloppy bun, and she was concentrating on her knitting.

The final vamp, Cindy, was completely engrossed in a Game Boy. Her dark hair was lank and tangled, and she paused occasionally to tuck it behind her ear, where it slowly worked its way free and dangled in front of her eyes again. She wore stretched-out, frayed sweats about three sizes too big in varying shades of gray that had originally been black. I wondered if she'd filled those sweats, once upon a time. And I wondered if being thin and ageless was worth the constant, gnawing hunger. Probably not to her.

"Am I late for arts n' crafts?" Bill said.

Jeremy glanced at him, then quickly looked away. Cindy ignored us. Tessa finished a few more stitches, then looked up from her knitting and smiled. "It's pretty good to have leisure time again. We don't take it for granted anymore."

Wild Bill strolled over to a dusty armoire, picked up a figurine of a shepherdess, looked at the bottom, then put the knick-knack down again. "But we got nothing but time, living *La Vida Vampa*."

"Not when you're busy running from an angry mob of villagers with torches and pitchforks," Cindy muttered.

"But he doesn't have to hunt every night," Jeremy said. I tried to figure out what his tone of voice was supposed to mean, but it was too vague, all but the fact that he was referring to me.

"Sit." Tessa pointed at a loveseat that had once had a run-in with a very industrious cat, judging by the side that was entirely shredded. "Hang out. Watch TV. Relax, for once. It's not easy at first. But it grows on you."

I sat, and tried not to look like I was perching on the edge of the couch, ready to jump out of my skin. Wild Bill sprawled beside me and pulled me against him. My head landed on his chest, and he cradled my whole head under his arm, running his fingers possessively through my hair.

"How long have you been a couple?" Tessa asked.

"Four years," Bill told her. Which was a lie, of course. It was more like four months, even if you counted the time I'd spent tracking down Bill in Minnesota. But vampires marked time differently than other people. Four months might easily tag me as fair game among a group who could live indefinitely.

"I heard that you can partially turn a human," she said, "but I've never seen anyone do it."

"Renfields," Cindy said without looking up from her Game Boy. "That's what they call 'em. Someone to make sure no one pounds a stake through you while you're day-dead."

Wild Bill's fingertips combed over my scalp. "I prefer the term 'companion.' And 'sleeping.'"

Cindy snorted. "You're a vampire fag. Why bother being politically correct?"

"It's all about blending in, girlfriend. I'm none too fond of being chased by rioting mobs, myself."

Hadn't these people heard of pleasantries? My God, what was next -- a rundown of how often Bill cut me and how much he drank? A blow-by-blow description of what we did in bed, complete with diagrams?

It was almost as bad as the Thanksgiving when Julie was seventeen, and she had announced she was dating that twenty-year-old junior from ISU, and Mom had started talking about birth control between slicing the cranberry sauce and passing the stuffing...

And I realized, this place where Wild Bill and I had landed was probably about as close to a family as he and I would ever find.

I settled against Bill, and we watched TV -- at least on the surface. I watched the other vampires, mostly, and one fragmented sentence at a time, we talked. Cindy was the resident technogeek. She'd been the one to answer me from the forum. Tessa dreaded the coming of summer. For her, it meant the library would close before the sun went down, and the house would get stuffy and filled with flies. Jeremy was in the market for a new guitar, because he was sure he'd be the next Eddie Van Halen just as soon as he found one with a neck that fit his hand properly. Cindy snorted again when he mentioned that.

They fed me two of those instant noodle soups that come in Styrofoam cups, and a side stack of diner saltines, paired off and sealed in plastic. There was no working refrigerator or stove. We had to rehydrate the noodles with hot tap water, and they only softened marginally. I was too hungry to complain, but it took a lot of chewing to get them down.

"What about Lenore?" I asked, once I'd drained the grainy dregs of my "broth." The eighth ingredient on the soup was dehydrated chicken stock. And I thought that as a vegan, she couldn't have even eaten the crackers, in case they'd been made with dairy or egg.

"She's out in the barn," Cindy said. She turned off her Game Boy, dropped it on the couch, stood, and stretched. "Why? You want a taste?"

"I could go for another round," Jeremy said, far too casually.

Wild Bill's fingertips tightened against my skull, and he forced a small nod out of me. "Sure," I said. And I probably sounded just as transparently stilted as Jeremy.

Tessa tucked her knitting into a basket next to her recliner. "You pick up the rotation a day early, then," she told Jeremy. "Remember how mad Miranda got the last time you doubled up on her hunting week."

"Fine. Whatever. I want to go one sunrise without hunger pangs -- is that so much to ask?"

Tessa was the second vamp to use the word "hunt." I could ignore it when Jeremy said it -- because he struck me as a melodramatic goof, a poster boy for unrequited love -- but hearing it from Tessa, with her knitting needles and her library books, sent a chill through me that drew my testicles straight up into my body cavity.

The amount of tension that Wild Bill put into clutching my arm suggested that he was on the very same page.

We went outside. It was a beautiful night, mild and breezy. The stars were out, and the familiar manure-smell of cows drifted over from the pastureland behind the barn. We walked in a loose cluster, three vampires, Wild Bill and me. But as we passed a tree, Bill stopped and dragged me along with him. He backed me into the rough tree trunk and buried his face in my hair, as if he just couldn't stop himself from getting a little action right then and there.

"This can't be good," he breathed into my ear.

I nodded once.

"You'd never outrun them. I'll herd 'em to the barn. You get to the van and lock the doors."

I peered around Bill's head and tried to pick the vampires out of the dark. The only one I saw was Tessa, hauling open the barn door. Where were the others? If I whispered, would they hear me? I brushed a kiss against Bill's cheekbone, then put my lips to his ear, and said, "What about Lenore?"

Bill sighed so hard his whole body sagged against me.

I kissed him again, his hair, his temple. "I have to see."

"No, you don't."

I pressed my forehead into his, and we both stood there with the weight of our consciences dragging at us. Finally, I said, "Yeah, I do."

It would've been comforting to hold Wild Bill's hand. But it also would've meant that each of us would only have one hand free, and there were three vampires, two of us.

Cindy stood framed in the barn doorway, backlit, shapeless in her oversized sweats. "C'mon, kissyface. You've got the rest of the night to swap spit."

I slipped my hand toward the back of my waistband, and Bill touched my elbow. "Don't draw it," he said. I had no idea how he knew I'd been reaching for my gun. "Not 'til you're ready to use it."

We stepped into the radius of the barn light. Bill had plastered an expression of saucy indifference on his face. I did my best to look like I wasn't about to cut and run, even though the vampires undoubtedly heard my heart pounding. Cindy fell into step beside Bill with her hands crammed deep in her pockets. "How long did it take to change him?" she asked, talking about me as if I had no more consciousness than a well-trained shih tzu.

"A couple of months, give or take."

"But how can you hold back? I mean, when you gotta eat, you gotta eat."

"Maybe when the right one comes along, everything just clicks."

Listening to Wild Bill talk was like peeling an onion. Layer after layer of truth, wrapped in sarcasm, wrapped in truth, covered with a wry twist of his lips and a flippant delivery. I was teetering on the verge of thinking he was serious, when a blur of long hair and acid-washed jeans inserted itself between Bill and me. I stopped walking. It was either that or get up close and personal with Jeremy.

"Hey," he said. "I didn't mean to piss you off before."

Oh God, not now, I thought. "Yeah, okay -- no harm, no foul." I sidestepped to get around him, but he matched me. He was backlit, which meant the light all fell on me. His eyes searched my face. Through the ambient light that reflected off my skin, I

could see the moistness of his eyeballs as they tracked left and right. He was way too close. I took a step back, and he matched that, too.

"It's not, you know, a gay thing," he said.

Right. "Of course not."

"I mean, I'm into chicks and all that." I took another step back, and when he matched it, he was so close to me that his jean jacket brushed the safety pins on Bill's leather. "It's just that you smell really... good."

I didn't even need to see his face to know that his eyes were glued to the side of my neck, as if he could see the cuts right through the double-wrapped scarf.

"Okay, look, I gotta --"

My breath whooshed out of me as my back hit the side of the barn. Jeremy had turned us around, and now the barn light fell on him. I can't imagine how I ever thought he looked forgettable. The gleam in his eyes was obsessive, the look of the nerd at the back of the class who tortures stray animals because nobody likes him. "Lose that Bill guy," he said, "and I swear, I totally swear, I'll worship you. Anything you want, just say it and it's yours."

He had me by the upper arms, and he was vampire-strong. His mouth hovered beside my jaw. I think he couldn't figure out whether he wanted to kiss me or tear out my throat.

"You want me to suck your dick? You want to cornhole me? Fine, I don't care. Whatever you say. Whatever you want. Anything."

I felt his breath on my cheek. It smelled of earth. Vampire breath.

I reached for my gun, but my body was mashed into the barn so hard that I couldn't squeeze my hand into the gap, let alone pull the thing before Jeremy figured out what I was doing.

He pressed his mouth to my jaw, and I heard his breath shudder -- and something else -- my heart pounding in my throat. I hadn't been this close to dying in a long, long time, so the sound of it filled my ears, but something else, too -- another heart pounding almost in time with it, but more erratic.

I felt Jeremy's heart pounding. It was a thrumming, a vibration, that my body sensed where he touched me, even through the sleeves of Bill's leather jacket.

He ran his tongue over my jaw, and his heartbeat went haywire.

I couldn't get to my gun without dislocating my arm, so I jammed my hands in the jacket pockets in hopes of coming up with something to defend myself, even if it was nothing more threatening than a set of keys.

My hand closed over Wild Bill's butterfly knife.

I flicked the blade open, clenched the handle, and swung in a single, smooth motion.

I'd thought the vampire outclassed me, that he was faster, stronger, harder to hurt. But the sharp little knife laid him open so cleanly that a mist of arterial blood spray splattered my face before he even started howling.

Jeremy staggered back, hand clapped over his throat. His denim sleeve was slashed to the elbow, and his forearm gaped open beneath it. Blood welled from his chest, too. But the hit to the throat was what had really thrown him. He staunched it with his hand for a split second, then vampire blood sprayed me again from between his fingers.

Commotion erupted in the barn. Women's voices: "Oh my God, where's Jeremy?" and "Fuck me, this is all my fault," and things crashing together, falling down, breaking, and over that a yell, a roar, and inhuman noise from an inhuman throat.

Wild Bill dropped out of the sky and lifted Jeremy up off the ground in a move worthy of WWF. Rage had transformed Bill -- veins bulged in his forehead, and his gums had shrunk back to make his teeth seem impossibly long and wicked. The whites of his eyes were blood red. Wild Bill snarled, held Jeremy aloft for a moment, then slammed him down.

Cindy and Tessa darted up, blur-fast, on either side of Bill. I switched the butterfly knife to my left hand and drew my gun. Which one was more dangerous? One

was calm, one was careless. One was mild, one was slovenly. How could I choose? It was like peeling an onion.

Tessa was faster. I aimed at her and squeezed the trigger. She fell.

Wild Bill was kicking Jeremy, who seemed to be attempting a badass transformation of his own, but who couldn't quite manage it with the disorientation and blood loss. Jeremy hissed, and red froth bubbled from his mouth. Veins throbbed timidly in his forehead. Bill kicked him again in the side of the head.

I aimed the gun at Cindy. She threw her hands in the air and started backing away. "Please don't hurt me. I didn't do anything wrong. Swear to God."

Wild Bill left off pulping Jeremy for a moment, and both he and Cindy blurred -- her where she made to run, him where he caught her.

I looked at Bill. It was hard to even tell where I should look when his eyes were so strange -- a wide-blown pupil, a thin sliver of blue iris, then his sclera, a deep, rich red. I reminded myself he was just Bill, the Bill I'd been sleeping curled against in the back of the van. The Bill who'd taught me to drive. The Bill who never gave in to the gnawing hunger that told him to bite me hard and keep on drinking. "Well?" I asked him.

Cindy tried to pull away, but he had her by so many layers of clothes that she only wrenched her arm around, sagged, and sank to her knees crying and begging me not to hurt her. Bill looked down into her face.

"Do it," he said.

I shot her. Jeremy was on his knees, hissing, and Bill turned back and pummeled him down again.

I set to work on Tessa first, since she was trying to crawl away, and had actually managed to put a few yards between herself and the kicking, spitting, swearing mass of boots and fists that Bill and Jeremy had become. Tessa's hair had come loose from its bun. I grabbed it and wrapped it around my fist to hold her head while I decapitated her from behind. Bill's knife was much better suited to the job than Marushka's razor had been. It was less flexible, and it held its edge better. I would have finished more

quickly if I'd had enough light to see where the vertebrae met the disc, and I didn't have to work completely by feel.

Bill stood over Jeremy, breathing hard, as I moved on to take care of Cindy. "Wait," he said between breaths.

I stopped.

"Kid -- she's dead. You shot her in the throat."

I looked at her. She was very still. "But she's a vampire," I said. She wouldn't be well and truly dead until I cut off her head or staked her through the heart. Everyone knows that.

Jeremy made a warbly hiss. He was obviously not dead. "What about him?" I asked.

Bill staggered away and crouched in the long grass. He buried his face in his hands. "They're all monsters." His shoulder blades rose and fell. Still catching his breath? I'm sure that was all. Too much adrenaline. "Put him down."

Jeremy tried to sit up. His fangs had sliced through his lips where Bill had punched him, and the side of his face was a mat of blood and long hair. I couldn't tell if the wounds I'd inflicted had already closed or not. There was too much blood.

Gun or knife? I weighed them against each other. I had six more bullets. I'd hit both Cindy and Tessa with one shot each. But still, what if there'd been a panic button, some kind of signal they'd gotten out, that had sent Miranda rushing home?

I knelt beside Jeremy and severed his left carotid. The incision didn't bleed nearly as rapidly as the first cut, more of a strong gush than a spray. His heels hammered the ground as he went into shock.

I opened him to the spine in a few more strokes, working quickly in the light from the barn. Once I severed the spine, I turned to look. Bill was framed in the barn door. He gestured for me to come over. "Hurry -- the girl's nearly drained."

My knees were rubbery, and I shook so hard that I couldn't even walk a straight line. I wove my way to the barn. The first thing that hit me was the sound of the flies. And then I saw her, Lenore, fastened to a table with makeshift straps made of old belts

and electrical ties. Her legs were elevated. Her punctured arm hung off the side of the table with a lancet at her inner elbow and a tube that drained into a cooler with a spigot at the bottom -- a container that, in my mother's fridge, would've held iced tea.

Lenore was covered with a blanket, but her lips were blue, and she was shaking as hard as I was. Flies crawled on her cheeks, through her hair, and over her eyelids.

"Pull the pillows out from under her feet and raise her arm," I said.

There was a blur. Pillows scattered, and then Bill was beside her, holding her punctured arm at a ninety degree angle from the floor.

I staggered up to them and considered removing the lancet, but I wasn't simply contaminated with vampire blood, I was coated with it. "She's lost a lot of blood, so she's not bleeding very fast. The safest thing to do is get a tourniquet on her and call 911."

Bill tore one of the belts free as if it were made of cobwebs, and handed it to me. "Unless they got a transfusion ready in the ambulance, she won't make it."

I calculated the amount of blood the vampires had already drunk, and the "seconds" they were coming back for. Bill was right. I tightened the belt around Lenore's upper arm and doubled the end back on itself to secure it. Between that and her lowered blood pressure, her blood loss slowed to a trickle.

A bright red bead hung from the end of the tubing, shimmered in the low barn light, then dropped into the cooler.

"Don't waste that," I said.

Bill looked from me, to the blood, and back to me again. "Can't they put it back in her?"

"Not without a cell saver, no."

Still, he stayed put. But he couldn't stop looking at the blood.

"Quick," I said. "We've got to get her to a hospital."

Wild Bill hesitated, then hefted the cooler and drank.

Chapter Six

One thing bothered me about Lenore -- other than the fact that I didn't know if she was alive or dead, because I doubt "Lenore" was even her real name, though I did keep checking the Southtown newspapers online just in case. It bothered me that I couldn't figure out what could've possessed her to offer herself up like that. Had the vampires lied to her, told her she'd become one of them? Was there some kind of vegan manifesto they'd bought her loyalty with, promising her a higher position on the food chain? Or was she suicidal anyway, and death by vampire was the most novel way to go?

The papers didn't mention any bodies discovered in rural Romeoville, either -- three fresh corpses, and God knows how many older ones -- so I presumed Miranda had cleaned up after us.

Miranda was still out there. That bothered me, too.

I couldn't talk about these things with Wild Bill. He'd given me permission to rid the world of those particular bad vampires, and I'd need to be content with that. I'd had to stifle back a laugh as we holed up in an old motel and soaked the blood from ourselves until dawn. I'm guessing I was in shock. But still, it was disturbingly funny how Bill seemed to have a giant blank spot in his timeline about what had just happened.

So I couldn't talk to him about the commune.

I also doubted he'd let me borrow his leather jacket again anytime soon. It took him forever to scrape the blood off it.

We hadn't covered much ground the past few days, so I was surprised when Bill pulled off the highway in Rockford before midnight. I didn't ask questions. We could follow his agenda until he cooled off. Even if that meant stopping at the cemetery.

It was locked for the night, but Bill charmed the security guard into opening the gate for us. I used to think the power to “win friends and influence people” (as he puts it) was in his gaze, but he’d been wearing mirrored shades ever since his eyes turned red, and despite the sunglasses, truck stop attendants and convenience store clerks still showered him with Marlboros, Kit Kats, and fifths of Jack Daniels.

Even though traffic noises filtered through the cemetery walls, the sounds were hushed, and the outside world felt distant. Bill drove through the meandering pathways with one wrist on the steering wheel and a cigarette dangling between his fingers, the other hand hanging out the open window. The grounds were dark, and the monuments seemed to spring from the ground fully-formed, regular and white, as the headlights hit them.

He stopped and killed the engine, finished his cigarette and started another. He stared at the night sky through the windshield.

“I got an email from my sister,” I said.

“Yeah? I thought those things were unlisted.”

“She went through my jacket and found Jim Harmon’s card. He gave it to her.”

Bill gave a humorless laugh. “Didn’t I always say he was a prick?”

Luckily Bill wasn’t watching me, so I could roll my eyes as dramatically as I wanted. “Anyway, I guess my whole family’s in an uproar about me being gay, even though Julie and my mother always knew. My dad’s parents joined a support group, and my grandmother on Mom’s side started a prayer vigil because she thinks I’m going to hell.”

I’d thought Wild Bill would get a kick out of that. He didn’t. He crushed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and exhaled a cloud of smoke, and didn’t say a word.

Julie had also said Bill reminded her of James Dean. But if he wasn’t going to talk to me, then I wasn’t about to stroke his ego.

We sat that way for several long minutes, both of us staring straight ahead. And finally he said, “Let’s take a stroll ‘round the boneyard.”

The night was mild, with a bright waxing moon showing through a haze of cloud cover. Bill held out a hand and I took it, and we walked together between the small, modern headstone markers over a gently rolling hill. He stopped at a grave that had been visited recently and pulled the flowers from its holder. He divided the bundle, put half of the flowers back, picked out a few dead carnations and tossed them over his shoulder, then took my hand again and continued walking.

We stopped in the middle of a long row of plots with small markers set flush into the ground. Low-maintenance, I guess -- just drive over them with the riding mower. Bill crouched, and brushed dried grass off one, then another. I went down on one knee beside him and read.

**Irene Katherine Schmitt
Beloved Mother**

She'd died fifteen years ago. I counted back to her birth year and did a quick calculation. "Your mom?"

"Yup." He set the flowers down. "Pneumonia. Sick one day, dead the next. And there's my sister. Two years older than me. Fell off a ladder, of all stupid things, cleaning her gutters."

I read his sister's marker. She'd died almost ten years ago.

"That thing you said, about faking your own death?"

Bill dropped into a cross-legged sit and pulled out his cigarettes. "Embellishment. They did think I was dead, though, 'cos of all the blood left at the scene. Threw a big funeral and everything." He lit up, and gestured with his cigarette hand, weaving a trail of smoke in the night air. "Third one down. That's mine."

My throat closed up and my heart stuttered. I moved toward Wild Bill's grave slowly, as if it might burn me. But like the moths that flung themselves against the van's headlights, I couldn't seem to resist.

I touched the white marble plaque. It felt cold. I brushed away the grass, and my eyes teared up as I revealed the lettering. I rubbed my eyes, twice, and then I read.

**William Thomas Schmitt
Beloved Son and Brother**

He'd been twenty-three when he died. Except he wasn't dead, I told myself. Just changed. Reborn.

Even so, I was still all choked up.

When I finally tore my gaze away from his grave marker, I found Bill lying on his back with one hand tucked under his head, smoking, staring up at the sky. "Don't shed too many tears for that guy," he said. "Everything he touched turned to shit. He made everyone who loved him miserable." He took a drag, exhaled. "The world's better off without him."

I couldn't look at Bill, couldn't look at his headstone, either. I stared hard at the ground. "Do you still love me?" I blurted out.

"Course I do. Some things are notoriously hard to kill."

"Then don't talk like that."

"Aw, c'mon, Mikey. You're taking this way too seriously." He patted the grass beside him. "Come over here and warm me up a little. I got a chill from laying on the ground."

I crawled between his grave marker and his sister's, being careful not to touch either of them, then I fit my body alongside Bill's. The spikes and safety pins on his jacket poked me in the ribs. That familiar bristly feeling was comforting. I set my knee on his thigh, and rested my head on his chest, with my hand protecting my cheek from the worst of the spikes.

He ground his cigarette into the grass, and held me.

"How are your eyes?" I said, because I thought that if he did still love me -- and if he was willing to show me his name, his identity, even his grave -- then he might be willing to talk about what had happened that night.

"Real pretty. The red sets off the blue. They're on opposite sides of the color wheel, y'know."

"So they're still..."

"Naw, the white's coming back, slowly but surely. Splotchy. You don't need to see it."

"I think you burst some blood vessels."

"Thanks for the diagnosis, Marcus Welby."

There was a little edge there, but not enough to stop me from asking, "Back at the barn -- did you fly?"

Wild Bill was quiet for a long time. He fiddled with his cigarettes, but there was no way for him to light one with me lying on his arm. He sighed. "That MTV closet-case cut you off from me, I smelled blood, and that's all I know. I'd say I snapped, but that expression's too fucking cliché, even for me."

Bill hugged me close and I closed my eyes while he squeezed me. But then I felt the gun slide from my waistband. I grabbed for it, and he ignored me. He pressed the muzzle under his chin.

"I vamp out like that again? Point and shoot, kiddo."

"Don't mess around," I said. I pried his hand away. The gun pointed at the sky.

"I'm serious. Promise me."

"You 'vamped out' once and you're fine now. I'm not going to promise to shoot you." I pushed his arm down against the turf grass, and the gun slid harmlessly from his hand. He had a faint smile on his lips. I couldn't see his eyes through the mirrored shades.

"Is that all it takes?" I asked him. "A bullet in the brain?" Because everyone knew that was how you killed zombies, not vampires. Not that zombies actually existed... at least as far as I knew.

"A few bullets'll kill most anything."

"And all this time, you let me think I had to behead a vampire or drive a stake through its heart to destroy it?"

Wild Bill sagged back against the grass and sighed. "I never planted that idea in your head. You came up with it all by your lonesome."

I tried to pull away, but Bill's hand was firm on my back, and I didn't have the right leverage to break from him. I ended up dropping my head onto his chest.

"I needed to see for myself," he said, "that you didn't enjoy it too much."

For someone who didn't remember what happened at the barn, he seemed to have a pretty good recollection. "Of course I don't enjoy it. It's just something I have to do. If I don't, nobody else will. And then the bad vampires will keep on killing."

Bill curled his arm around me, cupped my head against him, and kissed my hair.

"You wouldn't believe what a pain in the ass it was to lug those wooden stakes around," I said. I eased my hand into his jacket and lay my palm over his chest. I felt his heart beating, and not just figuratively. Whatever I'd become, I suspected it was more than the pale shadow of a vampire that I'd initially thought it was, especially judging by the way the other vampires had acted -- fascinated, and maybe a little envious.

I'd had the strength to break free from Jeremy's grasp, and the speed to cut him, deep. And what about his vampire gaze? I remembered full well how it had been when Ambrose Gray looked at me -- like my body would do whatever he wanted, while my consciousness just hitched along for the ride. If Jeremy had been able to do that, wouldn't he have at least tried?

I remembered the taste of the stranger's blood on Bill's finger, and the way I'd felt when I saw that iced tea cooler sloshing with Lenore's blood -- that it was too precious to leave behind. Something tugged at my insides even now that insisted that blood was... good.

I slid my leg over him, and he eased up and let me move so I could straddle his thighs. My reflection looked back at me from his mirrored shades, twin reflections, kohl-dark eyes in a pale face. I took the glasses off and set them in the grass beside the gun and the cigarettes. Bill didn't stop me.

He was right -- his eyes looked blotchy. But the sclera would clear. And even if they stayed red, I wouldn't have cared. What he looked like was irrelevant. He was my everything, regardless of what the contagion had done to him.

I bent my head to his, and his hand came up and tangled in my hair. We kissed, cautiously at first. But when I swept my tongue out to taste his cool lips, Bill met it with his. He opened his mouth to me, and I breathed in his gentle sigh.

He slipped his other hand down the back of my jeans and stroked the base of my tailbone.

"Let's go back to the van," I suggested.

"Let's not, and say we did." His fingers tightened in my hair and he kissed me again, more demanding now. He traced my teeth with his tongue, then went deeper, while his finger kept stroking.

I turned my head, barely. Bill had my hair so tight in his fist I could hardly move. "Not here."

"It might be cold out, but I'm sure you'll warm up soon enough." His finger slid lower, until it skirted my hole. "Hot young thing like you."

"Go ahead, act as creepy as you want. I'm not scared of you."

"Maybe you should be."

His fingertip pushed inside me.

I had to shift my hips to give my cock enough room to reposition itself inside my jeans as it stiffened. Bill was hard, too -- I could feel it through my jeans -- and when he breathed, his gasp was cool against the side of my mouth.

I decided he'd been serious about me needing to be scared of him. As serious as Wild Bill ever gets. Although, when I really thought about it, maybe he'd never actually cracked a joke in his life -- not since I'd known him, anyway.

If he wasn't going to let go of my head, and the only thing to do was kiss him, then damn it, we'd kiss. I fit my mouth over his. He kissed me hard, and moaned into my mouth.

I tongued one of his fangs, and felt a needy throb in my groin. The thought of Wild Bill vamping out? Not scary at all. It was hot, fucking hot. Red-eyed, fangs bared... scorching. Even the memory of him looking like that, dangerous and truly wild, wound my body up tighter, made me crave his kiss, his touch.

Not that I could tell him that, at least not in so many words. I'm not stupid.

I rocked my hips until our hard cocks settled together, side by side, and I ground myself against him while we re-learned each other's mouths yet again. His fangs always surprised me, sharp against my tongue. Dangerous.

I groaned without quite meaning to, and Bill's breath caught. He arched his back and ground himself up against me hard. And even though the temperature outside was low sixties at best, I wished we were both naked. He kept teasing me with his fingertip, and I imagined the way his cockhead felt when it dragged over my balls and taint, when it slipped between my ass cheeks and prodded me, looking to be buried inside me.

"I want you," I said. The words were lost in Wild Bill's mouth, but given the way I gasped and panted and humped myself against him, they weren't really necessary. He must have felt them, like Braille on his lips, because he pulled his hand from the back of my jeans and squeezed it between us. He had my fly open with a flick of his hand.

He kept hold of my hair while he dragged my jeans down one-handed. I wondered what the security guard would see, if he passed by while he made his rounds. Me, straddling Bill, with my bare ass in the air. And Bill would probably enjoy knowing that he saw it.

Bill's hand closed over my hard cock and gave me a much more satisfying channel to push into than the hollow of his pelvis. I flexed my hips and rode the feeling of his hand on me, and all the while our tongues advanced and retreated, his mouth, mine, then his again.

But I needed more. I forced my hand between us and fumbled with his fly, then snuck my hand into his jeans. His body was warm, but not hot, not like a human body would feel against the chill night air. Not a live human body.

I groaned again.

Bill took it as a sign that I was keen on getting to his dick. Of course the thought of him exposed to me like that was still a rush, and probably always would be. But more than that, I was letting myself revel in what he was.

A vampire.

Zipper teeth scraped at my knuckles, but I kept pawing at Bill's open fly until his hard-on was in my hand, and I grasped both his cock and most of his fist to try to fit all our parts together. He shifted his grip so I could jack both of us at once, and his hand rested over mine, gentle, more to feel the sensation of my hand gliding up and down over our stiff dicks than to guide me.

We huffed and panted into one another's wet mouths as if our petting had caused us to forget the right way to breathe. I grabbed a handful of grass, the same way he clutched at my hair, but the turf was short and dry, and it tore free from the hard ground when I pulled on it.

Bill pulled my hair harder, hard enough to hurt, and I sucked in a great gasp of cool night air.

"You dig that?" he said, and I felt the words against my mouth where he'd just been plying me with kisses. "I always thought it was some vamp-voodoo that tickled your fancy while I cut you up. But I get a little bossy with you, and your cock throbs against mine so hard I can feel it."

Did it? I'd started stroking us faster, too. I tried to control my breathing, but it came out stilted and needy. "You want to stop what we're doing and play Freud?" I asked him. I'd been trying to keep my voice steady, but without any success.

"Nah." Bill ran his tongue over my lower lip, and flexed his hips up into my pumping hand. "Too scared of what I might find."

I jerked us off even faster while my forearm cramped from the awkward angle of my wrist, and my tongue flitted from one of Bill's fangs to the other. He held his breath for a dozen strokes, then let it out carefully. Distant graveyard security lights glistened off his blotchy eyes as they stared up into the sky, and stiff grass crunched beneath his leather jacket as he angled his hips to line up his cock with mine perfectly.

And I heard a catch in his breath just a moment before I felt his semen hit my stomach, wet and tepid.

I rotated my hand and kept on stroking, so fast the sound of my palm on our skin seemed like the loudest noise in the cemetery, until I peaked too, and I clenched up

all over and held myself still while the waves of pleasure rolled through me, one after the other. Bill murmured his approval into my mouth, and his hand shifted to allow him to thumb our jizz over our cockheads, before the stickiness made our fingers taut-skinned, and dried into a flaky mess on our bellies.

"I'm not a masochist," I said, which was true, though it probably would have sounded better if my breath hadn't hissed out at the feel of his thumb sliding over my urethra. "I'm not a sadist, either. Vampire hunting's got nothing to do with sex."

Wild Bill let go of my hair. It slipped down over my eyes, and he smoothed it behind my ear with a touch as gentle as cigarette smoke drifting on night air. "You sure 'bout that? If vamps and sex don't go together like Jack and Coke, then how come you spurt every time I suck your blood?"

"I didn't say there wasn't a sexual element to the whole vampire thing, but..."

Well, damn. I tried to think of something about vampires that didn't lead back to sex, but it was kind of difficult when Bill was teasing my glans, and tracing my mouth with his tongue.

"Sokay," Bill said, so softly I could barely make out the words. "We're all a bunch of walking hormone cocktails, vamps and humans both. Some of us are just more volatile than others."

"Uh huh. You keep telling yourself that." If we were total slaves to our physiology, I'd be lying in a shallow grave somewhere outside Detroit, and Wild Bill would be throwing up yet another fifth of Jack Daniels behind a club full of pretty Goths who'd lined up to have their blood sucked. But here we were, instead. Together.

We kissed, long and deep. And when I dragged my tongue over the sharp edge of his canine and our mouths filled with blood, and my cock twitched in his hand and started to get hard again, I decided that while I was more than just a walking hormone cocktail, my new physiology insisted that blood was indeed very, very good.

Jordan Castillo Price

Jordan Castillo Price grew up in the steel mill warrens of Buffalo, NY, spent some formative drinking years in Chicago, and migrated north to small-town rural Wisconsin once she realized she was going to kill the next person who bumped into her with a shopping cart. She did a six-year stint in art school and played bass in a punk band that crashed and burned just before their first CD was pressed. At least she got a cool boyfriend out of the deal, since she ran off with the drummer.

Jordan has a weekly show on erotica writing tips and techniques at www.packingheat.net. She suspects some of her listeners aren't much interested in writing, and just tune in to hear her say naughty words.

Readers interested in freebies, snippets, and peeks into the writing process should check out JCP News, a monthly newsletter where Jordan posts links to free eBooks and serialized M/M stories. Visit www.jordancastilloprice.com to sign up.