



## **Sixteen Going on Undead**

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## Chapter One

I threw myself out across my bed and unraveled a stick of gum to pop into my mouth. I tucked my ear buds into my ears and blasted one of my favorite love songs while trying to make that popping sound with my gum. It wasn't working. Ronnie said it was because, of all the girls we both knew who could do it well,—and loud—I was the only oddball with good cavity-less teeth. I suspected the jerk was trying to tell me I had horse teeth, too big and flat for anything other than chomping veggies.

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes. Ronnie could kiss my butt. He was my best friend, but sometimes he got on my last nerve. Especially when he was being Mr. Know It All. Tonight we'd had a fight, and I had stomped out of his house, even though we were supposed to go see a movie. I had to admit I had a temper, but Ronnie didn't have to agitate it by ragging on me either. “Why can't he let me do me the way I want to?”

I flopped over on my stomach and spotted my latest issue of Vibe sticking out from under the bed. I pulled it to me and surveyed the various hairstyles the models wore on the front cover. Should I cut my hair? Running my fingers through the black with a tinge of brown locks I'd pressed out the day before, I considered it. The same old style extending to my shoulders was getting old. Maybe I should dye it. I needed something new if I was going to get a sexy boy to look at me this year.

Having just turned sixteen this month, August, I felt it was a little late to have never had even one, and kissing Ronnie when we were both thirteen at Jada's birthday party didn't count for experience. I wanted to live a little, have a life.

I shivered and stood to walk over to the window. Even my mother looked like wondered about me sometimes the way I only hung out with Ronnie, and she never had to deal with boys calling the house or me trying to skip my curfew. She sometimes spoke in a worried voice to other mothers in our block about my lack of a love life? “Maybe she thinks I'm a lesbian,” I mused.

I laughed at that considering how I'd reacted to Ronnie's older brother when I had caught him coming out of the bathroom after a shower. Wow! Okay, I'd been scared by his...size...but man did he have a nice body. All muscles. Not like Ronnie who looked like he hadn't hit puberty yet. Poor thing.

I pulled the curtains back and peered out into the back alley. Mrs. Knowles next door was putting her trash out. A light mist had begun to fall. I sighed. Going out with Ronnie to the movies would have meant wheels. Mad and alone meant I would have to hump it to the bus. Not a good prospect. Mrs. Knowles came to her oversized trashcans, which my mother had said violated city ordinances or something on not going over thirty gallons, but that old lady must have had muscles as big as Ronnie's brother under her tattered robe the way she hefted those huge bags above her stooped shoulders and dropped them into the cans.

I shook her head. People were weird for sure around here. I was about to turn away from the window, when something caught my eye. A man, or someone, stood in a hooded coat next to the yard on the other side of my house. He watched Mrs. Knowles intently. What was he up to? Whatever it was, it was no good. He didn't look like any of my neighbors because even in the dim lighting I could tell he was tall and broad-shouldered. That didn't fit anybody around here as half the residents were old as dirt, and none of them would have a reason to be standing around in a dark alley wearing a coat in the middle of summer.

Without any warning whatsoever, the man shot across the alley and over Mrs. Knowles' back fence like he was trying out for the summer Olympics. Mrs. Knowles had the chance to let out one tiny peep before he was on her.

I screamed, but nobody was home to hear my. My mother had gone out with a few girlfriends, it being Friday night. I didn't know why my dumb tail didn't call 911, but instead I turned from the window, ran across my room, and shot through the narrow hallway to the back door. I grabbed up the bat my mother kept in an umbrella stand and rushed down the steps to the yard.

"Hey!" I yelled, finding nothing cleverer to call out. I climbed over the fence that separated my yard from Mrs. Knowles'.

The man had Mrs. Knowles by the neck and leaned over her. The old woman was putting up a huge but losing struggle. When I called out, the man drew back, and the moonlight lit his face. I gasped and dropped the bat in my hand. Big mistake. He let Mrs. Knowles fall to the ground and changed course to come flying at my. And he definitely looked like he was flying, the way he moved.

"What the hell?" I squeaked out before he was on me.

The impact of his body meeting mine sent us both sprawling on the ground with him on top. Another first gone, I thought at this inappropriate time. I'd never had a guy on top of me, and here was this crazed maniac snatching away the initial experience. Fear crawled across my chest, closing my throat so that I couldn't breathe or scream for help. The fact that he had his hand wrapped around my neck didn't help either.

"Please," I croaked, not looking at him. "Let me go. I won't tell anyone you were here, and you can get away."

Of all things his ass laughed. "What makes you think I won't get away no matter what you say?" I didn't answer. Those last few words were all I found the energy to get out. He leaned down close to my face and kissed my cheek. "Look at me."

"No way, Crazy."

He laughed again.

I ran her fingernails along the tips of my fingers, wondering if I could get away with dragging them across his smug face. My mother had paid for me to get tips the other day, but she had warned me if I messed them up fast like I usually did, I wasn't getting any more until I could get a job and pay for them myself. But this was an emergency, and my mother had to understand. Dang, what an idiot I was to be thinking rationally—or irrationally depending on a person's view—at a time like this.

"Look at me," my attacker said again. "How old are you?"

I pressed her lips together, but this time I did look at him, and confirmed what had shocked me when I first caught sight of his face. This was no man, but a boy. I would guess he was around my age, at the oldest eighteen. He was sexy as hell, with big shoulders like I had guessed, and a chiseled face like a man's. But it was his young eyes that drew me in. Blue-green like the water was that time my dad took me and my mom to the Bahamas, back before they got a divorce.

The weirdest thing about him being here lying on top of me was my reaction to him, the reaction of my body. Here was this teenage white boy, hotter than any of the boys I'd seen at my school, and he was crazy. Not that I would ever go that way, but it did no harm looking.

But looking into his eyes took some of my fear away, not all of it, but some. I didn't want to rip at his skin with my fingernails and mar that handsome face. Maybe I could reason with him instead. "I'm sixteen," I told him. "And you're young too right? You don't want this life, attacking old ladies in their back yards."

Mentioning old ladies made me wonder how Mrs. Knowles was since I hadn't heard anything from the woman, but somehow I couldn't take my eyes off this boy.

The smile that revealed even white teeth that could never have needed braces made a shiver race through my body and my heart pound in my chest. "No, I don't want to, but I have to."

"What do you mean?"

The blue-green deepened, and I had to blink realizing it had gone straight to black, and the whites that were there before were gone. Oh crap, he was not an ordinary teenage boy. The fear returned with a vengeance. I tried raising my arms to push him away or to get a hit in, but it was like pushing a giant cinderblock off my chest. He didn't budge.

Now that I had found my voice, I decided to let loose a scream to wake the dead. Poor choice of words because the next time I caught sight of those pearly whites, the canines had grown longer than the rest, and looked sharper than knives or needles.

"No," I whimpered. "I'm dreaming. Wake up, girl. Wake up! Vampires don't exist."

“Don’t we?” he said before he lowered his head and plunged those fangs right into my neck. My entire body went numb. I couldn’t have flicked an ant off my body let alone this boy vampire. Dizziness made my world spin when I began to feel him dragging on my blood, actually sucking it up like his teeth were straws and I was a virgin strawberry daiquiri.

Warmth stole over my limbs, and the night grew darker. Coherent thought was leaving me. I knew I was going to die, or suspected it. I was going to my grave having never had a boyfriend, never been French kissed, nothing. If I had the energy, I would have cried, but I couldn’t even do that. I just laid there. My anger had simmered at his right to do this to me, but it fizzled just as quickly.

He grunted like my blood was as good as a steak, a very rare steak, and he put a hand behind my head to lift it off of the ground, cradling me like he would a girlfriend. I let my eyes drift closed. I heard the TV going in Mrs. Knowles’ kitchen where she watched reality shows. While it was dark outside, the birds twittered in a nearby tree, and the man down the street who had been rude to me the other day just because I was lost in thought and didn’t speak to his nappy headed self was calling his dogs to come in out of the rain. But they were barking like crazy, and I knew it was because of what was happening to me. I had hated those dogs because they had crapped on my front lawn, and my mother had made me clean it up. Now I silently thanked them for at least trying to raise an alarm.

The night sounds faded, but I thought I heard the screen door to my house slam. I thought I heard Ronnie yelling but couldn’t be sure. Something flashed, a light, white-hot and bright enough to burn a person’s retinas, I thought. But it was too late. I was already floating.

\* \* \* \*

“Hey, Tanesha, open your eyes.”

I frowned. “Ronnie, buzz off. I’m mad at you, remember?” But I did open my eyes. The room spun a little, and I closed them, trying to keep the cold pizza I’d wolfed down earlier from shooting out of my nostrils. After I felt better, I tried again. “Where am I? And what are you doing here, Ronnie? We don’t speak for a couple days when I’m mad at you.”

He smirked and leaned back in the chair he occupied at what I realized was the side of my bed. “You’re welcome for saving your life.”

“What?” I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed, holding my head. “What are you talking about? Saved my life? When?”

The attack in Mrs. Knowles’ yard came flooding back to my mind. The teenage vampire—the very hot teenage vampire. No, that couldn’t be right. I’d dreamed it. I put a

hand to my neck but felt nothing. Shuffling off my bed, I tried to stand, but my legs gave, and I crashed to the floor.

“Idiot!” Ronnie spat. “You were attacked. You should rest. I already called your mother and the police.”

“You what?” I crawled across the floor and grappled for the hand mirror on my dresser. Ronnie, the unhelpful jerk just sat there looking at me like I was crazy. I held the mirror up to my face and craned my neck to see if there were two puncture wounds there like they showed in the movies. Nothing. Not even redness, but that might attest to the fact that my brown skin was too dark. I didn’t bruise easily either. “What the heck happened to me?”

Ronnie’s eyebrow went up, just one. I had often teased him that the way he could look down on a person with that one eyebrow raised, could singe you in seconds, and I admired how he did that to people. Put them in their place in half a heartbeat. I wouldn’t admit that to Ronnie of course, and I’d practiced the look in my mirror but never got the hang of it.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I demanded. “If you saved me, then you know what happened after I passed out...after he...uh...after I was attacked.”

My scrawny friend rested his arms on his knees and sat forward scrutinizing my face like I was keeping secrets from him. I looked away, examining my neck again. Hadn’t Ronnie seen how that vampire bit me? Or did I dream that part? There was no evidence whatsoever, and I wasn’t going to ask him in case it never happened. I’d look like a fool.

“I came over because I still wanted to see Transformers, and I didn’t want to see it alone. I decided I was going to drag your stubborn ass out to the car if I had to. When I came in, I heard a yell, and the back door was open.”

I rolled my eyes looking at him through my hand mirror. “Meaning you walked in like you live here as usual.”

He nodded matter-of-factly. “When I got outside, at first I didn’t see you, but I heard a scuffle, and what did my four eyes see?”

“Get on with it, Ronnie! Damn!” He liked to drag everything out and make it a drama it didn’t need to be. I sometimes called him an old woman, but that made him mad. He would then call me Red because of that one time I dyed my hair, and it came out bright red. I looked like a rooster until my mother broke down and took me to the salon to get it fixed. After that, the stylist taught me a little about following directions, but I had been too scared to dye my hair ever since.

Ronnie grumbled since I'd taken the fun out of his story-telling. "He was on top of you and kissing your neck. I thought you liked it. I started to leave." His look was accusatory like I'd done something wrong.

I held up a finger. "Okay, first, I have never attracted a boy that hot. And second, I would not be doing it in Mrs. Knowles' back yard."

"Hot!"

"Whatever."

"Anyway." His nostrils flared making me want to laugh, but I held it in. "I grabbed the bat you must have dropped and took a swing at him. He ran off after that, and I got you in here."

I frowned, trying to recall what I had seen or thought I saw when I was in and out of it. "What about that light?"

"What light?"

I set my mirror on the dresser, deciding that there was nothing to find on my neck, and turned to face Ronnie. "I saw this bright, white light. It almost blinded me."

Ronnie burst out laughing so hard, he fell off his chair, and he still didn't stop for a long time until I walked over and kicked him in the thigh. That sobered him since I was dangerously close to his goods, which I had not meant to do. He covered his precious jewels as he rose, and I rolled my eyes.

"Hey," he grumbled. "Watch it."

"The light?"

He waved his hands and snorted, but I acted like I was ready to do some damage to him with the tip of my shoe. "Maybe it was that light from the other side. You know when people are dying?"

"Funny, Ronnie. Real funny. How could I be dying when you said that guy was just kissing my neck?"

He shrugged. "I'm just saying. You're the head case that saw the light, not me."

"Whatever."

My bedroom door burst open, and I found myself engulfed in my mother's embrace. I thought I heard a rib crack under the pressure and cried out. She eased her hold and



leaned back to cup my face. “Baby, are you okay? Ronnie called me to say you were attacked. What happened? Did you call the police?”

We both looked at Ronnie. He had the nerve to look guilty and stared at the floor. “Well I did call them, but...”

“But what?” My mother’s hand went to her hip. “Ronnie Jenkins, you better look at me when I’m talking to you, boy. Speak up!”

Ronnie paled. He was a lot lighter than I was. His cheeks were little round cherries behind his glasses. “Uh, well, you see...I told them this guy was kissing Tanesha in the neighbor’s yard, and...”

“Oh my goodness, Ronnie, you stupid!” I burst out laughing so hard, and my mother joined me. We shouldn’t have been laughing, especially me since that whole incident really happened, although the more time that passed made it feel like a dream. Maybe that’s why I was laughing. Maybe that boy *was* kissing me, and had been a little too eager to come onto me? So he knocked us both over on the ground. Yeah, that made sense. Not!

My excuses were stupid, but I had no other explanation. What I thought happened, couldn’t have happened. And Ronnie told me Mrs. Knowles wasn’t even out there. I remembered hearing her TV still going while that boy was on me. I could imagine seeing her silhouette through the window like always, watching her shows. So what really happened?

When my mother smirked at Ronnie in disgust at his obvious jealousy, I thought fast. If I couldn’t explain it, and Ronnie couldn’t either, the best bet might be to pretend it never happened. “Ma, I was talking to this boy I met, and Ronnie got a little too bat-happy and ran him off. No big deal. You know how he gets.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She rolled her eyes at Ronnie. “Okay, well whatever. We were on our way home anyway, ’cause Sharon got in a fight with her husband earlier, and he followed us down to the club like he expected to find her cheating. I need to find some new friends because, for real, I can’t take all the drama.” With that statement, she directed a look at Ronnie, and he looked like he was about to faint.

I had pity on him, grabbed his shirt front and dragged him to the door. “Sorry about the scare, Ma. Me and Ronnie are going to the movies. Be back about eleven thirty. Is that good?”

She nodded. “Yeah, okay, sweetie. Have fun.”

Outside, Ronnie stopped me and made me face him. “Why did you lie?”

“What was I going to say? You couldn’t explain what happened, and neither could I. Who’s to say it wasn’t just like you or I said. A cute boy got grab happy, and you ran him off. Case closed.”

He seemed to think about it, looking up at the sky. “Yeah, okay.”

I walked past him to Mrs. Knowles’ front door. Ronnie caught up to me.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“You said she wasn’t out there. I don’t know what happened, but I know I ran outside because she was in trouble. I need to be sure she’s okay.”

I rang her doorbell. While I waited tapping my foot, I took in the surroundings of my neighborhood. In the summer, the older folks sat on their porches and talked to each other over the railings. Sometimes if a younger mother sat out, she’d let her kids run around after dark as long as she could see them. But that was usually the woman directly across from my house. I called them the ghetto family. They came home at all hours, blasted music from their car at like one a.m., and yelled so loud when they got into arguments on the front porch, that I could hear the fussing from my room at the back of my house. I wished they would move out of the neighborhood and give us all a break.

While I stood there, all of a sudden this weird feeling came over me. I don’t know if it was dizziness or what. Maybe not dizziness, more like clarity. I couldn’t describe it if I tried. It might be better if I said what the results of the feeling were.

I had scooted down Mrs. Knowles wall and was flicking at a spot of dirt on my sneakers I assumed I’d gotten when I fell down in her yard. Then I realized I could hear her flick the channels on her TV at the back of the house. That was weird, but I thought it might be my imagination. Either way, that old woman was ignoring the bell. I knew for a fact that she didn’t have hearing problems even at her age.

Without getting up, I reached for the bell and pressed it again. With my body twisted to the side like that, one of my ears faced the road, and I was on a line with my neighbor’s house across the street, the ones I’d called ghetto. The part that almost had me hyperventilating was that I could hear them getting into an argument. My mind must be playing tricks on me, but I listened.

“So you’re not going to cook anything tonight?” the husband said. I didn’t know his name. I didn’t want to know. I knew the kids even though they weren’t my age. They were several years younger.

“No, I’m not cooking,” the wife responded. “You ain’t think of me when you was out with your boys last night. I’m not thinking about you tonight.”

“You’re not going to cook?” he asked again.

“Did I stutter?”

“Rochelle! What I marry you for?” So that was her name.

Her response embarrassed me when she told him why he had married her. Not that I hadn’t heard that kind of talk before, but the fact that I was hearing it inside their house made me start shaking. I got up and walked down Mrs. Knowles’ sidewalk toward the curb. I stared at their house and then looked up and down the street. I didn’t see the husband’s SUV. Maybe I was wrong, or this was my imagination. He probably wasn’t even home.

But then the front door banged open, and he stomped out. I looked away pretending I hadn’t been staring just now. The man flew down the steps to the street so fast, he stumbled, and I winced. That side of the street was steeper than our side for some reason. My side was almost flat ground, where their front lawn was a hill.

His wife barreled out of the house after him. “And you better not stay out all night. I mean that, Malik. You hear me? Malik!”

“The whole neighborhood hears you,” Ronnie muttered at my side. “Hey, you ready to go? She’s not going to answer, probably absorbed in who gets kicked off the island this week or something.”

I would have laughed at that, but was too shocked. “They were arguing.”

“What else is new?”

“No, but I heard them before they got loud, Ronnie.” I swallowed, my mouth dry. I looked around at the different houses and tried to hear on purpose what was going on inside them. Nothing. Ronnie was looking at me with that raised eyebrow again. “I know you don’t believe it, but I heard it. My hearing was...I don’t know...strong.”

Ronnie grinned and dragged me toward his brother’s car. “Yeah, just like that guy was biting your neck out back, right? Whatever, let’s go, or we’ll miss the next showing of Transformers.”

I let Ronnie get me in the car, but it wasn’t until much later when I was tucked in bed thinking about how good the movie was that I realized one important fact about the crazy night. I had never told Ronnie that that guy was biting my neck.

## Chapter Two

I decided to be a responsible sixteen-year-old and get a job. Everybody I knew had applied to the movie theatre. It was a cakewalk. You go in there, serve a few customers, and get to see all the free movies you want while getting paid. Wouldn't you know though, they didn't call me in for an interview. The place that did call me was the grocery store. Great. Heft people's bags to their cars and many times—at least in our area—get stiffed on the tip. On top of that, where were the perks? I couldn't see any. Like I wanted to work all around the clock, get my schedule shifted constantly, and stand on my feet until they felt like blocks of painful pulsating flesh.

Okay, the real story is that I didn't have much of a choice. My mother decided that since I was sixteen now, it was time for me to take more responsibility, and she convinced my dad to cut the money he gave me every month in half. So now, if I wanted to get my hair done or buy new clothes, I couldn't get it when I wanted. My life was hard sometimes. At least I thought so.

I put the madness of what happened in Mrs. Knowles' yard out of my mind. I'd seen her a couple days later strolling along to who knows where, so she looked fine. I told myself it was all an early Halloween prank and moved on.

"Okay, Tanesha, I'll teach you how to operate the cash register. We'll do a live run through since I have to pick up a few things for home," the girl, Jill, who was training me, said. I put her at about eighteen or nineteen, definitely not older than that.

I tried to muster some enthusiasm and smiled. "All right."

I don't know who she was training, but when she rolled the items through the scanner and punched in codes for produce, I blinked at the blur her fingers were. I wasn't learning a thing. "Did you get that?" she asked.

"Yeah." I shook my head. "No."

She sighed. "I'll run through this stuff too. Watch closely."

At the same speed of light, she whipped through a few more items, and then launched into a spiel that had my head spinning and my gnat-sized attention span stretched to breaking. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a piece of gum which I had purchased earlier when I arrived. Juicy watermelon flavor burst over my tongue, and I prepared to practice popping while scanning my surroundings.

Four in the afternoon on a Tuesday had been a good time for me to start my first day, but that had been spent in orientation, watching a movie on customer service, hygiene, and sexual harassment, followed by a year long lecture from the store manager. Now it was getting dark outside, and all I wanted to do was flop across my bed and listen to some music while flipping through my favorite magazine until something good came on TV. I

knew right away that this job was going to be excruciating, especially if I couldn't catch on to using the cash register. And here I had thought I was hot stuff with a B average in school. "Lack of focus" was what my father always said when I screwed up. Everybody couldn't be driven like him, being a big shot lawyer.

"Did you get that?" Jill asked.

I forced my attention back on her, zooming in on her nose ring and wondering if my mother would freak if I got mine pierced. "Yeah, I got it."

"Good." She gestured to a customer in the growing line at the next register. "You can come over here. We're open." A small crowd vied for position at register four where we stood, jostling the candy rack. "Okay, we're training here, so please excuse the slow going." Several people drifted back where they came from.

Jill backed up and put a hand on my shoulder to propel me forward. I shot her a look of annoyance but went on and scanned through my first customer. I made sure to look over her stuff to be sure she didn't have any produce I would have to key in a code to handle. All of this was probably brainless work, but since my brain was on summer vacation, it was harder than it needed to be.

Joy came in the form of an item that wouldn't scan. I could relax for a minute. While Jill shouted over the intercom for help on four, I glanced toward the exit, wondering how close I was to getting off. I had forgotten to charge my cell phone which lay dead in my jeans pocket.

Anyway, being focused on the door, I was able to catch sight of him when he walked in, all casual like he was pure and innocent. He wore snug jeans that hugged his narrow hips, and his sneakers were named brand from what I could see. A messy tee hung over the front of his pants, making him look sexy rather than bummy. But what really caught my eye and gave me trouble breathing was the thick, dark hair, overlong but wavy, about his head. The locks that tumbled onto his forehead, covering one of those hypnotizing eyes made my fingers itch to shove it back into place.

Then I remembered what he had done to me. If not bitten me, at least attacked me and had to be beaten off. My anger flamed to life like a rocket. I spun to face Jill and held up a finger. "I have an emergency! I'll be back."

The way I danced around, eager to get at this boy, Jill must have thought I had to pee. She nodded and took over the register. I ran around to an empty one, did a leap that my gym teacher would have been proud of over the cord blocking the aisle, and ran toward the back of the store.

He had disappeared down the bread aisle if I wasn't mistaken, but I didn't want Jill to see me heading that way because it was in the opposite direction from the bathroom. Once I reached the back though, I ducked low and shuffled toward aisle six. I hadn't learned

where everything was yet, so I was crouched low with my head thrown back so I could see the signs up on the ceiling. I imagined I looked like a duck, and confirmed it when customers glanced at me and quickly aimed their carts elsewhere.

At the end of the aisle, I stood up straight and flattened my back to the stack of Captain Crunch on special, and peeked out around a box. There he was as calm as you please looking at a loaf of Wonder bread. I could have laughed but didn't. Anger surged up inside of me, and I lost it. How many times did my mother tell me I would be in trouble one day if I kept letting my anger get the best of me? I didn't know, but this wasn't the time to think about it.

I stormed up to him and poked him in the chest. "Hey! What the hell are you doing here?"

His eyes widened, and he looked at me like he'd never seen me before. "Hey, yourself." His eyebrow went up in a way that reminded me of Ronnie. "I'm shopping. Nothing in the cabinets at home, and I was hungry."

"Just when did vampires start eating regular food!" I almost shouted and then felt stupid.

He burst out laughing, and so did the skinny thing beside him. That was the first time I had noticed her. My attention had been all on him. She clung to his arm like they were girlfriend and boyfriend. She had to be like fifteen, maybe sixteen from her young looking face, but she was dressed like the skanky girls Ronnie and I used to make fun of at school, until one of them gave him some play last year. He never admitted what happened between them, and I never asked because I didn't want to have to start with my own confessions.

The girl was white like Sexy Boy, but she had flaming red hair. And when I say flaming, I mean the strands were so bright, they looked like they were on fire, and it was long too, down to her butt. She had huge boobs, a tiny waist, and long bare legs under a way too short skirt. If I even tried to leave the house like that, my mother would have jumped me.

"Who is this, Lorcan?" She sneered at me, wrinkling her cute little nose and widening big green eyes. I hated her right away.

Lorcan. So that was Sexy Boy's name. Nice.

"I'm not sure," he responded. "Do I know you?"

He wasn't serious. He *couldn't* be serious. I didn't dream him up. With a face like that, and a body like his? Okay, I could have, but I didn't. That would be too freaky, too weird to dream of a guy and then there he was looking exactly like my imaginary one. But Ronnie had seen him. He'd hit him with the bat to run him off, he'd said. Then again, that didn't prove anything. I mean, I could be remembering the wrong face, and because this

boy was hot, I attacked *him*. Oh crap. I'd called him a vampire too. Loud so anybody nearby could hear. I must look like a maniac, and I could lose my job.

All these emotions went flying through my head at the speed of light, and they must have shown on my face because Skanky and Lorcan stared at me in shock and doubt. She clung to him like I was about to jump her skinny butt. My anger melted just like that. I backed up, waving my hands in front of me, laughing with this half chuckle that Ronnie made fun of me for.

"Wrong person. Sorry. Bye." I spun away and high-tailed it toward the bathroom, but when I hit that door with the flat of my hands, I heard laughing inside, other employees who were either on break or ducking out for a few minutes.

I looked to the left and saw this guy whose name I forgot because I was sure he'd forgotten mine or never heard it when we were introduced earlier. He'd looked right through me with glazed eyes. He was headed to the back exit with a trash bag in his hand. I raced toward him and snatched it away.

"I'll get that. Be back in a sec." I ran out the door into the huge lot behind the grocery store and threw the trash into the Dumpster. When the store's door banged shut on the guy's shout of "hey," I bent over and stooped to catch my breath.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid." Why had I acted like that? Why didn't I just let it go? No big deal. He wasn't the boy. I've heard people joking about other races like they all look alike, and black people get it a lot, and probably Asians. Some blacks felt the same about white people, but I could pick Lorcan out from a crowd. At least, I thought so after seeing him once. I mean the boy had been all in my face, cute. "Ugh! Stupid!" I screamed into the empty night.

"You shouldn't be out here alone."

I gasped and fell backward, landing on my butt. Just as I had thought, designer sneakers, the kind that cost at least a couple hundred. Licking my lips, I glanced up from his feet to his face. He was grinning down at me holding out a hand. I smacked it away and stood up on my own while wiping dirt from my jeans.

"What do you want? Come to gloat at how I made a fool of myself?" I looked around, wondering how he had gotten out here since customers weren't allowed in the back, and with that guy I'd snatched the trash from standing there, it wasn't likely he'd let Lorcan get past. "Where's your girlfriend?"

He winked. "Are you jealous?"

"Get real. I don't know you."

"You acted like you did in the store."

“You attacked me!” I shouted and then forced myself to calm down. Come to think of it, he could do that again, right here where no one would see. I started backing up to the door, feeling behind me for the doorknob. For every step I took back, he came closer, lessening the space between us.

My heart beat hard enough to hurt. I swallowed over and over but couldn’t get my throat wet. Moisture started in my armpits, and I tried to remember if I had slapped on some deodorant when I took a shower this afternoon before my shift. I was pretty sure I did since I was a stickler for that sort of thing. I might never have been kissed but it wasn’t because I stunk, that’s for sure. Then I started wondering, why was I thinking about being kissed at a time like this? I should be worried that I was about to die or something.

Lorcan tsked and shook his head. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to hurt you. Not hungry. I’ve already sucked all the blood I need for the night.” He said the words, but the way he said them sounded like he was making fun of me. That didn’t change how I felt. I could tell myself all day and night vampires don’t exist and that I made it all up, but I was scared to death that it was true. I couldn’t make myself *not* believe it, no matter how hard I tried.

He had me against the door now, his big hard body pressed close to me. I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t. The emotion in his eyes was intense like he had hypnotized me, not to make me do what I didn’t want to, but to keep me still. Or it could have all been in my mind. I scoured my brain for vampire facts and came up with none. I didn’t do paranormal. I didn’t like fantasy or sci-fi. In English class when we had been assigned to read Dracula, I’m ashamed to admit, I got Ronnie to read it and do a report for both of us. I paid him back later by doing his trig homework. It was only fair.

I licked my lips again, and Lorcan focused on them. Now he was less than an inch away. I could feel his breath on my face. I put my hands up to shove at him, but just like that night in the yard, it was like I was pushing a wall. I’d felt hard muscle before. Ronnie’s older brother liked showing off his biceps, and one time he had let me squeeze them. They were hard, but they were still flesh.

Lorcan was different. When I pushed at his chest, it was shaped like a boy who had been lifting weights, but it wasn’t like regular flesh. He was hard beneath the surface of his skin, like his internal makeup was all stone. Rock solid. If he was stabbed, would the knife even penetrate his body? I doubted it.

“I have to get back to work,” I told him in a shaky voice.

“Are you scared of me?”

“Hell no!”

He chuckled.



“Y-You’re just a bad boy. I’ve never been into bad boys. I don’t see the appeal.” I shrugged. “So why don’t you go back to Skan—uh, I mean your girlfriend, and we’ll forget this ever happened.”

He pouted and put a hand up beside my head. “Aw, but nothing has happened yet. I thought I’d get one little kiss.”

“A kiss?” I squeaked.

My first kiss? My mind was yelling yes, yes, yes, but this was crazy. I wasn’t the type to be the other woman. Hell, I wasn’t the type to be anyone’s woman evidently. I should tell him no and run away. I should try that trick Ronnie had taught me a couple months ago, which I’d used on him when I was mad, and he told me he hated me, while he was curled up on the floor. I don’t know why Ronnie put up with me. I really don’t.

I had come to the decision to use the move and brought my knee up, but Lorcan anticipated it. He tightened his legs so my knee hit his thigh. The ache was not funny. He moved in closer. I backed up, but there was nowhere else to go.

“If you let me kiss you, I’ll go.” He held up a finger. “One kiss.”

I pretended I was real brave and sneered up at him, lifting my chin. “I don’t kiss vampires.”

“Would you stop with the undead nonsense?” He shrugged. “I’m a regular teen. I just moved around here, and will probably go to your school in the fall.”

“What school is that?”

He seemed to draw a blank.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” The spell or whatever he had over me was broken with his loss of concentration. I ducked down to dip under his arm, but he caught me and jerked me around to face him. Fear snaked over my body. When I looked into his eyes again, they had changed, just like that first night. All the white had disappeared, and they were black as ink.

His breath was shallow, and his big chest brushed my boobs. I was scared out of my head and excited at the same time. Where was Ronnie to help me this time? Where was anybody?

Lorcan lowered his head and sniffed along the pulsing vein in my neck. He groaned. I gripped his arms to try to push him away, but I couldn’t make myself do it.

“I can’t help myself around you,” he whispered. “What is it? What’s in your veins that draws me?”

“I-I don’t know.”

He pressed tighter to me. Oh crap, I was going to be in so much trouble. The next thing I knew, he had covered my mouth with his. My first real kiss. I don’t know what I had expected—sweetness, innocence with a few bumped faces and noses getting tangled up. You know, like in the movies when a girl gets her first one with a boy who’s getting his first too. But this wasn’t that. No way was this that amateur hour.

Lorcan put a hand on my neck and tilted my head back. He stared into my eyes with such intensity, I was shaking. He looked hungry like he wanted to eat me, but some kind of way, it wasn’t a bad thing. He lowered his head slowly, never taking his eyes off me, and then his cool lips met mine.

He was so tall, I had to stretch up onto my tiptoes to reach him while he leaned down. When our lips met, I’m telling you fireworks went off. Yeah, people say that all the time, but this was scary good. I had to fight to keep from moaning like he had a second ago. His mouth wasn’t hot like a regular person’s, but it wasn’t cold either. I imagined vampires were cold from lack of warm blood. Lorcan wasn’t like that.

He sort of sucked at my lips, drew them in between his, pulled back a little and sucked at them again. My knees gave out, but he held me up. This was so not like kissing Ronnie, which had been wet and kind of gross.

After a long time, when I realized I was holding my breath, Lorcan lifted his head. I opened my eyes which I must have closed the moment he kissed me and stared into his face. He grinned, and I caught sight of his fangs. I hadn’t been wrong.

“No,” he said gently, “you weren’t wrong. I am a vampire.”

I gasped. “You did not just read my mind!”

He chuckled. “Sorry. I am what I am.”

I was about to say something smart, but he rubbed a thumb over my lips to keep me quiet. He was still holding me by the neck, not tight so it hurt, but firm. I knew what was coming next, just as sure as anything, and I wasn’t going to let it happen.

I started fighting, beating at his arms, kicking him, trying to bite him if I could. I think I got a good knee into his sensitive place, but he didn’t even react. Neither did his hold loosen. He was strong, and I started getting scared that if I fought harder or hurt him in some way, he’d get mad and snap me in half.

“Don’t do this, Lorcan,” I begged. “Let me go. You said you already ate. You lied!”

“No, I didn’t lie. I did feed.” He stroked that same vein in my neck. “But when you’re afraid, and when you’re excited...any heightened emotions really, I smell it, and I can’t help myself.”

“Then go suck someone else’s blood!” I screeched. “You’ve had mine.”

“I want more!”

I couldn’t say another word because he lowered head, and a sharp sting started at my neck. My body went limp like before. The pain was gone in an instant, and all I felt was him dragging on my blood. Tears filled my eyes. I didn’t want to die out here in the back of the grocery store any more than I wanted to die in Mrs. Knowles’ back yard.

What was I going to do? Nothing. I couldn’t beat him. My best friend wasn’t here this time. I knew for a fact that Ronnie’d had to work tonight. He wouldn’t come to rescue me. I closed my eyes waiting for the end, but this time was different. The world wasn’t going dark like before. I didn’t feel like I would faint.

Out of nowhere, a voice was in my head. *“I don’t want to hurt her, but her blood is so good. She’s different from the others somehow. I want her with me. No! She can’t be. I won’t curse her with the curse I have had to live with for twenty years.”*

Who was that speaking in my head? Was it Lorcan? But how? I’d thought before that he had been reading my mind, but was I now reading his? It was too freaky. I tried to clear my head, but I kept picking up his thoughts like a radio antenna.

*“What are you doing, Lorcan? I’m ready to go home. Let’s go.”*

Holy crap. I gasped. The girl that had been with him. She was in my head too? Or was I in hers, or Lorcan’s Confusion made me dizzy. But her speaking seemed to snap Lorcan out of it. He pulled back and released me. The sadness in his eyes surprised me as much as the black draining away until his eyes were normal.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. With a gentle breeze that cooled my hot body, he was gone. That quick, just *poof*. I stumbled a few feet away from the door while holding my neck and searched the lot, but there was no sign of him. My fear returned, and I spun around and ran to the door. It was locked. I banged and yelled, kicked it, and jiggled the handle until someone let me in.

I don’t know who it was, but I rushed by him and headed past the bathrooms. Jill was coming toward me with a scowl on her face. I thought fast about what I was going to tell her, and only one excuse that every girl dealt with came to mind.

“I’m sorry, Jill. I got my period.” A snicker from behind me met that confession, but I ignored it. “My cramps get really, really bad on the first day until I can’t do anything but lay down. I have to go home. I’ll understand if I get fired.”

I didn’t stick around to find out what she had to say to that. I kept running. Inside my head, I heard someone say, “*If she has cramps, why is she holding her neck?*” But I told myself it was just my imagination, and the person must have spoken out loud.

When I burst through my bedroom door a short while later, I had no idea how I had gotten there. One minute I was bolting out of the grocery store, and the next I was home. I thought about how Lorcan had morphed away, but doubted that’s what I’d done. My mind had been filled with thoughts of getting to a safe place.

After I’d stripped down and stepped into the shower, I had two objectives for the next day after I had slept this horrible night away—I was going to make an appointment to see my doctor, and I was going to the library to research vampires. If I had one stalking me, it was for sure I would be prepared the next time I ran into his ass.

### Chapter Three

“What are we doing here, Tanesha?” Ronnie looked like the last place he wanted to be was the library, which was surprising because I rarely found his nose anywhere else other than the between the pages of a book.

I held up my hand to his face, fingers splayed. “Nobody invited you. And you should be thrilled to be here. Maybe they have something new from Stephen King, your favorite author.”

He slapped my hand away. “I had things I wanted to do today.”

“I wasn’t stopping you.” Recognizing that God might have made this day just so Ronnie could bug the heck out of me, I walked past him and headed for the bank of computers in the middle of the floor. The one on the end had a blue card above it that read “Catalog.” I snatched the chair out and sat down. Ronnie scooted his narrow rear in beside me, almost knocking me on the floor, and I heaved a huge sigh. I wasn’t going to get rid of him so easily.

Deciding I wouldn’t give him any explanation as to what I was doing, I typed in “vampires” in the keyword search, and punched Enter. Ronnie made no comment, so I kept my head down and read through the entries. The first ten on the list that came up were all fiction, and one was in Spanish. I grumbled under my breath. Still Ronnie didn’t comment, so I clicked New Search. “Vampire Mythology” and “Vampire History” produced more fiction results.

I crumpled one of those little squares of scrap paper the library provided on the table, just so I could work out some frustration through the noise it made. A couple people who knew good and well they weren’t doing a thing on the Internet turned to look at me as if to say “keep it down.” I mugged them both and stood to stomp over to the information desk.

“Excuse me.” I leaned out over the desk, hands at my sides, trying to see what was on the librarian’s computer screen. He was on the phone and looked at me like I was crazy. Remembering the night before, I narrowed my eyes at him trying to get inside his head. All I got was nothing. He flared his nostrils and leaned away from me, then spun around with his back to me.

Sucking my teeth, I searched for another librarian, but the only other person was helping someone else. I refused to leave this place until I found something useful to help me learn about vampires. Maybe the main library downtown would be better than this small branch, but I didn’t feel like humping it on the bus to get there.

Someone bumped my arm beside me, catching my attention. I glanced over to come face-to-face with this boy that sure enough needed a makeover. I blinked. His hair was dyed coal black and lay in what looked like unwashed clumps about his head. His pale skin

showed off the half dozen silver rings in each of his nostrils in the worst way, and his clothes, shades of purple, were at least three or four sizes too big. I put the freak at seventeen.

He tucked a hand beneath his chin and grinned at me. “Let me ask you something that’s been on my mind for like”—he waved his hands in the air—“ever. Do you believe in vampires?”

I gulped but couldn’t bring myself to say anything at first.

Like he didn’t expect an answer, he continued. “What about werewolves?”

I reached into my jean shorts pocket and pulled out a square of bubble gum to pop in my mouth. Throwing the weight into one leg with my hip poked out and an elbow propped on it, I gave him a bored look. “You’re talking to me why?”

Someone burst out laughing, and we both turned to glance in the direction it came from. My heart seemed to stop dead in my chest. There next to Ronnie where he was still sitting in front of the catalog computer was the girl who had been with Lorcan the other night. She leaned down to rest her arms on the desk and giggled while somehow giving Ronnie a good view of her big old boobs. Jealousy rose in me. Not because I was interested in Ronnie that way, but because he was my friend, and I didn’t want to share him with bimbo vamp girl. Crap, I was taking this vampire stuff in stride way too easily.

I started over to them, but the boy next to me grabbed my arm to hold me back. I couldn’t have pulled away if I wanted to. “Hey, they’re having their fun. We can too.”

“Not in this lifetime, homeboy.”

He glanced around as if checking to see if anybody was close by and lowered his voice, while playing with one of his nose rings. It had the effect of looking like he was picking his nose. My stomach turned.

“You want to know about the undead right?”

I frowned. “The what, now?”

He whacked my arm with the back of one hand, making me wince in pain. I think he was joking around, but he didn’t know his strength. “The undead, dude, the undead.”

“What is that? Dead people that came back to life?” I wanted to get away from him, but if he knew anything that could help me fight Lorcan, then I was all for it. I wasn’t sure if he was with Skanky over there with Ronnie, but I took a chance. “Why don’t you explain it better?” I suggested.

The boy in purple took my arm, more gently this time, and led me over to the children's section. Why here, I didn't know. Maybe it was because if the kids overhead him saying crazy stuff, they'd think he was telling me a story. Okay, that made zero sense, but it was the only thing I could come up with at the time to settle my fears. Because it was for sure, I was freaked out.

After we sank down to those little colorful squishy animals that decorated the children's section, he held out his hand to me to shake. "I'm Blake, by the way."

I just stared at him at first, and then I shook his hand before resting my palm against my leg. When he turned his head, I scrubbed it along my shorts. "So why should you help me? And how do you know I wanted to know about vampires?" I looked back over my shoulder toward Ronnie. The girl was still there, but this time, she looked up at me, and her face grew dark and threatening. I felt a chill pass over me. Something told me if I crossed her, she'd get real ugly, and all that cutesy stuff would disappear.

Blake smirked. "You think we don't know?" He wagged a finger in my face, and I got to see the dirt caked beneath his nail up close and personal. "We're like a hive." He paused seeming to think about it. "No, like a collective. You know, Star Trek? Stuff like that."

"Whole lot of idiots, but one brain?" I suggested. I waited for him to be offended, but he just laughed, a nice easygoing sound to my surprise. I found myself smiling, liking him despite that fact that he was a bloodsucker. "So what did you mean about undead?"

"Okay, well, vampires have died once, and for whatever reason have come back to life, or what translates to life for them. We suck blood to keep moving, but we never die."

"Never?"

"Nope. Rad, right?" He grinned.

"So not," I told him.

"Anyway, some call us"—he made quotes in the air—"the undead." Sometimes it's the walking dead."

"Got it. You're dead."

I wanted to ask him how to defeat them, if it was steaks and garlic and all that stuff, but I was too scared. After thinking about it half the night and jumping at every sound outside my window, I had remembered some facts or what I assumed was facts. I hadn't closed my eyes until four in the morning. And then my mother had made Ronnie and me spend most of the day helping her with home improvement projects that would never be finished if her past record was proof. I'd just remembered that I needed to call my doctor and make an appointment before her office closed. After a run to the store for Ronnie's brother, we had headed over to the library. It had been a good thing that the library

opened late. Maybe not so good since at least two vampires had taken advantage of the dark to hunt me down.

“Can you only go out at night?” I blurted out.

He glanced down at his pasty skin on his arm and rubbed it. Funny how neither the skank nor Lorcan looked like vampires, but if lack of color was a factor to pick them out, Blake was so it.

“Well I could if I wanted a wicked suntan.” He chuckled. “Seriously though, the older you are, the stronger you are, and some of the elders in our Coven can tolerate the sun a little longer. An hour or so.”

“Coven?”

I waited for him to answer, but his eyes grew glazed. He frowned and shook his head. I turned around to look over at the girl, but she seemed deep into Ronnie. In fact unless I was crazy, she looked like she was about to bite him right there in the middle of the library! I jumped to my feet and ran over to them.

I shoved her. “Back off!” I turned to Ronnie. “Are you nuts playing around with her?”

Ronnie blinked up at me looking like he was coming out of a daze. “What?”

“Calm down,” the girl on her butt told me with a sneer. Her teeth were normal now, and I wonder if I’d made a mistake. Maybe I was crazy. “We were just getting to know each other, right Ronnie?”

She purred it in the most disgusting way. I cringed.

Ronnie surged to his feet and bent down to help her up. “What’s the deal, Tanesha? You okay, Adrienne?”

She poked out deep rose lips and clung to his arm. Where was her boyfriend? That reminded me I hadn’t asked about Lorcan.

“I’ll talk to you another time, Ronnie.” She cut her eyes at me. I set a hand on my hip ready to take whatever she brought, but she turned away again. “When we aren’t rudely interrupted.”

“What are you talking about, Adrienne?” Blake cut in. “You told me it’s time to get out of here.”

So that was why he’d gotten that weird look on his face. She’d been speaking in his head.



Adrienne released Ronnie, who said not another word, and turned to sashay toward the exit. Before Blake could join her I rushed up to intercept him. “Hey, Blake...uh...can you tell me anything about Lorcan real quick?”

A slow grin spread over his face. “That I can’t.”

“What!”

“Sorry, dude. We were to scope you out a bit, see why he’s so obsessed with you, but that’s it. No talking about the L man.”

The L man? Give me a break. “Please, can’t you tell me something useful?” I pleaded.

Adrienne stepped up to his side and grabbed hold of a couple of nose rings. She tugged, and he cried out. “You keep your mouth shut, Blake. Nobody even told you to tell her what you did. They’re going to come down on you, and you’ll be lucky to see the beautiful night for a month!”

She pulled Blake away, and from the looks that passed between them, I knew they were arguing in their heads. What I wouldn’t have given to have that trick again, this time longer, to know what Adrienne had meant by “they” and more about covens. What I desperately needed to know was why Lorcan was obsessed with me and how to stop him. Something told me if I could get Blake alone, he’d spill it, but I had no idea where they lived or if it would be safe to visit.

Who was I kidding? Of course it wouldn’t be safe! I needed some help from someone before I became the undead.

\* \* \* \*

“Tanesha, I have the results of your test,” my doctor told me. “I’m not sure why you felt you needed this done, but from the looks of things, you’re healthy. Your blood count is a little low, which concerns me.” She flipped through her reports.

I glanced up from studying my feet. “My blood’s low? I have less? B-But I feel fine. Strong and healthy.” I’d wanted to know if Lorcan sucking my blood had some bad effect on my body, but now that I was here, I wanted to deny everything, to pretend none of it had happened. I hadn’t seen any of them in a couple weeks, this being the soonest my doctor could squeeze me into her busy schedule. Was I ever happy that once you hit a certain age, your parent did not have to know anything about your medical sessions.

If my mother knew I had requested blood tests, she would have freaked and suspected the worst. Not that I could blame her. This experience was worse than anything I’d learned in health class.

“Nothing to worry about, Tanesha,” Dr. Morgan told me. “It’s probably your menstrual cycle that’s the culprit. Your body will compensate and make new blood.”

Yeah, but what if more is siphoned off before my body does that? I wondered. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to scream. Most of all, I wanted to kick Lorcan’s butt. Well, right after I had one more kiss. Just one more. How could any of the boys at my school compare to that? Easy. They couldn’t. I sighed and closed my eyes.

“Nothing at all to worry about. You’re fine.” She marked my chart. “I will see you back here in six months for your annual checkup.”

Still worried, I hopped off the table and prepared to leave after my doctor had shuffled on to the next patient. A few minutes later I was out on the bus stop squinting in the sunlight because I’d forgotten my sunglasses. I glanced down at my bare arms and was relieved that I wasn’t burning in the least. I was not *undead*.

When a 1982 Camry with one yellow rusted fender on the right side pulled into the grocery store parking lot beside me, I thought about Mrs. Knowles. That looked like her car, and I knew for a fact that she came all the way out here near my doctor’s office to get food rather than the Stop and Shop near us.

I waited to see if it was her, and sure enough she shuffled out of the car in a big floppy straw hat and a dress that covered all parts of her body, her arms and her legs. For a minute, I thought maybe she was a vampire, but I remembered it was broad daylight, and they would burn. Then again, she could be one of the older ones.

My heart hammering in my chest, I decided to follow her into the store, and if nothing else, I could ask her about the other night and what was up with her going in the house watching TV like nothing happened.

I slipped into the grocery store not a minute behind Mrs. Knowles, but when I stopped just inside the doors and glanced around, she was nowhere in sight. Strolling along the front of the store, I looked down every aisle but still didn’t spot her. I began to wonder if maybe I’d been wrong about seeing her in the parking lot, but a quick glance out through the floor-to-ceiling windows on the front of the store showed her ugly eyesore of a car still there. She was here somewhere, and I’d find her if I had to take over the intercom and yell out for her. I laughed at, thinking she’d be as embarrassed as Ronnie was that time we took off for the gaming section in Wal-mart, and his brother’d had someone call for him that way. You’d have thought we were three instead of thirteen at the time. I ribbed him about it for a week until he found a way to get me back.

While I stood there near the registers with people moving past me to get to the shortest lines, I started getting this funny feeling, like someone was watching me. Considering where I was, I dismissed it and started back along the aisles, but the feeling refused to go away.

Trying to be nonchalant, I scanned the area around me and began thinking maybe Mrs. Knowles had seen me following her in here, and she was hiding while watching me look for her. I mean the woman was strange after all. That steel wool-like bluish hair, frumpy clothes, and penchant for ignoring knocks on her door, didn't put her in the normal category, in my book.

At last I found her. She was at the other end of the crackers and cookies aisle, gesturing and moving her lips like she was talking to someone. Grateful that there were a couple people in the aisle, I made it half way down, staying out of sight. When I came within hearing distance of Mrs. Knowles, I stopped beside a cardboard display with the latest double chocolate fudge wafers on sale. For a minute, I was distracted, mentally counting up the amount of money I had in my purse to see if I could snag a package, but then I shook my head to focus on what Mrs. Knowles was saying.

If only I had that freakish super hearing thing going on that I had that one night, it would be easy. I strained harder, forcing myself to concentrate, to block out all other sounds around me except for Mrs. Knowles' voice.

"She's awakening more and more every day," Mrs. Knowles was saying. My chest tightened for no reason as I wondered who she was talking about...and to whom. The other person must have said something, but I couldn't even pick up a whisper.

I opened my eyes which had drifted closed when I concentrated. The closer I inched to the her, the more Mrs. Knowles and whoever it was repositioned so that I couldn't see the other person. Not even a hand or a piece of clothing.

Did she know I was there? Did she want me to hear her?

Mrs. Knowles continued. "She's valuable. You know that. She can be used. The others won't stop until they get her. If they know for sure that—"

Someone bumped me, and I almost went flying over the display I'd been crouched behind pretending to tie my shoe. I glanced up in irritation, ready to tell whoever it was off, but no one was there. I searched up and down the aisle. All the customers that had been there before were gone. Swinging around to where Mrs. Knowles was, I growled under my breath to find her and the person she'd been talking to gone.

"Of all the stupidest—" I bolted to the end of the aisle and looked up and down. Almost running, I searched the store, but Mrs. Knowles was nowhere in sight. Checking my watch, I realized that the bus I'd been waiting on outside, had most likely left. I'd be standing out in the heat of the sun for another twenty minutes for the next one. I could so cuss my head off right about then.

While I thought about whether to call it a day or look for Mrs. Knowles one more time, if nothing else than to see who she had been talking to—the old woman had never been

sociable and never had visitors to her house that I knew of—the feeling came back, of someone watching me.

This time when I looked up, I saw them. Three men, tall as anything, maybe like seven feet. That might have been an exaggeration considering my heart jumped up into my throat, but they were up there. And they wore thick black coats with hoods on them.

“In this heat?” I wondered.

What I could see of their faces, they weren’t monster-like, which is what I had expected. In fact they were hot as hell, rivaling Lorcan in beauty. I couldn’t see their hair, but their skin was pale, almost translucent, and their eyes were all green. I had the feeling that whoever these three men were, they were related.

They moved like a single unit, coming at me from different positions. I wasn’t waiting around to see what they wanted. I jetted in the opposite direction. Over my shoulder, I saw that they weren’t moving at the same speed I was. It could have been that they weren’t trying to draw too much attention to themselves.

“Oh crap, too late,” I quipped as I zipped between aisles. With their looks and style of dress, they stuck out big time. I made it back around through the bakery section with my heart pounding in my chest, hopped a baby carriage, and did a power walk toward the front of the store.

In my shorts pocket, my cell phone buzzed. I yanked it out and found that it was Ronnie calling. “Ronnie! I need—”

“Hey, I came to pick you up, and you already left—”

“Wait, you’re at my doctor’s office?”

He sighed. Ronnie hated when I cut him off. “I was. They told me you left. Now, I’m at the light ready to head back into the city. Could have had a ride. I gotta get the car back.”

“Wait!” I picked up speed and zipped through the automatic doors, just missing cracking my elbow on the edge of one since they moved so slowly. In the short distance, I spotted Ronnie at the red light on the corner. “Wait for me, Ronnie. I’m right behind you.”

I didn’t pause to see if he would agree. I closed my phone, tucked it in my pocket and took off in Ronnie’s direction. Scared to look, but knowing I needed to be sure, I checked behind me. The strange men had stopped in the lobby of the grocery store’s exit. They seemed hesitant to risk the sun. I stopped running and turned around to face them. Anger blazed in one of the men’s beautiful eyes. He took a step out, but his friend or brother grabbed at his arm. Steam rose from both their sleeves, and they jumped back with small grunts of pain. I thought I would pee in my panties at that.

Vampires. They were freaking vampires! Real life ones, here in my city...and after me. My throat went dry. My head began to spin, and I wanted to throw up. How did they get in the store in the daytime if they melted in the sun? No, that was witches, wasn't it? Melting? I shook my head and ran a hand over my face. I didn't know a thing other than what Hollywood produced like the Wizard of Oz.

Tires screeched behind me. A car door opened, and I heard Ronnie grumble, "Get in. I'm late."

I continued to stand there staring at the men while they stared at me. Something came over me. My mind clouded. I took a step in their direction. Ronnie's annoyed tone faded from behind me. I took another step.

*"Get in the car."*

I don't know who spoke in my head. I didn't recognize the voice. I looked around me for who might have spoken, but no one else was near. At the entrance to the parking lot, a big black van, with windows tinted almost as dark as the body itself, turned in my direction. A warning went off in my head. Somehow I knew that van was coming to get the vampires, and once they were mobile, Ronnie and I might be in big trouble.

I spun around, dove into the car, and slammed the door behind me. "Step on it, Ronnie. Let's get out of here."

He shot me a dirty look before putting the car in gear. "Like I haven't been telling you to come on. You know how Renard gets when I'm late. We'll be lucky to get the car before another month, maybe two. What were you doing?"

I buckled in, pulled my knees up to my chest and stared into the side mirror. The van stopped, but the vampires didn't come out. I leaned back with a sigh and closed my eyes. "Just drop it. I don't want to talk about any of this."

"Any of what?"

I didn't answer. None of what had just happened was real. I was a regular teenager, with a regular life, and my biggest priority right now was to find a way to make some cash.

## Chapter Four

I was still in serious denial when I dragged Ronnie to the mall later, but that was my favorite place to go, to blow off some steam, when my mother was getting on nerves, or just to hang out. You could do some people-watching, buy something healthy to sip on or something fattening to soothe hurt feelings, all in the same building. My main like was jumping from store to store, trying on clothes, and then when I was too tired to do anything else, go around to the back of the mall to the movie theatre and get lost in watching somebody else's issues.

"Are you going to put in an application up here?" Ronnie asked.

I rolled my eyes at him. "You're saying I'm a bum with no ambition?"

He shoved me. I started to chase him when he ran but didn't when I spotted a cute boy. I'd remembered my sunglasses this time and was glad of how dark they were inside so I could enjoy the view. He was with a girl I assumed was his girlfriend. I sighed.

Ronnie came back. "I figure you should get something since I'm going to be busy this summer."

I planted a hand on my hip. "My world doesn't revolve around you, Mr. Jenkins."

"Whatever. Which store?"

I was about to answer and then groaned. "Oh here we go. Skank-alert."

Just ahead of us, with her pack of wild hyenas, was the dirty girl I'd mentioned before that Ronnie had fallen for last year. Annoyance rose in me, and I felt my nostrils begin to flare. Why did she have to come here today of all days? When I needed a serious break to pull my head together.

"Well, well, well, if it ain't Tanesha." She planted a hand on her slender hip and rolled eyes that were heavily made up. Her lashes had to be fake they were so thick and long. Black rings circled her eyes, not like somebody had belted her, although I wish they had, but like she had applied eye liner. I was jealous. No matter how hard I tried to put mine on, I screwed up in some way and had to scrub it off. The only makeup I'd ever put on that was half way decent on me was lipstick and rouge for my cheeks. That was it.

My mother liked to say I had natural beauty, that I didn't need as much as Butterfly, but I know she was lying. And yeah, the dirty girl who was already simpering like a dang fool at Ronnie had been named Butterfly. What her mother had been smoking when she named her, I didn't know. At one point, I thought she was making it up, but even in school, when I had been cursed to be in her French class, the teacher had called her Butterfly from the roll sheet. Whatever. It took all kinds, I guess.

“Hey, Ronnie, how you doing?” she whined to him, her voice so sweet, I felt a cavity coming on.

I took in her appearance. The color pink had thrown up on her entire body. A pink head band held her straight cold black, permed curls, back from her forehead. Pink and black dotted earrings dangled from her ears. A pink top that was cut too low and was too small hugged her rail thin figure, and she had matched it with a deep rose mini skirt and pink flip flops on her feet. Unlike my fingernails, hers appeared to be freshly done. The pink on her nails with flowers on every other nail glimmered with a gem in the center. Her toes were simply done in a French manicure. Each one of her friends was just as made up to perfection without a hair out of place.

I struck a pose, leaning into one hip and crossing my arms over my chest, mostly to hide the chipping paint that had started on my own nails. On top of that, the night before I had slammed my fingertip in the closet door and chipped one nail. It was wrapped in a Band-Aid, but I didn’t want Butterfly to see it.

“Buzz off, Bee,” I told her, knowing it irritated her when I messed up her name. “We’re just having a good time and don’t need the air polluted with your cheap perfume.”

Her eyes grew round. “For your information, this is—”

I yawned and tapped a fist to my lips. “Tell it to someone who gives a crap, Black Barbie.”

“What did you say to me?”

I bumped her aside and took Ronnie by the arm. He was looking daze-eyed again with a pretty girl nearby, although I hated admitting Butterfly was anything but a creature from the underworld. Then again, maybe she *was* underneath all the makeup. One could only hope.

When we were just a few feet past the girls, Butterfly called out. “Oh, hey, Ronnie?”

He almost tore my arm off turning around. “Yeah?”

She sauntered up, casting me a look that said I was an amateur and I’d never beat her at anything. She could have my best friend if she wanted him. A half second after that, her gaze dropped to my exposed fingers on Ronnie’s arm, and she cringed. I dug my nails in Ronnie’s flesh. He cried out and wrenched free of my hold.

Butterfly rested a hand on his chest. “I am going to this stupid thing my parents are dragging me to next Saturday, and I have to buy a dress. I was wondering if you could help me.”

Ronnie blinked. “What could I do?”

He was such an idiot. I resisted slapping him in the back of the head. I chewed my tongue to keep from telling him he wasn't helping her with anything.

Butterfly giggled, grating on my nerves. "Stupid, you'll tell me what looks good on me."

I couldn't help it. "Not much." I pretended to study her figure. "Be sure to get something with strong straps over your shoulders." That was a dig at how huge her boobs were, and how she should be careful or they'd break free. She was just like her mother, and I was just like mine, to my disgust.

The dig didn't bother her. She had the nerve to plump the things. "I know, right?"

Ronnie almost drooled. I hate boys.

"Yeah, I can help," he offered. And just like that, I was sitting alone scoffing down pizza in a second rate pizza shop while my best friend had abandoned me to run behind Butterfly. The thing that burned me up was that she didn't really want him. She had always hated me, and the feeling was mutual. Whatever she could do to one up me, she did it, which didn't make sense because from where I was standing, she had all the bonuses. I had zip.

Butterfly's mother was a lawyer. She didn't need a man to take care of her, as both of them liked to preach to anybody who would listen. That was a good thing I guess since Butterfly's father had run off when she was two, or so I'd heard when I was sitting on the porch with my mother, while she gossiped with the neighbors. Since then, Butterfly'd had five stepfathers, and none of them stuck it out for more than a few months.

My mother, on the other hand, had only been with my father, and claimed she'd never let another man break her heart like he did. I figured she still loved him a lot, and from those warm fuzzy experiences around me, I decided I was never getting married. But damn, I wanted a boyfriend—just once.

I shoved the last of my pizza away, unable to eat anymore. Annoyance and boredom set in. I wondered if I should see a movie alone but remembered that I had no more money, and I'd seen everything interesting. Trying on clothes with no one to chat with was a bore, and for the millionth time, I considered getting a *girl* friend. A sudden fear that things were changing between Ronnie and me came rushing over me, and tears filled my eyes. I blinked them away, deciding I was an idiot and stood to throw my trash away.

*"Forget him."*

I gasped and spun this way and that, looking for who had spoken in my head. In the small restaurant, there were only three other customers—one woman with her little boy, and a man who looked like he was about ready to pass out. His clothes were tattered, his facial hair out of control, and he rocked side to side like he was drunk. Probably was.



For whatever reason, I checked my watch. Time had flown by. It was already sundown, and that made me nervous. If the sun had passed out of sight, then the vampires could return. All at once, the appeal of my favorite place had fizzled, and I wanted to go home. I left the pizza joint in a hurry and flipped open my phone. I intended to tell Ronnie I was leaving. He'd told me he would spend only one hour with Butterfly, but it had been over two.

I waited through four rings before he picked up. "Ronnie?" I grumbled through the phone at the same time I spotted Blake leaning against the mall directory. He was dressed again in all black and purple clothing, but tonight he wore shorts so that his pale muscled legs from the knee down were bare. I must have been looking a little too long because when I refocused on his face, he winked and stuck out his pierced tongue. I rolled my eyes at him.

Ronnie was calling out in my ear. "Hey, Tanesha, you okay? Tanesha!"

Thinking about giving him a little payback for dropping me for that dirty Butterfly, I snapped my phone closed and started walking over to Blake who seemed in no hurry to meet me or go anywhere else in the mall. I began to wonder if he had somehow tracked me and had come there to see me. Something inside wished it had been Lorcan instead, but I hadn't seen him since that time at the back of the grocery store. I had to admit I missed him. Yeah right, like we had anything going.

Before I could reach Blake, Ronnie stepped in front of me, blocking my view of him. I stopped short so I wouldn't careen into his chest. "What in the world are you doing, Ronnie?" I frowned at him. "And where did you come from?" Looking around for Miss Thing and her perfumed shadows, I waited for Ronnie to answer.

When he didn't answer, I faced him again, and it was like he put on a show just for me. That was weird. I had known Ronnie forever, and I darn sure knew when he was lying to me. Like now. He started huffing and puffing like he'd been running, but I knew for a fact that he wasn't out of breath when he charged in front of me.

He held a hand to his chest with too much drama. "I ran down here. I thought you were leaving without me. Had to catch up."

I stared at him, trying to figure out what his game was, but he just blinked right back at me until I turned away. "Whatever."

When I moved around him I noticed that Blake was gone. Searching the area did nothing. He was nowhere in sight. This was another lost chance to get to know all about vampires, and to ask some questions about Lorcan, and it was all Ronnie's fault—*again*. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was up to something, like he wanted to keep me from knowing the truth. But that was ridiculous. He didn't even believe me that first night when I said Lorcan was biting me. No, wait. He had admitted it later. Then again, that could have

been because I said it. I slapped my forehead and groaned. Now I was all confused. Nothing seemed to make sense. Two weeks ago none of this nonsense was real. It probably still wasn't. Ronnie could be in on this elaborate joke to trick me, but how long would they carry it out? Maybe I should play along.

My head began to pound, and I decided whatever else I did, I was going home and throw myself into my bed. I wasn't going to get up until next year.

\* \* \* \*

A taste filled my mouth, similar to what I imagined sucking pennies would be like. Something thick lay on my tongue, and although my mind told me to spit it out, I couldn't. Not that it tasted good exactly, but that I really couldn't. I needed it. I wanted it. My mind was cloudy, and I had trouble focusing on where I was and what I was doing. Somewhere in the fog I was aware that a finger ran down my cheek and slipped beneath my chin to lift it, forcing me to take in more of the liquid.

"Good girl," someone whispered.

I tried to raise my hand to push whoever it was away, but I couldn't move. I was trapped in his spell, his...what? I searched my mind for the answer.

*"Glamour."*

I began to shake, willing my eyes to open, but they wouldn't obey. "*Wh-Who is that?*" I called out in my head. No one answered that time. This had been going on for a while. I had at last come to the realization that someone or more than one had been whispering things in my head at different times.

When I had trouble figuring out what to do, the answer came. Not like it was my own brain finding a solution, but like someone else was lurking inside there, spying on my thoughts. I didn't appreciate it one bit. I had always liked the fact that I could escape into my own thoughts because it was for sure my mother and Ronnie never let me have a moment to myself. My mother had told me flat out that my room was still a part of her house, and if I wanted a locked door, I could get my own place. That had pissed me off, but what was I going to do? Move? I didn't even have a job yet.

As for Ronnie, well he acted like we had to spend twenty-four seven together. I never minded too much because I didn't have any other friends, and well I liked the boy. I just needed some time by myself every now and then, like when I was PMSing. He didn't get the concept.

After a few more mouthfuls of blood—I had figured out what it was and was grossed out by my enjoyment of it—the pressure on my head eased. Whoever had been controlling me, keeping me still and forcing me to drink, had let me go. I was still in and out of it but willed my eyes to open. I lay in my bed, blinking and taking in the darkness. While I

couldn't move my head or my arms and legs, I could roll my eyes left and right to see if there was anyone there.

I knew, like I knew a lot of things I shouldn't, that the shadow in the corner by the window was alive. It was thicker and heavier than the rest although it didn't move. My heart raced. I swallowed a few times and licked my lips, drawing a few leftover drops of blood into my mouth. Was I dead now? I wanted to cry, to scream, but my body wouldn't react.

"Who are you?" I think I said it out loud, but I wasn't sure.

"You can see me?" he asked. I recognized his voice. It was Lorcan. Now my heart did a flip. I wanted to check my hair and put my hand up to test my breath. Stupid! He was trying to kill me, and I was more interested in knowing if he thought I was pretty.

"You're right there. By the window." I managed to get a finger moving and aimed it in the direction I meant. Lorcan chuckled. I imagined his beautiful even teeth and wondered if the fangs hung down right now. He was dangerous, that was for sure, but I was drawn to him. I wanted him to stay. "You did something to me. You've been here before, in my room, haven't you?"

He didn't answer at first, and I clenched both my fists by my sides. A wave of energy passed over my head and slammed the wall where he was. He gasped, and the shadow shifted until it gained color. The next thing I know he was there in the flesh, more sexy than I remembered.

"I gave you strength," he told me. "Feeding you my blood."

I screeched. "What?"

"I was taking your blood each time I met you. If I didn't replace it, you would have collapsed."

The horror and anger mingled in me enough to allow me to get control. I sat up and swung my feet to the floor, but a wave of dizziness came over me. I grabbed my head and realized my stupid scarf holding my wrap in place had slipped off somewhere. He must think I looked a trip. When the memory of his words washed over me again, I pushed my physical appearance out of my head.

"It was only twice, right?" I asked him, reviewing it in my mind. "Once in the back yard, once at the grocery store."

"More."

My hands shook so hard I looked like I was jumped up on twenty cups of strong coffee. I fumbled on the floor for my purse, and inside I found my pepper spray. I held it up to him threateningly. "Get the hell out of here. Right now, and don't come back."

He grinned and started walking toward me. "You don't want that."

"I mean it! Get out!" I stood up and slid along the side of the bed until I had cleared it, and then I inched back until I was heading toward the door still facing him. My arm began to ache holding the tiny bottle out. I felt dumb, but I couldn't back down now.

He kept coming.

"I said get out."

"No." He stopped in front of me with the bottle pressed against his chest. To prove I was brave, I squirted out some of the liquid, and a tiny wet circle formed on his shirt. If I had any real guts I would have aimed at his smug face and drenched those eyes that made me want to jump in his arms.

He laughed, tugged the tiny bottle from my limp fingers, and tossed it over his shoulder. "You don't want me to leave."

I backed up some more until I hit the door. He crowded me. I gulped. "My mother is in the next room. If she knew I had a boy in my room...I could scream this house down..."

"Do you want to know, how I know, you don't want me to leave?" He caught hold of a lock of my hair, but I slapped his hand away. It looked bad enough. He chuckled and dipped his head down until his nose touched mine. I was so done right then. "I know you don't want me to leave because your shield was down."

"Shield? What the heck are you talking about?"

"Didn't you know?" He frowned then lowered his head to kiss me. The touch of his lips was too quick. He spun away and walked back toward the window. Like I was a robot trained to follow, I stumbled along, stopped to slip my bare feet into flip-flops and was soon steps behind him.

"There is a shield of protection around you at all times, or most of the time. No one gets close to you except you let them, or...someone else does."

"Someone else? What's with the riddles, bloodsucker? If you're trying to say something you need to just come on out with it. How can I have protection around me? I'm not magic or whatever. I'm no one special. And who else would be able to protect or unprotect me?"

He shrugged and stepped up onto the windowsill like we weren't on the second floor. "It's stuffy in here. Come out for a walk with me." He held out his hand, and although my mind cringed at the thought, I found myself resting my palm in his. I was in some serious trouble if he decided to rip out my throat while we were away from my house. Then again, he could have done it right here. Maybe I was already dead.

*"You're not dead...yet."*

I turned away to run, but he caught me by the shoulders and spun me around. I closed my eyes, but he tightened his hold. "Open your eyes, Tanesha."

"No, you're not glamouring me."

"Do you think I can't do it unless I look into your eyes? That's Hollywood." He ran a thumb over my lips, and I looked up at him. He winked at me, and I felt it, that pull, that control fall over my head like melted butter.

"You lied," I whispered as he guided me onto the windowsill, grabbed me around the waist, and propelled us both over the ledge to plunge to the ground. I thought I was going to give up the ghost right there, but I survived. Lorcan touched down first with me digging my fingers into his chest. He didn't even flinch. After a few minutes, I calmed enough to let go, and he stepped back.

"See, that wasn't so bad."

"I hate you."

He took my hand with a smirk spread over his full, deep rose lips, and we started walking down the yard to the alley. I must have lost my mind. It was the middle of the night. If my mother knew I was out here, she'd beat me black and blue and ground me until I was twenty-five. I had never snuck out of the house, except that one time last year to go to a party. I got away with it, but only because the party had turned out to be lame, and Ronnie had snuck out to pick me up when my ride wanted to stay. Ronnie had been mad at me for weeks for not including him in my plan. I had promised to include him if ever I did something crazy like that again, but it really didn't interest me. Until now.

I couldn't call Ronnie to join me and Lorcan. I just couldn't. I wanted this time all to myself, which was probably a huge mistake.

Lorcan rested a hand over his chest. "You break my heart."

I gave him a doubtful look. "Does it beat?"

"Come and see for yourself." He leered, wiggling his eyebrows.

“So not cute.” I rolled my eyes. “I’ll pass, thanks.” After we had left my block and continued on toward the park in silence, I decided to get some answers to my many questions. “So, why me? You made me think I’m somehow special. Why?”

He squeezed my hand. “That’s not up for conversation right now.”

“What?” I yanked my hand away, stopped, and put my hands on my hips. “You broke into my room and did who knows what before I woke up.” I was telling myself the blood thing wasn’t real. “I deserve to know what’s going on, especially since it has to do with me.”

Lorcan shoved his hands into his pockets and spun away. After a while I jogged to catch up to him. No matter how much of a fit I threw, I couldn’t make him talk about what he wasn’t willing to share. In my head, I knew I should be screaming my head off, scared, running in the opposite direction, but there was something about all this that was, if not familiar, at least...expected. I don’t know how to explain it. It was like I had been waiting for someone to wake me up, but that was ridiculous.

“So you’re not going to talk to me about it?”

“Nope.”

“Then what can we talk about?”

“Anything else.”

## Chapter Five

We were in the park at the fountain they had just built two springs ago. The water had been turned off, along with the lights, but I stared in shock when Lorcan only waved his hand over it, and the bubbles began. The blue, green, and red lights danced beneath the surface, lighting the area, and his pale face. I shivered. Who was he? Where did he come from? Had he always been a vampire?

“Unlike you, I am no one special,” he said. “And no, I’ve not always been a vampire.”

I blinked and then grumbled, “Stop reading my mind, damn it.”

He laughed. “Sorry. You’re an open book. Getting into your head is easy. I almost don’t have to try. You just hand it all over to me.”

I pulled off my flip-flops and stood on the narrow stone bench running around the fountain. While I walked, I concentrated on closing my thoughts off to him, so he couldn’t read my mind. I didn’t know if it was possible. A light pressure around the edges of my consciousness let me know he was pressing to get in.

*“Not yet, beautiful,”* he whispered in my head.

I growled and lost my footing on the fountain. When I would have pitched face first in the water, his hands came around me and pulled me back to his chest. I elbowed him to get free and ran to leap over the side to the ground. I think I landed on a pebble and hurt my foot, but I wasn’t giving his big head the satisfaction of knowing. Hobbling to a grassy spot on the opposite side of the circle, I pretended not to hear him laughing behind me.

“So who are you?” I demanded.

He bowed like they did in the olden days or those shows from the past. “I am a simple vampire, in love with a beautiful black girl named Tanesha.”

“Boy, you are not in love.” My voice shook when I said the words.

“Who says I’m not?”

“You promised you’d talk about anything except me, so you better spill it, or I’m going home. And what was that with the waving of the hand? You can do magic?”

He dropped down beside me and reached for my hand. I let him take it to hold in his lap. “Not magic exactly. Not like witches and warlocks type of stuff. More like...” He paused seeming to search for the right words. I squinted up at him, trying to probe his mind. I got nothing. The flick of his eyebrow let me know he knew what I was trying to do. I wanted to punch him.

“A vampire comes with certain enhancements. The way I look at it is, should the human race evolve, kind of like using more of your brain power, anyone, no matter who they are, could do what I do.” He glanced down at me and smiled. “Do what you did back in the bedroom.”

“Wha—?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t notice.” He shook his head. “If I’ve learned anything at all about you, Tanesha Johnson, is that you have a strong mind, but you use it to block out anything that is hard to accept. That’s why you haven’t freaked over all you’ve learned about lately. I guess that’s a good thing.”

He looked up at the full moon. I found myself glad that he wasn’t a werewolf and considered whether they were real as well. A tremor went through me, and I shifted closer to his side. It couldn’t have come off more like I was flirting, and looking to be hugged, if I had been Butterfly herself. Lorcan’s strong arm came around me. A feeling of unreality washed through my head. This whole experience was mind-blowing.

“Back at the room, you used your own power to shove me hard enough to knock me out of my cloak.”

My eyes widened. “I did? How? What cloak?”

He wagged a finger in front of my nose. “Uh-uh, no talking about you. Almost got me. But I can tell you about my cloak. I can bend the shadows around me until I become like one. That is vamp all the way, and I’ve loved doing it ever since I became a vampire.” He closed his eyes with his face still raised like he was basking in the sunlight. I supposed he couldn’t ever do that now. “At first I hated it, felt like it was a curse, but now I’m used to this life. The best thing is being able to travel to places and hide in plain sight, wherever there is a shadow. I can people-watch and get into their minds to know what they’re not saying.”

“In other words, you’re nosy with everybody, not just me.” I thought about what he had said, about me using power. I didn’t have any, but again, he was acting like I was special in some way. How? “I’m not a vampire, am I? Did you feed me blood?”

He didn’t say anything for a long time.

“Lorcan, answer me! Am I dead? Or...or...*undead*?”

“No.”

“Then how can I—”



“Shh!” He stiffened, and his facial expression became alert. He tilted his head and then jumped to his feet, pulling me along with him. In a heartbeat, he shoved me behind him so my view of the circle was blocked. “What do you want?”

“You know what I want, Lorcan. You’ve disobeyed orders long enough. Give her to me.”

“Go walk in sunlight,” he snapped.

I didn’t recognize the voice, but by the tone, I knew it was someone older, a man. I tried to look around Lorcan’s body, but he threw his arm out, causing his long black coat to block my view. “*You mustn’t look into his eyes. Stay behind me.*”

My stomach did flip-flops. I was scared out of my head. His words confirmed that he had lied about needing me to look into his eyes to glamour me. I wondered what else he had been lying about. Did they send him to get me, or to kill me? The man had said he wasn’t following orders. My throat went dry.

While the two of them argued, I backed away from Lorcan, into the trees. I didn’t want to be with him anymore either. I didn’t trust him. What had I been thinking? This boy, as fine as he was, had been sucking my blood, admittedly even at times when I didn’t remember him doing it. He had been replacing it with his own. I couldn’t even begin to figure out why my doctor’s blood tests hadn’t seen that much. Must have been more vampire magic or mojo or whatever the hell he called it.

I spun around and high-tailed it through the trees. If I circled around the park, I could come out on the street opposite mine and get to my house by the front. But then I realized I didn’t have my key and wouldn’t be able to get in because Lorcan and I had jumped from the window. That’s all I needed was to have to ring my doorbell to get in. My mother would not believe that I had somehow fell out the window and walked around the front. I was in serious trouble.

A rustle in the leaves behind me and the crack of branches set my teeth on edge. I had come to a stop to catch my breath and consider what to do. I ducked behind a tree and struggled not to breathe so whoever was out there wouldn’t hear me.

“*Stay right there.*”

I don’t know how I knew this time, but I was positive whoever was speaking in my head was not Lorcan. Blake had said they were all like a big hive, connected by their thoughts. Was I in the loop now that I had Lorcan’s blood in me? Is that why I had powers like him? I closed my eyes and listened to the night around me, but I couldn’t pick up anything other than crickets. Where was the evolution stuff when I needed it?

“*Who are you?*” I asked the person who had spoken, but he didn’t answer.

I decided if he couldn't tell me his name, then I didn't have to listen to him. I started creeping toward the edge of the park. At least there would be more light, and if I needed to scream, houses were nearby for someone to hear me.

The thought of more light reminded me of something. The park didn't have street lights, which was why it closed at night. Only the circle had old fashioned lamps around its edges, not here in the trees. So how the heck was I getting around? My heart felt like it was stuck in my throat, and I glanced about. In the sky, the moon had gone behind thick clouds, plunging the park into total darkness, yet I could see in that darkness like it was twilight. Another side effect to a vampire's bite, I thought. I touched my neck but felt no marks. Like before, Lorcan had done something to heal me.

Instead of moving like a normal person would, stumbling with hands slung out to keep from bumping into something, I just walked. When voices up ahead reached my ears, I paused and crept to an opening. Mrs. Knowles was just turning away from Ronnie, and she darted into the trees so fast, I felt sick. That was not an old lady, and Ronnie knew it. From my distance, he looked worried and a little annoyed, but he did not look shocked at how Mrs. Knowles had moved.

My best buddy knew more than he claimed to know about everything that was going on. I stood there leaning against a tree and biting my thumbnail. Behind me the area was clear, and I could no longer pick up Lorcan and that other guy arguing, but that didn't mean I was out of danger. I turned back to Ronnie. He still hadn't spotted me.

After a few minutes, he put his hands out in front of him and moved like a bumbling idiot through the darkness. So he wasn't a member of the undead society. That was good to know. When he stumbled over an untied shoelace that I zoomed in on with no problem, I laughed. Yeah his dumb behind was human.

I stepped out. "Ronnie, what are you doing out here?"

He spun to face me and then ran forward to hug me, knocking us both on her butts. I shoved him off.

"Stupid, are you crazy?"

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. "Are you? What are you doing out here?" He hesitated and then continued. "I had this horrible dream a little while ago, and I called your cell. You didn't answer. I started to get worried."

I stood up, brushing dirt off my shorts and noticing for the first time that I was still barefoot. My flip-flops were back at the circle. I didn't look at Ronnie as I headed toward the street with him falling into step beside me. He was lying. Just as sure as I knew my own name, Ronnie was lying his head off.

All of a sudden, an intense sadness came over me. I felt alone and scared. I had no one I could trust. I expected not to trust people I didn't know. Now that I knew vampires existed, I expected not to trust them. But of all the people in the world, I did expect to trust my best friend, and I couldn't.

That fact brought tears to my eyes, and I had to swallow over and over to keep them from falling. I wasn't the crying type, not even when I had been teased and called Grimace by half the girls in my class in seventh grade. But this was worse than that, much worse. The more I found out, the less I knew, and nobody wanted to own up to anything.

We stopped outside my house, and Ronnie waited for me to go up to my door. I hesitated. "Ronnie, what's going on? I saw Mrs. Knowles out there in the park. She was talking to you. What about?"

He was quick with his answer. "I don't know why she was out there. You know that crazy old lady. I did ask her if she'd seen you though. She said she didn't but she'd let you know I was looking for you."

I found the nerve to look him in the eye but didn't feel any glamouring happening to me, nothing to indicate he was trying to control me. He just blinked back with his big brown eyes behind his glasses. He looked innocent enough.

"She talked to you? I can't believe it. She acts all anti-social and everything. I don't remember anyone actually carrying on a conversation with her."

"Asking if she's seen you was hardly a conversation." He crossed his arms and looked down at my feet. "Why would you leave the house this time and not wear any clothes or shoes? Your mom would kill you if she found out."

I didn't feel like telling him I had something on my feet when I left, as if that would make up for the fact that I was in the shorts and T-shirt I wore to bed each night. What I did struggle with is how to tell him I couldn't get back in the house. "I pulled the door shut not realizing I didn't bring my key. I'm stuck out here. I guess I'm in trouble either way."

"How?"

I played dumb. "Huh?"

"How did you come out? Front door or back?"

"Um."

He waved his hand. "Never mind. I know a way to climb up to your window. You left it open as usual, didn't you? No matter how many times I've told you not to."

“It’s hot, and the central air doesn’t mean squat in my room. I told you that. Besides, I broke my fan last week, remember?”

“Stay here, I’ll climb up and come open the front door for you.” He started to walk away and then turned back, worry on his face. He looked up and down the street and pushed me toward the steps. “Get up on the porch. You know some of these old people in this block don’t sleep. They sit by the window to watch what’s going on outside.”

I let out a squeak. “Oh my goodness, you’re right.” I darted up on the porch, praying no one had seen me. That was all I needed, for one of them to tell my mother I’d been out here this time of night. I wouldn’t have to be undead to miss daylight for a month. “Hurry up, Ronnie.”

He ran down the street to circle the block and go up the alley. I dropped into the chair my mother kept on the porch and winced from the hard metal under my butt. She took in the cushion for the chair every night to keep strays from making a comfy home on it when we weren’t looking.

By the time I had made it back to my room and assured that dang Ronnie I was fine to be on my own and wouldn’t leave the room again before morning, I was yawning up a storm. My eyes burned, and my jaw ached from stretching it so hard. I needed to go take a shower and wash the dirt off, but I couldn’t make myself do it. Instead I flopped on my bed and was almost out in two seconds before I felt someone in the room with me.

I forced my eyes open and scanned the room. This time, he didn’t use a cloaking technique to hide. He just sat bold as you please in the chair across from my bed, watching me. I made myself sit up and wrap the sheet around me.

“Why are you here?”

He smirked. “Why did you leave me? I could have protected you.”

“But who would have protected me from you?” Getting bold, I slipped out of bed and strolled over closer to him. The scent of blood on him was strong. It tickled my nose and made me want to smack my lips together like an animal. Because that was shocking, I resisted doing it. I wasn’t about to examine myself right then to figure out what issues I had. Besides, Lorcan had issues of his own.

When I got right up on him, I noticed he had gashes in the side of his beautiful face, on both sides, and his eye was swollen. My heart almost stopped, looking at him. I reached out to touch the cut on his forehead, but before my fingertips could make the connection, the little slit was gone. Just like that. I blinked.

“What in the world?”

His eyes drifted closed, and he looked run down in energy beside the fact that he was beat up. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? We heal fast.”

“Vampires?”

“Yup.”

I tried not to cry, but it wasn’t easy. “It hurts though, doesn’t it?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Before I knew what he was doing, he stood up and lifted me in his arms like I weighed five pounds. He carried me to the bed, laid me down, and slipped up there beside me, resting his back on the headboard. I hoped he wasn’t getting any funny ideas, because I wasn’t ready for *that*.

We sat side by side in silence for a while, staring out the window at the moon. My thoughts were alive with trying to figure out who I was and why he was after me, or rather why the others had sent him after me. Who would tell me? Blake?

I shut down that thought before it could fully form. If Lorcan was reading my mind, he’d know I was thinking about questioning Blake about myself, and he might not like it. As weird as that guy was, he seemed the most forthcoming about what was going on. I was going to milk that for all it was worth.

“Lorcan, how did you become a vampire? How long has it been?”

He sighed. “Twenty years. It was my birthday, and I’d just turned eighteen.” He leaned his head back, and I noticed how there was no emotion on his face as he spoke about it. Maybe twenty years was long enough for him to accept the curse of never dying, and being stuck in the dark. “My dad had taken me out that afternoon to get my first car. I was so excited. I thought I was the shit. He let me drive all that way to the next town which was like fifteen miles, to this restaurant we both liked. I had shrimp primavera—bell peppers, onions, mushrooms and this sauce over the penne called arrabbiata.”

“Dang, you remember all that?” I asked him.

He nodded. “It was the last meal I ever ate.”

My throat tightened. “If it’s too hard to talk about, you don’t have to.”

Lorcan pulled me closer to his side and kissed me. I could get used to that. I slipped my arms up around his neck and rested my cheek on his chest. If I couldn’t trust him, it was something I would deal with tomorrow. Tonight, I wanted to pretend that he was my boyfriend, even if it wouldn’t last.

“It was on the way back. Something swooped down from the sky and bumped the front of the car. My dad didn’t believe me. He thought I’d hit something in the road, maybe an

animal.” He shrugged. “It all happened so fast, maybe I was wrong, but I doubt it. We were alongside the cliff by the water. You know the place.”

I nodded. Down past the lake, just outside of town, there was a hilly area where the road got windy. If you weren’t paying attention, you could go over. During heavy storms that route out of the city was closed because of mudslides. I was thinking a rock could have hit his car, but then there were no big rocks like that on that hill above the road. The place was trees, grass, and dirt—nice to look at but not good in bad weather.

“So what happened then?”

This time he did show emotion. Anger. Lorcan put me away from him at the same time I saw that all the bruises and cuts on his face were gone. He stood up and paced the room, his fists clenched and his lips pinched tight together. When he faced me, his eyes glowed, and it was like he didn’t recognize me or thought I was the enemy from back then, the one that had attacked him and his father.

I swallowed. “Lorcan?”

His glowing eyes were creeping me out. They seemed blinded, staring right through me. “He wanted me to stop. We should have kept going. He demanded to drive and yelled at me that I was not responsible. I pulled over, and the second he stepped out of the car, he was attacked. I couldn’t stop it. I punched and beat at the thing until my fists bled, but it was like hitting a wall.”

Don’t I know *that*! Lorcan was built like a wall himself. Must be a vampire thing. My heart hurt for him, but I was scared to go over and try to hug him. I would wait until he calmed down some.

Without warning Lorcan blinked. His eyes went back to normal. The whites returned, and the blue-green drew me in. I drifted over to him, letting the sheet fall on the floor. I couldn’t move. He stood there above me staring into my eyes. As if in slow motion, his lips parted, and his fangs came down.

“To become a vampire, enough of your blood has to be drained away. You do not have to suck a vampire’s blood in return. That’s something different.”

I wondered what that meant. Lorcan had been feeding me his blood. “S-So your father became a vampire?” I asked.

“No. He died without a drop of blood left in his system. Everyone doesn’t turn. I’ve asked myself many times why he didn’t turn. I’ve never found the answer, and no one has been able to tell me.” He shrugged like it didn’t matter, but I knew it did. “I on the other hand did turn.”

My eyes widened. “The vampire attacked you too?”

Lorcan strolled over to the window. A glimmer on the horizon showed the daylight was coming. “Not him. Another member of his coven, whom he called when he realized there would be a witness to what he had done. Vampires don’t allow humans to know of their existence. That’s a given, right?”

I went over and stood in front of him. A few minutes ago I thought he was going to bite me, but I knew now that he wanted to nail it into my head about how I could be turned, and that I was wanted for something else, something he wasn’t ready to tell me. I couldn’t live with that, nor could I ignore it pretending that everything was going to be fine. If I wanted to live, I better learn to fight back. If I had that power he mentioned, I better develop it to protect myself from all the over vampires in Lorcan’s coven, and possibly from him as well.

“I got my revenge eventually.”

My throat went dry, but he didn’t explain what he meant.

“I have to go. Stay inside at night unless I am with you.” He climbed on the windowsill.

“Will I see you again?” That sounded so lame. I tried to give the impression that I didn’t care one way or the other, but it fell flat, evidenced by the laughter in his eyes.

“You want me, little girl?”

I rolled my eyes. “Who you calling little girl?”

“Technically, I’m too old for you. I would be thirty-eight had I lived.”

“Technically, you’re a freak of nature, but I’m not holding that against you.”

He winced. “Are you always so cruel to your friends?”

I laughed. “Ask Ronnie.”

He seemed about to say something at the mention of Ronnie, but changed his mind. He turned his back to me. “I must go before the sun rises. I’ll come back tomorrow night.”

I craved to see him, but I couldn’t let myself get caught up with him. “I need rest. I didn’t get it tonight, and unfortunately, I have to find another job.”

He stepped off the sill, but this time he didn’t fall. He just hung there in the air facing me. That was a sweet trick, but I wasn’t going to admit it to him. His expression told me he’d already read it in my mind. I resisted smacking him.

“I will get you whatever you need. You don’t need a job, and I’ll see you tomorrow night.” Before I could tell him what to kiss, he was gone.



## Chapter Six

I was in the shower after the sun came up, washing the grime off my body while I thought about what I knew. I was someone special. “Okay, that doesn’t sound conceited at all, Tanesha,” I told myself, my voice echoing in the narrow space.

Never mind how stupid it sounded, someone believed it. I was special, not a vampire, definitely not dead since I had leaned half way out the window when the solar rays came beaming down, with my bare arms exposed in their path. Nothing. Not even a sizzle. I laughed at that. Although, I did notice that my eyes were more sensitive to the light, and I hadn’t tested it, but I thought my vision was clearer, better than it was.

I still needed to learn how to kill a vampire. Using human strength wasn’t going to cut it. I doubted I was “the chosen one” with enhanced abilities to rid the world of evil. I laughed at that thought. Yeah, right. This was not TV.

What else did I know, I wondered as I ran my soapy loofah over my skin. I stopped at the lower right side of my belly and froze. “Vampires heal fast and leave no scars.” I dropped the sponge and stared down at myself. The scar from when I had surgery to remove my appendix was gone. I searched the left side even though I knew that was stupid. My brown skin was smooth and baby soft. Finding it missing, I sank down to the floor and cried my eyes out while the water ran over my head. I had forgotten to put on my shower cap. I would have to wash my hair and blow it out or sit under my mother’s dryer, but I didn’t care. All this time, one theory I had was that this was a great big joke, and Ronnie would yell “gotcha” after a while. But Ronnie couldn’t remove a scar.

I was changing, and changing fast. I had to put a stop to it. Lorcan, as much as I wanted to be with him, was turning me, making me like him. I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to be a vampire and live off of people’s blood. I didn’t want to have to remember my last meal because I could no longer eat real food, or be trapped in the dark because the sun would cook me. He didn’t have a right to do this to me! No right at all, and I was going to fight back, no matter what.

\* \* \* \*

I went back to the library, bringing Ronnie along since he refused to leave my side.

“What are we here for again?” he complained.

“Well, we had to leave last time because you couldn’t stop drooling over that girl, whatever her name was.”

He pretended not to remember, but I knew he was picturing her right then. His eyes glazed over a second before he shook it off. “Please. She wasn’t all that.” He sucked his teeth for emphasis.

“Whatever.” I turned away from him and stomped over to the information desk. This time I was determined to get some info on vampires. Urban legends or old myths would work and not fiction. I figured there had to be some reference books that could point me in the right direction. After that, I was going to check out a couple of kickboxing classes. If I found something good and cheap, I was going to call my dad and beg for money to pay for it. If he knew it wouldn’t be for more clothes and shoes, maybe he would be willing. A girl could hope. What I wasn’t going to do was hold my breath waiting for Lorcan to take of whatever I needed.

“Excuse me, do you have any books on vampires?” I asked the librarian in a low voice so no one would overhear me. Not that it mattered. Vamps seemed to be eternally in if you asked me.

With a big fake smile, the librarian led me to where they kept a couple books on the subject. I ran a finger over the spines, reading as I went, and came to Vampires: Myths and Folklore. After snapping up the book, I flipped it open to the introduction page while I was half aware that Ronnie had wandered to the end of the aisle where they kept little chairs with small tables attached to them. He pulled out his Ipod, popped his buds in his ears, and closed his eyes. I sighed. At least he wouldn’t rush me.

“Vampires are creatures of the night with great strength and power. After living for centuries and watching many of the ones they love die around them, they become emotionless, shunning normal society.”

I considered what I had just read. Maybe Lorcan hadn’t lived long enough because he was hardly emotionless, and for that matter neither were the other teenage vampires, Blake and Adrianne. How long had they been vampires?

I tried to remember what that one vamp sounded like in the park, the one Lorcan had fought to save me. He had been older, and yeah, definitely frosty. I shivered. So they shunned society? That meant they might not live in a regular house, didn’t it? Or maybe they did, but they didn’t know their neighbors like we did. Shoot, a whole lot of humans don’t know their neighbors. You saw them on the news all the time. *“No, we didn’t know his ass was crazy like that. We didn’t do more than say ‘what’s up’ while passing by in the morning.”*

I laughed, and I could have sworn someone else laughed with me. I looked around, but there was no one in my aisle. I went back to reading, skipped over a few pages, until I found something that caught my eye. “Vampires are very strong. They can move almost faster than the human eye can detect, and they have an insatiable lust for blood. There are only three ways to kill one of these creatures—severing his head, leaving him in the sunlight, or making him bleed out without replenishing his blood for an undetermined length of time. The old Hollywood movie myths about needing to put a stake through his heart are nonsense. He can be killed just as well with a kitchen knife if for some reason he can’t replenish his blood.”

Another laugh in my head and a whispered “kitchen knife.” I ignored it.

So if I could somehow hold down a vampire, I could either decapitate the sucker or drain him. Like sitting on him would hold him down. How in the world could anybody kill one of them that way?

*“Who are you trying to kill?”*

“All right, enough is enough,” I shouted and ran to the end of the aisle in the opposite direction of Ronnie.” A librarian frowned at me from across the room and tapped a finger to her lips. I was so irritated that I sneered at her. I pitched my voice low. “You better show yourself right now!”

Energy crackled over my fingertips, freaking me out. I shook my hands and ran them over my denim miniskirt, but didn’t dispel the power I felt surging throughout my body. I didn’t see twinkling lights or anything dramatic like that, but I knew I was different if only for a minute.

Nervous, I clung to the nearest bookcase with one hand and threw the other hand out ahead of me. I don’t know what I was planning on doing, but what happened blew my mind. I felt the energy leave my body just like it did when Lorcan was hiding in my room. That time I knew where Lorcan was even though my eyes couldn’t see him. This time I didn’t have a clue. I just knew somebody was here who had jokes, and I was going to make him sorry.

Like I said, the energy or power or whatever you wanted to call it shot out of me, through my arm, and across the floor. I couldn’t see anything, but a cart of books just flew up off the floor and smashed against the wall. When it did, books landed everywhere, and people screamed. But that wasn’t what I was focused on. A shadow uncurled from the floor under a table, separated from the table’s real shadow and darted out of the way just before the cart hit next to it.

I could tell myself that was a coincidence, but it wasn’t likely. Without a second thought, I let go of the bookshelf and took off after the shadow. The more he had to move away from the shadows in the room—and there were few because the library was bright for reading—the more he was visible. I had the feeling he shouldn’t even be trying that trick here where someone would notice.

He moved fast, but he couldn’t get up to what I guessed was vampire speed because of so many people around. He was headed to the exit, and I was right on his tail. A familiar chuckle sounded in my head at the same time I realized it was that dumb behind Blake. I was right on him, like he wanted me to catch him. At the front door, I laid a hand on his shoulder just as I heard Ronnie tell me to come back.

Just that quick, Blake threw on a hood, spun around, and had me in his arms. The world around us went out of focus while we moved through the doors and away from the library

parking lot. I couldn't believe how the wind blew against my face, and I couldn't make out anything around us. I fought to get out of Blake's hold. "Get your hands off me, Blake. What are you doing?" I shouted through gasps for breath.

His hold tightened. "Come on, we're going for a little joy ride."

"Joy ride, my butt. Let me go!"

I elbowed him and ended up hurting myself. Trying to remember how to conjure up that energy flow, I concentrated, and Blake laughed over top my head because I was tucked under his chin, held against his chest. If it was Lorcan, yeah, but Blake was on the boney side, and not comfortable, for real.

I was getting angrier at him for his games. "Put me down, idiot!"

Had to be the anger that triggered the power because like before it came out of nowhere and was like a fist to Blake's chin. He went flying one way, and I went flying another. I bumped the ground and landed in a heap of pain in the middle of an alley. I shook my head to clear it, but I was getting a headache, and from the feel of my forehead, a lump was forming there too. Blake was so going to pay.

Standing up on trembling legs, I looked around and didn't recognize the area. Not that I had memorized back allies, but something told me this was deeper into the heart of the city, not where you wanted to find yourself even in the day time. Fear crept over me, and the anger I had felt at Blake began to dissipate. All that was left was self-preservation.

Hearing a grunt behind me, I spun around to find Blake splayed on the ground, in clear view of the sun. His cloak might have been thick, but it was no match for ninety-five degrees and zero humidity. Even a drop of sweat wouldn't sizzle for long out here before it evaporated.

Blake was dying. One of his hands slid to the edge of the cloak but didn't venture past it. "Please help me, Tanesha," he rasped.

I should let him stay there. After all, he was the enemy, a vampire. But he was also a person. I think. And I couldn't stand there and watch him beg me for help and not do anything. I spotted a shaded area between two Dumpsters and ran over to grab hold of Blake's arm. I tugged. Nothing. He was heavy!

"I can't move you, Blake. Can't you try to stand up?"

Steam rose. My head began to spin. Why would he risk coming out here? To mess with me? He must be out of his mind.

"Get up, Blake! Try!"

He found the strength to lift himself just a few inches off the ground. That helped me get a foot under him and a good grip on his shoulder. With everything in me, I rolled him over and nearly burned off his face. He howled, and I screamed. We rolled again, and he landed in the shade.

“Oh my goodness, I am so sorry,” I told him as I forced myself to examine his face. His skin was hot to the touch, and my stomach roiled looking at the burns. Unlike how Lorcan had healed last night, Blake didn’t seem to be getting better. “Why aren’t you healing?”

He struggled for his next breath. “Too hot, too light, too weak.”

I chewed on my lip and searched up and down the alley. “Do you want me to try to get you some water? I bet they have a corner store around here somewhere.”

Despite how bad off he was, he smirked. “Uh...that would be no!”

“What?”

He cracked a half smile that crumbled seconds after it formed on his face. “What I’m craving is not water.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t about to offer him a vein. “Why were you out here in the daylight? I thought you couldn’t survive.” Looking at him I modified that. “I *know* you can’t survive, so why did you risk it?”

“For the thrill.” He licked his lips and tried to grin again, but it wasn’t happening. “Come on, you can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy that ride across town, right? It was a rush.”

“Yeah, I’m not into rushes.” I stood up. “So what do you want to do, Blake?”

He looked like he was thinking it over with his eyes closed, but I think the light hurt his eyes. I considered giving him my sunglasses, but my head was still pounding. He got us into this mess, and I was not feeling like being that nice. My eyes no doubt weren’t as sensitive as his.

I sank down against the wall and hugged my ankles, considering what to do. I couldn’t leave him there, and I darn sure wasn’t waiting with him until the sun went down.

“Tanesha.”

“Yeah?”

“You saved my life. I think I should save yours.”

“Meaning?”

He took in a deep breath like he hesitated to let out his next words. “Don’t trust Ronnie.”

I burst out laughing. “What? Are you stupid? Ronnie is my best friend, and has been for most of our lives. Why would you even think I would listen to you?”

“Because I’ve never lied to you.”

This creepy feeling came over me, like the temperature had dropped and the sun went behind the clouds, but it didn’t. It was just as hot and bright out there. All the reaction was in me. I played dumb. “What are you talking about?”

“You can sense when someone is lying to you, can’t you? It might even be just a human thing. I don’t remember what that was like, whether I had regular everyday instincts. But you sense it. I feel it in you, distrust of Ronnie.”

“You mean you’re reading my mind.”

“Either way.”

I was so irritated, I stood up intending to leave him laying there so somebody would come by and kick his butt while he was down, but I just stood there frozen.

“He’s been lying to you.”

“You probe his mind too?”

“I’ve tried. I just know he’s lying about something. He’s keeping secrets just like we all are. Yeah, dude, you knew that too. I would tell you everything you wanted to know if I could.” He shrugged. “I like shocking people.”

“Evidenced by your style.”

“Whatever. Look, I said I was going to save your life, okay? I didn’t mean about Ronnie. If he was going to kill you, he’d have already done it, considering whether he could I guess. That move you did in the library was wicked! Anyway, the way I’ll save your life is to tell you to get out of here. They’re already on their way to pick me up.”

My stomach dropped. “They?”

“Members of my coven. They know I’m down. The collective, remember? Get out of here, Tanesha, before they find you and force you to go with them.”

All kinds of thoughts rushed through my head, like what did they want me for, and where was Lorcan? Was Adrienne his girlfriend? Was he in on the plot against me? I didn’t ask

any of it. It seemed like every time I got close to getting some answers something or someone interrupted me. It was getting old fast.

“Are you sure? Are you going to be okay? I could—”

“Go! And don’t forget what I said...about Ronnie. Take a look around you, little girl. There’s a lot more that’s been going on than you know about, and has been for years.”

A tire wheel screeched somewhere in the distance. “*They’re here,*” Blake whispered in my head. I didn’t ask any more questions but spun around and took off at top speed down the alley. I willed with everything in me that I would move as fast as Blake did, but it didn’t happen. I could only pray that the vampires wouldn’t spot me, and that I wasn’t running in the direction that they were coming.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning was the first morning that I didn’t feel renewed and strong. I had to drag myself out of the bed with all my strength and shuffle into the bathroom. When I glanced into the mirror, I screamed.

My mother, who had been passing my door at the time, stuck her head in. “Tanisha, what’s your problem?” she demanded.

I swallowed. “Uh...uh...I found a pimple.”

I was glad she hadn’t crossed my room to peek into my bathroom, but I could imagine her rolling her eyes. “Ah, lord, teenagers! Girl, shut that noise up and get dressed so you can help me clean this house. Summer vacation doesn’t mean no chores. Got it?”

“Yes, Ma. I’ll be there.”

My door shut, and I focused on my face again. Where a couple days ago it had seemed like I had baby fresh skin and was vibrant with health, this morning along with no energy, I was pale. I mean sickly pale like my blood wasn’t circulating or something. I paced from the sink to the toilet and then had to sit down on the toilet because I had used up the little energy I had. “I can’t be dead. I can’t be dead. I can’t be dead.”

Putting my hands together, I looked up at the ceiling and pleaded. “Please, I beg you. Don’t let me be dead.”

Not knowing what else to do, I turned the faucet on and put my hands under the water. I was about to lift them to take a drink from my palms when my stomach turned in disgust. Blood. Oh no, I wanted blood. I craved it. Just seeing the color red on washcloth reflected in my mirror had me licking my lips.

A thought popped into my head, and I looked in the mirror, dragging my lips back from my teeth. No fangs, thank goodness. My teeth were just like they always were, a crooked one at the bottom which I hated, but right about now, I loved that little imperfect tooth. All the vampires I had met were physically perfect.

The longer I stood there, the greater the desire to drink blood was. Terrified, I turned on my shower and climbed into the tub still dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. I let the warm water run over me and felt the same horrible turn in my stomach.

“Just a little,” I muttered to myself. “Just a mouthful will do.” I was sounding like a druggie, and it flipped me out. I rocked, cried, and cursed Lorcan out for a good hour before I lost my fight against sleep. I don’t remember turning the water off, but I do recall slithering across the floor dripping wet to my bedroom, and hauling myself up to my bed. I prayed my mother wouldn’t come in to see what was taking me because I would need to sleep for half a century before I felt up to vacuuming the living room carpet and sweeping off the front porch.

\* \* \* \*

“Hey, Tanesha, wake up.”

I moaned and threw a pillow over my head. “Get lost.”

He yanked the pillow away and tossed it on the floor. I pried one eye open to glare at Lorcan. He wasn’t so cute, I tried to tell myself. “You lied. You didn’t come last night.”

“I had to take care of something. I’m here now.” He held out his arms so I could see he was wearing black jeans and a red T-shirt. What was up with the color black with them? Red I could see. As the fog lifted from my brain, I remembered what had happened earlier and was glad to note my body didn’t go psycho at the sight of Lorcan’s shirt. Had it been my imagination?

No. I was still weak. I had to fight to get up and sit on the side of the bed. “I hate you. Get out of my room.” Tears filled my eyes. “Look what you’ve done to me.”

He sank down beside me and tried to hold me, but I shoved him. He held onto my hands, and I couldn’t shake him off. “Don’t push me away. I’ll help you. Trust me.”

“Trust you?” I stood up, but my head began to spin, and I fell back down. Lorcan pulled my feet up and laid me back against my pillows. “You did this. You’ve killed me.”

He leaned down over me, staring into my eyes and brushing at my nappy, wild hair like it was made of silk. I wished I could hide. “You’re not dead, Tanesha. You’re still human, still alive.”



With his forehead resting against mine, he closed his eyes, and I did too, breathing him in. I wanted to hate him, wished I had never met him, but I craved just talking to him, being with him, as much as I had the blood earlier.

“I guess I had what you would call chores to do last night, and I was glad to do them because it would help me put some distance between us. I thought I would realize that I could let you go.”

I licked my lips. “And?”

“And I can’t.”

He curled his fingers around mine and kissed my hands. I felt like a woman, and Lorcan was my man, but on the other hand, it was like playing house, and I was expecting my bubble to pop soon. “I’m so weak, Lorcan. I feel like my throat is closing, like I can’t breathe.”

You would have thought I told him he was fat and ugly the way his face fell. The depression in his eyes was clear. “Can’t turn back, Tanesha.”

His jagged teeth came down.

“No.” I shook my head. “No, Lorcan. I can’t do it.”

“You have to.”

He raised his wrist to his mouth and bit down. Thick red blood oozed around his lips. It should have been gross, but it wasn’t. In my head, I went over what I had read in that book at the library. I could make an excuse to him to let me go down to the kitchen. I could get a knife and...No, I couldn’t. Not him. Not Lorcan of all people.

Lorcan held out his wrist, and I took hold of it ready to slurp it up. A knock on the door, a twist of the knob, and I was holding air in front of my mouth. Lorcan was gone. I glanced from my mother now standing in my doorway to the window where the curtains were billowing.

“Are you okay, baby?” my mother asked. “I came in earlier, and you were knocked out. I couldn’t wake you for anything.”

“Sorry, Ma, I wasn’t feeling well. Something I ate I guess.” Or something I didn’t eat, I thought, remembering the sight of the blood on Lorcan’s wrist. Even as I sat there all calm as you please in front of my mother, I was greedy to find Lorcan. I actually wanted to jump out the window after him. The only thing about that is I wasn’t sure if it was the blood calling me or Lorcan himself. I was in so much trouble, and how could I tell my mother that? She would be making me an appointment to see a head doctor inside two seconds.

I grabbed my stomach and hunched forward, not meeting my mother's eyes. "I'm still not feeling that well. I think I should just go back to sleep since it's getting late, and try again tomorrow."

She nodded. "Yeah, might as well. Your chores will wait."

I sighed. "Thanks a lot, Ma."

Her laugh irritated me as she strolled across to my bed and sat down a saucer I had noticed in her hand. "Here, eat this sandwich I made for you. It's sliced turnkey and cheese on rye with mayo. The way you like it." She pushed the plate toward me, and I resisted shrinking from it like it was filled with poison. "You need your strength because I can see you're still shaking. If you're not better tomorrow, I'm calling your doctor."

To cover, I snatched the plate up like I was starving and lifted a half of the sandwich to my mouth. "Dang, Ma, don't worry. I'll be fine tomorrow."

"Don't dang me. Next thing I know you'll be cussing me out. You're not grown yet."

I grumbled. "Sorry."

She walked over to the door and shot a dark look at me over her shoulder. "Finish all of that food and go back to sleep. I'll check on you in the morning." It was almost like she expected me to try sneaking out of the house and she was locking me down. I made my face as innocent as possible and smiled back as I bit into the heavy bread. Nothing could have tasted more like sawdust.

## Chapter Seven

When my mother shut the door, I spit the bite of sandwich out and ran over to the window. I searched the back yard, but Lorcan wasn't there. By that time, I was seriously desperate. I tiptoed to my door, listened at it, and then opened it, but the sound of the TV in the living room let me know my mother was down there. Probably folding clothes and watching the news. I couldn't get out the back door or the front because one of the steps creaked, and before I could get out, she'd see me.

Feeling defeated but still crazy enough to try anything, I ran back to my window, shoved it open wider, and threw a leg out. We didn't even have a fire escape like some people did, and in other houses around the city, some people had second story porches on the back of the house. Ours was a straight drop down to a broken leg or a snapped neck.

I swallowed, took in a shaky breath and put a second leg over the sill. Maybe if I twisted around and let myself drop from my hands, there would be less chance of breaking my neck. I was about to go for it when something stopped me. I couldn't see anything, but there was a force around me, keeping me from going beyond the window. I actually leaned way out, or tried to. Four or five inches from my house, an invisible shield kept me in place.

Was that why Lorcan hadn't come back? That weird protection thing he had mentioned went up? Was it because I didn't want him here? While I sat there, I tried to project my thoughts to him wherever he was. *"Lorcan, you out there? Come in, good buddy."*

I laughed at the CB talk. This time, no one laughed with me. At least Blake wasn't around. Come to think of it, I hoped he was okay. I was sure he was. The men in his coven, the older ones, probably patched him right up. I was another story.

*"Lorcan!"*

Still no answer. I climbed back inside and stumbled across the room to stand over the plate of food. All the energy I had left had been used climbing out the window. I was in worse condition. After sinking to my knees, I laid my head on my bed and reached for the sandwich. Downstairs, the doorbell rang. I let my gaze drift to the clock at my bedside. Who would be coming here at eleven thirty at night?

A deep voice I recognized rumbled on the stairs. "I'll see if she's still awake."

"Dad!" My yell of excitement was weak, and I didn't get up, but I was so glad to see him. It had been forever. And while I loved my mother a lot, as great as she was, she couldn't compare to my dad. He was seriously—my hero.

My mother had to be whack to have left him. He had money, he was over six feet tall, and he was obviously good-looking because everywhere we went when I was younger, women were trying to talk to him. That pissed off my mother. I had thought it was funny

at the time, but Lorcan would no doubt get the same reaction from girls at my school or the mall, and I would hate it. Not that he was my boyfriend or that I was hoping he would be, but still. I'm just saying.

My dad stepped inside the room and shut the door behind him. He rushed around the bed and pulled me up from the floor. His frown at the plate of food as he set it aside told me it was just as much a turn off to him as me, but then he had always been a picky eater. He lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. The dark expression on his face made me shiver.

"What's been going on around here?"

I pulled out of his hold and glanced away. "Nothing. I don't know what you mean. Same old, same old."

I wasn't going to tell him about the vampires after me or about Lorcan in particular. He'd flip. Well, he wouldn't believe me, and I'd find my butt down at the nearest hospital in the psych ward. No thanks. I would keep my secrets to myself.

"Don't give me that, Tanesha." He was starting to sound like my mother. "You're pale, you're shaking, and your mother said you've been sleeping for almost twenty-four hours."

I waved an arm that proved his words by the way it wobble-wobbled around, and I dropped it in my lap, hoping he didn't notice. "Ever heard of a cold or the flu?"

"Tanesha!"

"Sorry, Dad." You could get away with smarting off to your mother sometimes, but you didn't try that crap with your dad unless you wanted to land on the floor blinking and wondering how you got down there. "You know how she is. She exaggerates. I have not been sleeping for twenty-four hours." I pretended to cough. "Just a little bug. No big deal."

I don't know who I thought I was fooling, but it was not Evan Johnson, that's for sure. "I feel like you're not being taken care of, and if that's the case, someone will have to answer to me."

"Dad, Ma's doing her best. For real, just let it go, please."

He didn't respond for a few minutes, and I started twitching. A weird feeling came over me, and I glanced out the window. I could have sworn a shadow flitted past, too big to be a bird. The gentle pressure came over me, the one I'd experienced before when a vampire was probing my mind. I shut my eyes tight and thought of fruit—watermelon, apples, oranges. That turned my upset stomach, so I thought of the color yellow and associated it with the sun. I pictured the sun in my mind, great, big, and hot. I remembered that our sun was so big you could get millions of Earths inside it. When I learned that, it blew me

away. That must mean the sun was ridiculously far away from our planet. Yet we felt the heat from it.

After a while, the pressure in my mind eased, and I hoped whoever had been nosing around in there didn't find what they were looking for. I wanted to learn how to close my mind so everybody and his brother couldn't invade it. What I was thinking was my business and nobody else's.

My dad stood up and paced with his arms folded across his chest and a finger tapping his chin. His eyebrows were low, and his deep brown eyes seemed to be even darker. He was angry, but I hoped he wasn't going to take it out on my mother and blame her for letting me get sick. The man was hard on me when it came to grades, but I guess he did spoil me and half expected my mother to do the same. "Pack some clothes, Tanesha. You're staying with me a few days."

"What!" I forced myself to stand and then wished I didn't considering I was about to smash my nose on the floor. "Why do I have to go with you? This isn't the right time. I have things I have to do, to find out and..."

"What things?"

I looked at the floor.

"You're keeping something from me, Tanesha. Do you think I'm stupid?" Heck no. He knew me better than I knew myself. "When I asked you what is going on, you looked guilty. So, you can either explain it all to me now, or you can come and stay at my apartment until I feel comfortable letting you come back here, or until school starts. Your choice."

He could not be serious. Wait, what was I worried about? My mother wasn't going for it. A couple days tops, and I'd be back home. No problem. "Can Ronnie come?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Come on, Dad. He's my best friend. You met him. He lives down the street."

"Not going to happen. You'll be fine at my house without Ronnie." He strolled to the door. "I'm going to discuss this with your mother. Be ready in fifteen minutes."

And just like that my dad was rearranging my life, making me have to put off finding out what was going on with me. Then again staying at his house might give me a break from being chased, and he also had a top of the line computer, unlike my mother and me living in the dark ages. I could do some Internet research on vampires.

I don't know what my dad said to my mother, but I was shocked that she didn't argue at all. In fact, when I walked past her and gave her a kiss on the cheek, she told me to have a

good time while I was gone, which was weird because normally she would have said something like “you better act like you know while you’re over there” which meant she’d kill me if I did anything she didn’t like.

By the time we made it to the car, I was ready to nod off in the passenger seat. My father pressed something into my hand. “Take this.”

I looked down to find a tiny red pill. Fear gripped me. “Dad, you’re not giving me drugs, are you?”

He chuckled. “Of course not. It’s a vitamin. You look like you can use some nutrients.”

“If you only knew.” He offered me a warm bottle of water, and I used it to swallow the pill. Glancing outside my window, I saw something on the roof of my house and blinked. I couldn’t believe it. Lorcan had come back, or he never left. He crouched up there with a breeze stirring his silky black hair, lifting it off his forehead. My fingers started itching to play in that hair. I sighed.

I waited for him to say something in my head. Good-bye or I’m never letting you go. I kinda wanted the drama, the excitement. I know, I was what they called a glutton for punishment. Lorcan didn’t say a word, and my head remained quiet. What a lonely place.

\* \* \* \*

Whatever was in that “vitamin” my father gave me must have worked because at one in the morning, I was wide awake, all weakness gone. I began to wonder if I was fully vampire now. But I found my old heart monitor when I was nosing around in my dad’s den, and it confirmed my heart was still beating. I had used that thing constantly when I was on an exercise kick about three months ago. That hadn’t lasted long because Ronnie was skinny as hell, and he was always tempting me with donuts.

Continuing to search my dad’s desk for other items I might have left over here, I booted up the computer. When the computer finally came up, I noticed my dad had installed Yahoo messenger. I knew about it from chatting with my friends online, creating a Myspace page and a Facebook account, even though I couldn’t think of what to say on them half the time. I did shout outs like once a week, but that was it, and it was always at somebody else’s house or the library.

I double clicked the browser icon and waited. While I did, a message box popped up. I was going to close it since they probably thought it was my dad, but I stopped cold when I saw the name. Nina Knowles.

“What the hell?”

My throat went dry, and weakness shot throughout my body. Not from lack of blood, but from fear. This was big, and I knew it. “What is Mrs. Knowles doing on my dad’s instant messenger friends’ list?”

Shaking from head to toe, I read the message. “Is she there now? Did you get any information out of her?”

She? Was she talking about me? My teeth chattered. I was going to throw up. There was no reason in hell my father should be talking to that old lady that lived next door to me. No reason at all. So what excuse could he give? What were they up to?

I curved my fingers over the keyboard thinking about what I could say to get her talking, get her to tell me more about what information my dad wanted to get out of me, and what they intended to do about it. But I was so shocked and scared, I couldn’t think of what to say.

“What are you doing, Tanesha.”

I screamed and jumped, knocked over my chair, and fell on the floor face down. My dad crossed the room, and instead of helping me up, he first jabbed a finger in the power button to shut off the computer. When he turned to offer me a hand up I shrank away. The man I loved more than anybody, the person I had figured would always take care of me, was all of a sudden someone I didn’t know. I didn’t trust him.

“What’s up, Dad?” I demanded. “That was Mrs. Knowles, my neighbor. What’s she doing IMing you?”

He was going to lie. I saw the split second hesitation. Funny, I hadn’t noticed it before this weird junk started happening to me. Now, I seemed to zoom in on eye shifts, muscle twitches, and whatever else was an indicator that the person was about to make up a load of crap.

“There’s more than one Knowles in the world, Tanesha. I know a lot of people, being in my line of work.”

I shook my head. “I’m not buying it. Nina Knowles. That’s what it said. I know that’s Mrs. Knowles’ first name because our dumb behind mailman mixes up the mail all the time, and we get hers. You’re telling me that’s a coincidence, that you know someone with the same first and last name?” Before he could get a word out, I continued. “Who also asked you if *she* was here and if you got any information out of *her*? So since it was to you she was talking to and there’s no one else here, I’m guessing she’s referring to me.”

He grinned, crossed his arms, and sat on the edge of his desk. “You’re very clever, Tanesha, but what could I expect being my daughter.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

His eyes narrowed. I swallowed and tried to keep my eyes locked on his, but I couldn’t. When he wanted to, my dad intimidated me, and he knew it. “Let’s just pretend you didn’t see what you saw for your own good.”

All kinds of warning bells went off in my head. Did he really think I was going to let it go? Mrs. Knowles’ weird tail was out in the park in the middle of the night. I started backing away from my dad, trying to make it to the door.

Mrs. Knowles had been talking to someone I couldn’t see in the grocery store the other day, and then the next thing you know my dad shows up when he hadn’t ever come to see me outside of his normal every other weekend thing. And since he’d had a big case, even that had been slack for the last few months. Was he the one she had been talking to? Was Mrs. Knowles encouraging him to take me and question me? Why? What information could I possibly have that they could want?

Or maybe he wanted me dead too? Panic set in. I yanked the door open and ran out of the den.

“Tanesha! Come back here. I want to talk to you,” he called out, but I ignored him and kept going.

I half expected to feel his heavy hand drop on my shoulder to stop me from leaving, but he let me go, and soon I hit the street running. I didn’t stop until I was three blocks away, and the stitch in my side forced me to catch my breath. My throat burning and tears running down my face, I wobbled in the direction of the subway station, which ran twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week in our city. I paid my fare and jumped on the train which rolled in minutes after I got there.

Huddled in my seat with my knees drawn up to my chest and my head resting on them, I let the events of the last couple of weeks run through my mind. I considered calling Ronnie since we talked about everything and everybody, but then I remembered he had been lying too. He had lied about what he and Mrs. Knowles had talked about when he ran into her that night at the park. If he could keep secrets from me, then I could keep them from him. I know that was childish, but so what. I wasn’t grown yet anyway, and I was feeling like a little girl right about then, like I needed my mother’s shoulder to cry on.

“Yeah right. I can’t tell her about this. She’d never believe me.” I moaned and complained to my dad even though he wasn’t there, and I laid out Ronnie too. It took me some time to realize I wasn’t alone in the car and that anybody hearing me would think I was psycho.

I looked up at the person across from me and shrieked. “Lorcan! When did you get here? Were you already on the train when I got on? I didn’t see you.”



He smirked, slouched down with his legs wide like guys always did, and peered at me with those beautiful blue-green eyes that made my insides turn to jelly. “I followed you to your dad’s apartment.”

My eyes widened. “You did? Why didn’t you come into my room like you did at my mother’s house? I have my own room at his place too.”

His blink seemed like slow motion. “Your protection was up.”

“My protec—” He had said something about that before, but I didn’t get it.

“Tell me why you ran away, risking your life out here so late.” He moved across to sit beside me and ran a thumb over the wet streaks on my face. “Why are you crying?”

Lorcan looked at the tears like they were a weird phenomenon that he’d never seen. His stare started to make me feel uncomfortable. I shoved his hand away. “Take a picture, why don’t you? Dang. You act like you’ve never seen tears.”

“Vampires can’t cry water.”

That surprised me. “What?”

“We cry blood.”

“Weird.”

He shrugged and glanced away. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

“Not.” I stood up and moved to the door for the next stop. Lorcan followed me and stopped directly behind me, close enough for me to feel the energy rolling off his body in place of actual human warmth. He rested his hands on my shoulders and waited with me. When he whispered in my ear, I shivered.

“We should go out.”

I swallowed. “Go out?”

“Go steady.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him, glancing up over my shoulder. “You did not just say going steady.” I laughed. “What era are you from?”

“I’m not that old,” he grumbled.

“If you say so, Grandpa.” The doors slid open, and I broke free from him and sprinted along the platform. A guard looked like he was about to say something to me, but I was up the stairs and out through the turnstile before he could form the words. While I ran, the night air whipped at my face, cooling it.

Lorcan zipped up from behind, grabbed me around the waist, and increased his speed. Before I knew what was happening we were streaking along the road, passing people and cars. From the blur and the darkness around us, I knew no one could pick up on what had just passed them. I tried to remember if ever in my life, I’d felt something move by in a blur like that, but I didn’t think so.

We didn’t slow down until we were near the lake, and then Lorcan let me walk on my own while he held my hand. Tingles ran through my hand to my arm and all over my body. This was unreal. I didn’t know how long it would last, if it would go past September when school started up, but I knew Lorcan was special. I wanted to know everything about him.

At a small pier, we stopped and sat down to remove our shoes before dipping our toes in the water. Lorcan laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“The myths about us.” He pointed to the water. “One of them talks about us being afraid of moving water or not being able to cross it. We are not that lame.” He threw his head back and looked up at the moon. “I like to think a group of bored nerds got together and thought up the ‘rules’ just to screw with everybody. Wherever we go, we get slapped with stereotypes.”

I snorted. “Stereotypes, huh? Dang, guess it’s not just a skin color thing.”

He lightly flicked my nose. I would have punched him, but he pulled me up on his lap and kissed me so hard and fast, I forgot what I was doing. My head was spinning it was so nice, but I was scared to let myself go. I pulled back and crawled off his lap.

“What’s wrong?”

I shrugged, not looking at him. “I don’t know you that well. I’m learning bits and pieces, but I’m not the kind of girl that’s going to jump on any boy that comes along. Got it?”

He raised his hands in defense and smiled, but I was sure there was something dark and dangerous in his eyes. Lorcan chose to be sweet to me. I had to remember what he was, even if his face did make me weak.

“Got it. What would you like to know?”

I caught a fingernail between my teeth and thought for a minute. “Well, do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Not a one.”

“What did you do after you became a vampire? And what do you do now? I mean do you have a job, or do you do regular stuff like other teens do? Go to the mall, the movies, or just hang out?”

“I don’t know the last time I went to a movie. They don’t interest me that much. Real life is more exciting, especially when Blake, Adrianne, me, and a few others in our coven go grunt-hunting.”

Okay, that didn’t sound good. “Grunt-hunting?”

His eyes grew dark with his excitement. “Yeah, they’re what we call lower life beings. They can shape shift to look like regular people. They live probably as long as we do, but I don’t know how they’re made, whether they’re born into this world like humans or are turned like vampires. Most of them are evil, but some can be made into slaves if you know what to do to make them that way. When you hunt them, you have to be careful because they can use magic.”

“Are you for real?” I didn’t see any sign that he was lying, but how could he not be? Lower life shape shifters that could do magic. Come on, that had to be TV. “You’re kidding, right? What do they look like in their regular form?”

He winked.

“You are joking!”

“I’ll prove it to you if you give me another kiss.”

I stood up and put my hands on my hips. “My kisses are not for sale or trade.”

He rose as well. “Then give it to me for free.”

I mugged him up and down his body and turned away, but he caught my arm and whipped me back. I knew he would do that, and kind of liked it. Strong and commanding, but not so much I had to read him. When he let me up for air about five minutes later, I was panting, but his chest wasn’t moving a bit. I laid my hand on it and felt no heart beat, no rise and fall of breath going in and out of his lungs. He was definitely real, and if he was, then maybe these creatures he talked about were too. I didn’t want to see them, but at the same time, I was curious.

“Show me.”

His smile grew wide, and his hold on me tightened. I figured I was in for another fast ride all over the city looking for the grunts. “Okay, hold on. Be quiet, and stay close. Remember, they’re dangerous, even for vampires, which is why we like to hunt them, of course.”

“White boys,” I grunted.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be, I guess. Let’s go.”

## Chapter Eight

We stood next to a light pole because Lorcan could grab onto the shadow from it and cloak us both with darkness. The grunt wouldn't be able to see us, but we could observe him. I rested with my back against Lorcan's chest while he wrapped his arms around me. The energy he commanded like it was nothing unfolded from his body and made the hair on my arms rise. It tickled, but I wasn't about to laugh with that thing close by.

*Thing* was the only way to describe it because I couldn't get a good look. All I knew was that it was tall and thin. Unnaturally thin. When it moved, it seemed to float rather than walk on two legs. Energy was coming off of it too. Lorcan had whispered in my ear that the energy increased when it was about to change or do something magical.

"Why are we whispering?" I asked him. "I know I can't talk in your head, but normally you'd be showing off by now, all inside my head."

He didn't take his eyes off the grunt. "You said your dad gave you a red vitamin?"

"Yeah, so?"

"It wasn't a vitamin."

My stomach turned. "What was it?"

"Something created by a doctor I heard of years ago when I was first turned. He was a vampire. He wanted to suppress the traits that make us what we are. It didn't work on full fledged vampires, but he discovered it did work on humans that have had some of their blood drained by a vampire, if they are showing symptoms of turning. But you'd have to keep taking the pill until your blood replenishes itself, and your system is purified of all traces of the blood I fed you."

"Oh my goodness. You're kidding me. I can be cured?" I closed my eyes and blew out a breath, with a smile creeping over my face. "My dad wasn't trying to kill me if he gave me that pill."

"Or he was keeping you out of his head." Lorcan had to burst my bubble.

I glared at him. "What are you talking about? I was only able to read minds that one time. The powers kept flipping around to new ones, and they'd only last a short hour or so before I was back to normal."

He shrugged. "He had no way of knowing that. The fact that he gave you a suppression pill says he knew you had been exposed to vampires. He had no reason to think you weren't farther along the transformation than he thought."

"How do you know that's what it was? It could have been a vitamin."

He put a hand on the top of my head and forced me to look forward to watch the grunt. “All the way to your father’s apartment, I tried to enter your mind. I know that you wanted me there, so you were not throwing up a mental block—if you even knew how to. And I still can’t enter your head, probably for another couple of hours, unless I bite you.”

“Don’t even think about it!” I warned. Then a sound reached us, of a woman’s heels clicking on the ground somewhere nearby. The grunt heard it too and began to change right before my eyes. I could not believe that the willowy thing which had hovered a second before, had now set itself on the ground with two human feet. A ripple raced over his body from the bottom to the top, and the faster it went, the faster the thing became this average sized man wearing a jogging suit.

I began to shake. “What the—?”

Other than those couple of words, I couldn’t speak. The lady rounded the corner, and the thing was on her. I couldn’t tell what it wanted, to suck her blood, to kill her, or what, but she screamed her head off. I looked up and down the street. Nobody came. Lorcan had brought us to the worst area of the city where if you had any common sense you didn’t bring your butt outside after dark. But some people had no choice. You had to work, and if you got off after dark, then that’s the way it was.

“Lorcan, do something!” I begged. “Save her.”

He had the nerve to look confused. “Why?”

“Because she’s a person, and you have the strength to stop it, that’s why.” When he didn’t move, I tried to get out of his arms. He held on. I stomped on his foot with no reaction whatsoever, except those creepy crawly feelings in my ankle. “Let me go, Lorcan.”

“Keep your voice down,” he growled. “They travel in packs often. It’s not likely this one is all alone.”

I let out a shout on purpose. “Hey, you, get your hands off her!”

The thing looked up with big black eyes. I almost threw up in my mouth. The thing let the woman go, and she fell on the ground crying. The creature came at us. I knew Lorcan was going to just pick me up and run, leaving that woman behind, so I tried to distract him.

“More over there,” I shouted. He looked, and I broke free and rolled on the ground like I was some kind of trained spy. Okay, it probably looked crazy, but it felt good. Lorcan didn’t have time to grab me again, because the grunt was all over him snarling and flashing some scary claws. I searched around for a weapon and found a small metal pipe that looked like it had broken off the rail at the side of some steps.

Just in time to crack the second grunt that showed, upside his head, I swung the pipe as hard as I could. The thud of hitting his head made me scream again, but I whipped it a second time. He went down and looked unconscious, but Lorcan was now fighting two more.

I ran over to the woman still crying on the ground. “Are you nuts, lady? Get up, and get out of here unless you want that thing to eat you.” I didn’t wait for her to get up, I yanked on her arm hard enough to dislocate it. That got her moving. In seconds she was on her feet and running down the street.

A flash of white light lit the area, and ear-splitting screeches made me sink to my knees, covering my ears. Lorcan roared. The sound must have been tearing his head apart with his sensitive hearing. I looked over to find him flinging two of the shifters off of his arms. Like a streak of lightning he flashed over to me, snapped me up into his arms, and we shot off down the street in the direction the woman had run. Within a few moments, the grunts were nowhere in sight.

Lorcan continued at top speed until we were back at the lake, and then he let me slide down to the grass. The look he turned on me could have set my hair on fire if he had the power. “Why did you do that?”

I sucked my teeth. “You the one who wanted to hunt grunts.”

He growled and sank down beside me. “I would not have attacked them with you there. You’re a distraction.”

“Oh please, you were getting your butt kicked, and you’re blaming me.”

“I was not!”

“Whatever, Lorcan!”

We were nose to nose. A gentle laugh made us snap out of it, and I looked around. Of all people Adrienne stood there, looking too beautiful as usual. Her pale skin glowed in the moonlight, and her flaming hair made me want a pair of scissors. Her arms were folded under big old half exposed boobs.

“You’re late, Lorcan.” She pointed her chin at me. “For that?”

I jumped to my feet, adrenaline from the fight pumping through me at top speed. “Oh, we can go right now, girlfriend.”

I hadn’t completed a blink before she was on me, hand around my neck. “You sure about that?”

Lorcan jerked her away, a little too hard. She tumbled on her butt, and I laughed out loud.

“I told you to stay away from her, Adrienne.”

“You turn on your own—for a human?”

“Leave it alone.” He gave her his back, but I wasn’t letting her out of my sight. She was sneaky, and I wouldn’t put it past her to do something to Lorcan just to get at me.

On the edges of my mind, I heard whispering, and I knew the pill was wearing off. I decided not to mention it just in case. Adrienne stood up and brushed her butt off. She straightened her short skirt and pulled her top down over it. “He wants to see her. Now. He knows she left her dad’s, so you can’t use that as an excuse.”

I looked at Lorcan. “What’s she talking about?”

“Nothing.” He growled at Adrienne, and I was thinking he sounded more like a werewolf than a vampire at that point. A shiver ran over my body. You know when you’re in over your head, and I so had that feeling right then. It was flashing lights and ringing bells at me. I should go back home and take my chances with my dad. At least I’d known him longer, and he hadn’t killed me yet.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here, but I ain’t nobody’s fool, Lorcan.” I sneered and ran my gaze up and down Adrienne’s body before spinning on my heel and starting to walk off. “I’m going home.”

Lorcan trapped my elbow in a tight grip. I glanced back over my shoulder and caught the pitiful expression on his face, like he was apologizing before he sold me out. “I’m sorry, Tanesha. I can’t let you do that.”

“Excuse me?”

“They won’t kill you, I’m sure.” He spread his fingers out and shrugged like that would make it all right.

Adrienne laughed. “Not forever.”

“I can’t believe this,” I shouted. “I thought we—” Adrienne was all ears to know what I was going to say. I wasn’t giving that skank the satisfaction. Without thinking about it, I hauled off and punched Lorcan in the face. I aimed for his big fat lying lips, but missed and hit his jaw. I cried out in pain.

He grabbed my hand and looked at it. “Why did you do that?” Stupid jerk didn’t even feel it.



The second attack was a kick, but this time, I was careful to protect my toes and hit him with the ball of my foot. I managed to knock him off balance and give myself enough time to get my arm free, and then I ran as fast as I could. Of course outrunning either of them was a joke, but I tried. Adrienne was the first to catch me. She slung me around and tried to slap my face, but I blocked her swing. Her eyes widened, and I imagined my face was full of shock too. The energy in my body was building, and I knew if I didn't gain an advantage over her quick, her years of doing this would outweigh my power that came out only when it felt like it.

So I let her have it. I grabbed a hold of her long hair, spun her around, and shoved with all my strength in time to send her flying into Lorcan's chest. The power must have been great, because they both slammed to the ground and tumbled until they splashed in a heap inside the water. I wanted to stick around and laugh my head off, but I got out of there. As I ran, I heard their thoughts clear as day.

*"How the hell did she do that?"* Adrienne complained.

*"I don't know, but it was seriously cool, wasn't it? She's amazing."*

My heart warmed hearing the pride in Lorcan's voice, but I wasn't stupid enough to trust him again. I had liked him—a lot. I wanted something more with him, but that was shot.

*"When I get my hands on her, if the others don't kill her, I will! What is she anyway?"* Adrienne demanded.

Lorcan grumbled. *"How do I know? They only tell us so much. But she's more than a regular human. That's for sure. I want to know what, but..."*

*"But you have to follow orders, Lorcan. You know what they'll do to you if you don't bring her in."*

After that, the conversation was cut off. I didn't know if I was too far away or if they had blocked me hearing. It wasn't until I had jumped on a subway train that I realized how far I had come in such a short time. I didn't think I'd moved as fast as Lorcan had bringing me to the lake, but it had been about three miles in a few minutes, and I'd never run that fast.

I jumped onto the first train through the station, even though it wasn't the one that would take me back to my dad's apartment, or to my home with my mother. I just needed to get away and do some thinking. I wasn't dead, but I had some kind of latent power. Who was I? Were my parents my real parents, or had I been adopted? One thing was for sure. My dad wasn't going to admit anything, and now I knew that Lorcan and Adrienne didn't know much more than I did. What about the others in the coven? Could I trust going to them?

I shook my head as I sat down in a vacant seat. "No way. That's crazy."

“Excuse me?”

I looked up to find a woman watching me from across the aisle. Her eyes were so dark and shadowed beneath the hood she wore that I couldn't see the whites in them. I shivered and hugged myself. “Nothing.”

Suspicion that she was one of them rose in my mind. I scanned the car to see which way I'd need to run if she attacked. The power that had gotten me here had fizzled. I was on my own.

When I looked back at the place where the woman had been sitting, the seat was empty. My heart felt like it was about to choke me. I gasped for breath, looking around. Maybe it was my imagination. Maybe she'd never been there in the first place. If she had been there, she would have taken me, wouldn't she? I mean, she was a full grown vampire. I was just...well, whatever I was.

“Whatzzzzzzuppp!”

I turned toward the back of the car, and coming through the doors connecting two cars was Blake. I sighed. “Hey, Blake. They sent you for me?”

He dropped into a seat. “Yup. I'm the only one crazy enough to run around in a train when the sun is coming up soon.”

“Oh, you didn't learn your lesson last time, huh?” I checked our location. We were coming up on Franklin, the first stop where the train moved from below ground to several feet above it. My watch said four-thirty. It didn't seem like so much time had passed in the little I'd done tonight. This was the first time in my life I had stayed out all night. If I wasn't in so much danger, I would have gotten a thrill out of it. As it was, I was dog tired. “You look like you healed okay,” I told Blake.

“Yeah, I fed. That always speeds it up.” He lifted his arms out to the sides, and his coat widened making him look like one of those Count Dracula guys who were about to turn into a bat. As usual, Blake's clothes were dumpy and dark, and it looked like he'd added another piercing to his left ear. “You're not going to fight me on this, are you, Tanesha? Come on, dude, I think you and me could be buds.”

I rolled my eyes. “Buds? Get real. How do you keep those holes in your ears if your body always heals?”

“Willpower.”

I glared at him. “Fine.”

“Fine, what?”

I stood up. “I’m ready to go with you. I figure if I’m going to find out what’s going on, I should go to the man running the show.”

Blake whistled. “Yeah! Now you’re talking. We’ll be grunt-hunting together in no time. You wait and see.”

Not! That one experience was more than enough. I didn’t want to see those weird creatures ever again, if I could help it.

\* \* \* \*

My eyes burned, and my throat was dry. I had been crying for the last hour and a half or more. I couldn’t be sure because they had taken everything—my watch, my cell, even my shoes. I sat huddled in a cold, dark room with only a twin mattress on the floor in the corner. The door was locked from the outside, and I was pretty sure from the scrapes over the cement floor outside the room that someone guarded the door.

Unlike how Lorcan and I traveled together, Blake brought me to his people in style. I had never ridden in a limo, but that’s just what was waiting for us when we climbed the piss-smelling steps from the subway. A sleek black limousine was parked at the curb with a chauffeur beside it. He had his hands crossed in front of him and a hat pulled low on his head, along with sunglasses. At night, mind you.

It wasn’t until I was sliding onto the soft cushion under my butt and gawking at the interior of the car that I realized the windows were tinted really dark. And while we rode, it got later until the sun rose in the sky. I couldn’t see it, but I knew it was out there by the time on my watch.

“Cool, huh?” Blake asked. He touched a button, and a panel slid down revealing all kinds of sodas. “Want something?”

I frowned. “Why is that there? You guys don’t drink it.”

“For you.” He winked. “You get the VIP treatment.”

“Whatever. Did you arrange all this, Blake? You called them?”

He tapped his head. “Yup. See, I know how to do it right, not like that wannabe, Lorcan. He thinks he’s so great because the head man favors him, but I’m the one they can depend on. In the end, I’m the one who got you to come.”

I turned away, rubbing my arms because it was cold in the car. “I don’t want to talk about him. Why is it so freakin’ cold in here?”

“Wards off the heat of the sun. Not a good thing, trust me.” He laid across the seat and slipped his hands behind his head, with one ankle crossed over his knee. “Get comfortable. We have a long ride.”

“How can the driver stand it? The sunlight, I mean. We’ve got tint here, but there’s no way he would be able to see through that much at the front.”

“Grunt.” Blake yawned.

“Huh?”

“The limo driver is a grunt.”

“Say what!” I would have jumped out of the car if I didn’t think I’d break my neck. “What is that thing doing here? How do you know? I mean he looked regular. Of course he looked regular. They shape shift.”

“Hey, calm down.” Blake laughed. “You might have heard, grunts can be enslaved. The one driving is a slave to the head dude. He does what our leader wants, asks no questions. I know by the look on your face that you don’t like it, but that’s how we live. Better get used to it.”

“What about—”

“Ugh! Tanesha.” He glared at me. “I’m happy to answer questions, but not now. Do you know it’s not natural for us to be awake during the day? I’m sleepy as all get out. Once that ball of fire hits the sky, I’m out. So please, dude, just give me some time. K?”

I settled back in my seat, twisting my hands together. “Okay.”

I liked Blake. He was cool, blunt, up front with me. He didn’t seem to take life seriously, but he knew what he had to do. The best part was he didn’t get my heart going or make me feel like I was a little girl who should be home with my mommy. Not like Lorcan, and for that matter not like Adrienne, who for her slutty look still made me feel ugly. I thought Blake and I could be friends, but right then I was missing Ronnie. Blake was nice and would be fun, but it had seemed like Ronnie cared about me. Of course that could have been years of lies.

I closed my eyes thinking I’d get some sleep along with Blake. If a battle was coming, I would do much better if I was rested. At least I wasn’t craving blood, even though I was sure the red pill had faded out of my system. After a quick fifteen minute nap, I intended to practice bringing up that energy thing. I had a feeling I would need it and more.

## Chapter Nine

I couldn't see it, but Blake told me the members of the coven lived in a mansion set on eighty acres of land. He said the driveway alone went on for a mile. I couldn't imagine, but we were turning into it by afternoon. If the place was so far, why were they in my city? I asked Blake since he looked more rested now and wouldn't snap at me.

"Vampires don't hunt near their home. We like to keep the two separate."

I swallowed as the car slowed. "Hunt. You mean the grunts?"

He laughed and flashed his fangs. "Hunt. For our food. Grunts are for fun." He tilted his head to the side like he was listening to something. I tried to tap in, but it didn't work. The car stopped. "We're here. Let's go."

The driver opened the door, and as I stepped out I tried to look closely at his face to see if I could spot any evidence that he wasn't human, but he didn't meet my eyes. I wondered if that was part of his job. It wasn't right that they made these beings slaves. Not that I had too much sympathy for them, cause for real, they creeped me out, but it was still wrong.

We were in a darkened garage, brightened by a small light overhead. Not even a crack of daylight got in that place. There were no windows. Blake led me over to a door, and we came into a hallway. I looked around. They had money, I know that. I guess whoever was in charge had been around for long enough to save a few lifetimes' worth of money. Must be nice.

Hardwood floors, giant pictures of landscapes on the walls, and every room we passed decorated to the hilt. I was impressed. So why they led me to that empty prison room place I didn't know. It was all kinds of cruel. If I didn't know better, I'd say they had a grudge against me, but I didn't do anything to them, except avoid being killed.

Before I was taken to the empty room, I had to meet with the head guy. Blake handed me over to a woman no taller than four feet and rail thin, with dry, flyaway red hair.

"Lin'll take you to the big dude," Blake told me. He started to walk off but then stopped and grinned at me. "Don't let her size fool you. The smaller they are, the more vicious." He winked and disappeared in a breeze. I chewed a thumb nail.

"This way," she told me. I followed.

"Hey, um, have you seen Lorcan?" I told myself I wasn't going to ask about his lying ass, but I couldn't help it.

She didn't answer.

“Did you hear me?” I called out. She turned a corner, and we came across some stairs. While we walked up, I concentrated on the back of her head, narrowed my eyes, and tried to get in her thoughts. I actually felt it, like pressing on a balloon. At first it seemed like I was getting through, and then I’m not sure what happened.

One minute, she’s looking the other way going up the steps, and the next her fangs are out, her face is scary crazy, and she’s coming at me. I don’t know where the clawlike fingernails came from, but she would have sliced me like bread if she got to me. An instant before she did, someone passed between us.

“You came.”

I glanced up, and almost fell on the floor seeing Lorcan. “Oh, it’s the loser, the liar, the—”

“I didn’t lie to you, Tanesha.”

I waved my hand. “Whatever, homeboy. I don’t want anything to do with you. Now get out of my way. I have a date with the leader.”

He paled, if it was possible. “Don’t say that.”

“I said get out of my way.” I put my hands on my hips and dared him to stop me. He stepped back but not to the side.

“I’ll take you to him.” He took my arm and almost dragged me up the rest of the steps, around a corner, and down another hall. At the end were double doors that opened onto a huge room set up like a dining hall. Twelve people in black shirts and slacks sat around a massive wooden table. At least they’re not in robes, I thought, before I remembered that every one of them could read my mind with no trouble whatsoever. I tried to empty my head, but wouldn’t you know, all I could think about was how it felt to kiss Lorcan at the lake.

Twelve sets of eyes shifted to Lorcan, and I looked at him too. His cheeks turned light pink. I wanted to die of embarrassment. After a few minutes, one of the men at the table stood.

“Come in, Tanesha.” He nodded to Lorcan. “That will be all, Lorcan. Take your rest.”

Can you believe, Lorcan actually bowed and then left, shutting the doors behind him? I felt like I was in medieval times. Lifting my chin to hide the fact that I was shaking, I walked forward and stopped a few feet from the door.

“So why have you been after me? I didn’t do anything to y’all. I’m just a teenager, trying to do my thing.” They all looked like they wondered what “my thing” meant. I wasn’t

going to enlighten them. They were probably all like nine hundred million years old or whatever, ten men and two women.

The head man smiled. "Our ages range. The oldest is six hundred, and the youngest is two hundred fifty. Of course there are covens where older vampires exist."

"And I'd appreciate it if you'd stay out of my head!" Those last words seemed brave, but in reality my voice cracked every other word. I was not feeling any better knowing Mr. Big Shot had noticed. He was the only one who showed any emotion, while the others were stony-faced.

I squinted at them all around the table. "*A good laxative will fix you up.*"

That got them riled. I laughed at the noses rising, and whispers filled my head. The leader waved his hand. "Enough!"

I tried to say something more or even to think something, but I couldn't. This guy was so powerful he could control my body inside and out. Fear gripped me. I had to blink a few times to keep myself from crying.

"I was kind," the leader began, "by sending those that looked like they were closer to your age. I thought friendship would lead you out of your protection."

There was that protection talk again.

"As usual, I was right."

Arrogant anyone? Damn, this man thought he was the stuff. Someone needed to knock him down a few pegs, but I knew already I wasn't going to be that one. Whatever he had in mind for me was coming, like it or not.

"You're here, and you will be useful." He breathed deep. "Mm, I smell it. Brothers, sisters, don't you smell it? I told you she was more than we thought at first." He smiled at me. "You should be happy about the oversight. We thought you were an ordinary human for sixteen long years. It worked to our enemy's advantage, but something happened when you turned sixteen. Maybe it was maturity, whatever. That scent, that key to what we want was turned on, and we sent Lorcan to scout you out. His first taste of your blood confirmed it."

He must have let me go because I could speak. "Confirmed what?"

"That you're half vampire of course."

"Half what?" My legs gave out, and I fell on the floor. I know they could have moved fast enough to catch me, but they didn't. They didn't give a crap about me. They just wanted to use me for something. I wanted to know what it was, but then again I didn't. I

just wanted to go home and forget every one of them existed, that what I believed was real, and what I believed wasn't stayed that way.

I crawled across the floor like an insane person, until I reached a chair set against the wall. I used it as a crutch to get to my feet, and then I flopped down on it, gripping the sides so I wouldn't crash down on my face again. "Let me get this straight. You think I'm already half vampire, even though Lorcan didn't suck out much of my blood? You've got to be crazy. You must be, 'cause I'm not buying it. I won't!"

"Poor thing," the man said. He crossed the room and stood over me. I willed myself to knock his hand out of my face when he ran it down my cheek, but like before I couldn't move. "You've been lied to for so long. Didn't your daddy tell you?"

"Look, if you have something to say, why don't you say it and get it over with?" I grumbled. "I don't have time for this."

"You have time." His eyes darkened, and his nostrils flared. I could almost hear the fangs lowering in his mouth. He licked his lips while he watched me like I was his next meal. "We'll give you all the time in the world."

*"Tell her, Jett, and stop tormenting her."*

I gasped at the voice. The person had deliberately spoken in his head and mine so I could hear what she said to him. It was one of the women at the table. I checked the two, but their faces were still blank. Neither of the two sets of eyes seemed to have spoken to me.

Jett, the leader, turned and pointed at the lady with the red hair and the green eyes. I thought she looked like Adrienne. She was the one who had spoken. She seemed too calm, too put together to be related to Adrienne, but I wasn't going to tell her that. The smirk on Jett's face said she and all the others already knew what I thought. I dropped my head and drew my knees up to my chest. My mother had taught me better than to be rude to my elders, but that had never meant I couldn't think rude thoughts. This was too much.

"For you, my dear," Jett said with all the attitude of a drama queen, "I will tell her who she is."

His hand shot out to me and wrapped around my wrist. He jerked, and I winced when he twisted my arm. All my life, I had this freaky little birthmark just above the bend in my arm. I thought it looked like a target, the kind where you're aiming your gun in a video game, and that circle with the cross in the middle shows you where to shoot. But one time, Ronnie and I had been messing around on the Internet, and we looked up symbols. We found one that looked like mine. It was a sun cross, the symbol for the sun.

"This marking means that you're from the day walkers' clan," Jett explained.



“What the heck are day walkers?” I asked with total disrespect. I had jumped off the deep end already. There was no since in coming back and pretending I respected these people.

Adrienne’s relative seemed to show some life at last with a raise of her eyebrow. I thought if she felt like speaking, she would fuss at me with my mother’s tone, when she wanted to lecture me on what I’d done wrong.

Jett went on. “Day walkers are vampires that can do just that, walk in the day. The sun does not bother them to the extent that it does us. They will not die if they are exposed to it, although their eyes tend to be sensitive to the light. In the Eastern world, the sun cross symbolized both the sun and the tree of life. Do you know what that means?”

I tilted my head up at him and rolled my eyes. “Why don’t you save us both the trouble and just tell me?”

He raised his hand to my face like he was going to smack me but resisted. I think that woman stopped him again. “Fine,” he growled. “In addition to walking in the light, day walkers can eat regular food and reproduce.”

“Damn, somebody sounds bitter.” I laughed and was sure I heard a titter in my head.

“Anyway,” Jett almost shouted, “you are one of these special ones, or rather half. At first we thought the genes were latent in you, but we were wrong. We know now that your father protected you.”

“My dad?”

He leaned down so his face was level with mine, and tilted his head, mocking me. “Yep. Isn’t that special? Your dad is a great big liar. He didn’t tell you he’s one of the most powerful vampires since we came into existence. And you know what else, girlfriend?”

I resisted smacking *him*.

“Your blood is going to make us just as powerful.” The door opened, and Lin came in. “Take her to her new room, Lin, where she can await her fate.”

\* \* \* \*

I rattled around in my prison—because that’s what this room was—for hours it seemed. I had stood at the door with my palms on it and my eyes closed, trying to will my mind outside to see if I could pick up anyone’s thoughts. But it didn’t work. I didn’t know if they had reinforced this room to keep vampire powers in or if I was just too weak to get anything. I needed more of Lorcan’s blood. From what I could figure out, him sucking my blood would eventually make me a full-fledged vampire, but him giving me his awakened my inner half vampire abilities. Whatever. Either way, I needed out of here. First stop, the toilet. I had to pee bad.

A sound outside the door caught my attention. I moved away from it and stood with my back to the wall and took on a phony fighting stance. Phony 'cause I didn't have a clue how to fight, but I could talk—and show—a good game. I expected the doorknob to turn or to hear a key in the lock. What I got almost made me wet my shorts.

This dark brown goo, which reminded me of the apple butter my great-grandmother would try to get me to eat, oozed under the door. I stared at it, and then looked around to find a broom or something to sweep it back out. The stuff was alive. It paused, rolled one way toward the left and then rolled back to the right. My heart stopped when it focused on me and continued to come in.

Next thing you know, it rolled to the middle of the floor and started layering itself, getting taller and taller. When it stopped rising, it started forming into a person, solidifying, and you could have knocked me over with a puff of air at who was standing there.

“Ronnie!” I shook my head and scrubbed my eyes. No way. No freakin’ way was my best friend...well...whatever he was. “What are you? How did you...” My mind was jumbled. I was scared silly, and I wanted to cry, but instead I just stood there with my mouth hanging open.

I had just learned that I was half vampire, if it was even true, and now I was facing this? No! “This is too much,” I shouted, like doing that was going to throw a reset button, and all the craziness would disappear. Fat chance.

The pained look on Ronnie’s face put an ache in my chest, but if I could have stomped on it, I would have. He was obviously not what he had been claiming to be all these years, and now he showed up just dripping into the room. I knew that couldn’t be called dripping, but I was pissed off.

“I-I’m a grunt,” he admitted.

I screamed.

He flew at me with his hands out to cover my mouth, but I dove to the side so he couldn’t touch me. I had flashbacks of those things’ original form, and it wasn’t cute and fluffy, that’s for sure. A grunt. A tall, thin creature that could shape-shift and use magic. The only time they weren’t following their own evil instincts was when they were made slaves. I remembered those facts and spun around to face Ronnie, who hadn’t chased after me when he realized I was scared of him.

I gasped. “You’re a slave?”

He shrugged. “Don’t even worry about, Tanesha. I came to get you out of here, so if you’re ready—”

“Don’t even worry about it!”

He darted to the door and listened. “Keep your voice down. If they suspect something up, all they have to do is read your mind.”

I ignored his words and threw my hands up on my hips, facing him. “How can you tell me not to worry about it? I didn’t even know you existed until a couple weeks ago, nor vampires for that matter. I can’t just not worry about it. So who locked your heels, Ronnie? Tell me!”

“Your dad.”

I just stood there in silence, a million questions going through my mind, but I couldn’t make myself ask any of them. The one that made me want to cry the most was, is the man I thought I knew and loved real or was he faking all my life? Was I real? Or anything around me?

I couldn’t help it. I started blubbering like a fool, and Ronnie tried to touch me again, but I slapped his hand away. He looked like he would argue, but I got all up in his face. “Don’t you touch me! You lied. All these years, you’ve been lying. Are you even a boy? Are you even sixteen? I don’t get it. What’s going on?”

Ronnie held up his hands and looked over his shoulder a few times toward the door. “Hold on, Tanesha. I’ll tell you if you shut up. But first we gotta get out of here before they catch us. Do you really want all your blood drained out to feed those creatures? Or do you want to trust me and let me get you out of here?”

I crossed my arms scowling at him. “Well it’s not trust I feel for you, you can believe that.”

He looked hurt. I turned away.

“Fine, get me out of here, but then you’re talking, Ronnie. Or whatever your name is. No more lies. And the minute I get my hands on my dad...no, never mind. I don’t ever want to see him again.”

For a minute, I thought Ronnie was going to change me into apple butter, but instead, he scrunched up his face and wiggled his fingers in the direction of the door. A white light came out of his fingers and raced over to the lock. My eyes bugged so hard it hurt. That was the same white light I had seen that night when Lorcan attacked me and Ronnie came to save me. Now I knew. He had used it then too, and Lorcan said we had to be careful of the grunts because they could use magic. This was a taste of it.

The lock clicked, and Ronnie hurried over to it, checked the hall, and then looked back with his hand out to me. In that moment, I remembered how I had kissed him when we

were younger. He'd known then that he wasn't human. Gross! Shaking my head to get that icky thought out of it, I took his hand, and we moved to the hallway. We tiptoed along with every muscle in my body tense and hurting. My throat was dry, and the palm in Ronnie's was soaking wet.

Whispers started in my head the moment we left the room. Ronnie stopped walking and looked at me with fear in his eyes. "Don't think."

"What?" I frowned at him.

"Don't think anything, but don't try to block them out either. If they feel the barrier, someone will come. Right now they're asleep, but they're always aware of each other. They're connected through their thoughts, and you are too, even more so here in this house. If you start thinking about escape or what we're doing, they'll know."

I nodded. "I get it. And if I try to block them out, they'll know that too. Crap, I hate this. I don't want to be like them."

Ronnie shook his head. "It was my longing to be like them that got me in this mess in the first place." I wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but he turned and started walking again. If he was so magic, why didn't he just blink us out of there?

"Because he can't."

I gasped. Ronnie and I turned around, and there was Lorcan. He tapped his head. "You're thinking, Tanesha."

Ronnie gave me an accusing look.

"Sorry."

Lorcan reached his hand out to me. "Come here."

A feeling like I can't describe, like I had to be close to him, came over me. I took a step in Lorcan's direction, but Ronnie jumped ahead of me and blocked the way. "You don't care about her. You just want to use her so you can walk in the daylight."

Lorcan's eyes turned coal black, and his nostrils flared while his fangs lowered. "Get out of the way, slave."

I gasped at the evil in his voice. "Lorcan!"

He didn't even look at me. "Do you think you're any better than I am? You who have lied to her all this time? You who made a deal with a vampire to become like us? Fool! You can't be like us. Only a human can become the undead, not grunts. You learned that when? Four hundred years ago?"

I stumbled over to the wall and held on. “Four hundred years?”

Shame on Ronnie’s face let me know it was true. “Tanesha, let me take you somewhere safe, and I’ll explain everything.”

“I don’t believe you!”

He took a step in my direction, but a whiff of air blew between us. I was slammed against a hard chest and assumed that Lorcan had got tired of waiting for me to come to him. I clung to him and closed my eyes, my mind in a whirl. I wanted to sleep because I’d been up all night. I wanted to cry because every single person I knew had betrayed me except my mother, and I would not have been surprised at that point if she didn’t have her own secrets.

Not until we had moved straight through the house, down to the garage where I had come in the limo, and he had busted the lock on the door leading outside into the sunshine, did I realize whoever had me could not be Lorcan. I looked up and saw my dad. He appeared just the same, his dark sunglasses in place, his tailored suit fitting him to a tee. Just one problem. The world whizzed by us at lightning speed. Jett hadn’t lied. My dad was a full blown day walking vampire.

## Chapter Ten

*“Tanisha, come here to me.”*

I jumped up and screamed. A hand fell on my arm, and I jerked away until I realized I was in a house I didn't recognize, and the person touching me was my dad. “Where am I?”

“A safe house,” he told me. “Here, drink this.”

I took the cup he held out and smelled it. The scent reminded me of grape juice, one of my favorite drinks, but I didn't trust my him. “What did you add to it, Dad?”

He glared at me and looked like he was about to lecture me on obeying him but seemed to change his mind. The bunched eyebrows he had lowered over his nose went back in place, and he sighed and sat down on the bed beside me. “There's a red pill in there.”

“So the others can't get in my head.”

“Yes.” He ran a hand over his face and scratched at the slight beard on his face. His facial hair had always grown fast, and he had to shave twice a day if he wanted to be clean-shaven. I had always liked the scraggly look on him. It made him look less like he was perfect because I wasn't. “I should have protected you better,” he muttered. “Or sent you away.”

“Protect me how?” I sipped at the drink. “With Ronnie?”

He nodded. “Yeah, and Nita Knowles.”

“Mrs. Knowles!” The juice slipped from my fingers and would have hit the floor, but my dad was fast. He caught the cup, even the sloshes that had gone over the edges. He pressed it back in my hand and guided it to my lips. I had no choice but to chug it down. Soon Lorcan's voice, which I still heard in the back of my mind, would fade away. I wanted to cry because everything inside me wanted to go to him, and not because I was glamoured. “What do you mean Mrs. Knowles? She's an old lady, isn't she? Plus, she went back in her house when Lorcan attacked me that first night. She didn't even try to help.”

I started to cover my mouth because I forgot I hadn't shared everything with my dad, but he didn't look surprised. Then I realized that Ronnie, or even Mrs. Knowles, must have already reported what had happened that night.

He stood up and paced over to the window. I noticed when he opened the curtain that it was starting to get dark. The vampires would get up for the night and be hungry. Maybe they would all go down to that room ready to feast on my blood. I shivered.

“Don’t think like that,” my dad told me.

I blinked. “Say what? You read my mind? But the pill...”

He grinned. “First of all, you’re my daughter. We share a connection, no matter what. And second, the red pill is partly an extract from my blood.” He waved his hand. “I won’t go into details.”

I crossed my hands over my chest and stood up to face him. “Thanks for that.”

“Suffice it to say, the pill does not block me, or any other advanced day walker, if there were any.”

My eyes widened. “You’re the last?”

He shook his head and smiled. “No, you are.”

“I’m not! I’m nothing like...” I stopped and looked away. “What does Mrs. Knowles have to do with it? Is she a grunt too?”

I didn’t think he was going to answer at first, but then he focused on the street below the window. “Yes, she’s also a grunt, Ronnie’s sister actually.” Spots danced in front of my eyes. He went on not even knowing I was about to pass out flat on my face. “She’s not an old lady. She changed herself to look like that and has been living next door to your mother for many years. I influenced your mother to buy that house because I knew I had already set things in place to be sure you were protected.”

“Influenced. That’s a good word for it, Dad.”

“Watch your attitude, Tanesha.”

“Why should I? For all I know I might not even *be* your daughter. And if you were so worried about me, why did you leave? Why did you divorce my mother? Was she too human for you?”

He was across the room in a heartbeat and took me by my arms. I thought he was going to throw me or hit me. He didn’t do either one. “Little girl, you don’t know anything about it. You’re still brand new. You don’t know what it’s like to be an immortal. Divorce? Try marrying over and over because your wife grows old and dies. The one time I turned my wife, it was disastrous. You know why?”

I felt ill. “Dad, I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.”

“The same reason I did not have any children or turn a wife for hundreds of years is because of what’s happening now. My wife, my children, become day walkers, and then they become fair game to all the others who want what we have.” He let me down, and I

moved away from him, rubbing my arms. “You can’t know the loneliness, Tanesha. I’m not going to let you know it. They want warmth. They want families, children. They collect teenagers and turn them, pretending they are their children. You’ve seen Gardene.”

I frowned. “Gardene?”

He nodded. “The red-headed female vampire. She turned Adrienne because she looked like her, but Adrienne hates her. They want to be able to have children and go out in the day. They want to eat regular food like humans do. They think it will ward off the cold loneliness of what they are.”

“Wow, can’t get darker than that. Why don’t they walk into the sun or something?” I asked.

He smirked. “Would you?”

“Heck no. I’m not crazy.”

“Neither are they.”

I sucked my teeth. “Says you.” I tried to process all that he said, and I wanted to ask questions, but before I could, something popped, and the next thing I knew, a knock came at the door. I stiffened, but my dad acted like he’d been expecting it. He opened the door, and Ronnie walked in. I glared. “What no oozing this time?”

“Tanesha,” my dad warned. I didn’t say anything. “I’m going out for a little while. I’ll be back in a couple hours.”

I ran up to him and grabbed his arm. “So what, I’m supposed to be a prisoner here now? I have a life, Dad. And school’s starting in a couple weeks. What am I going to do then?”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

He slammed the door closed and was gone. I spun to face Ronnie. “What are you, my babysitter? What about your sister?”

His eyes widened. “You know about her?”

“Yeah. My dad didn’t say much, but he told me Mrs. Knowles is your sister. So you knew that too when we went to her house that first night. Tell me something, you didn’t call the police at all, did you?”

He stared at the floor. “No.”



“I can’t stand you.” I didn’t look at him but climbed back on the bed and folded my legs up so I could rest my knees on my chin. “Did you report to him that you left me plenty of times when you were all caught up in Adrienne and Butterfly’s face?”

“I wasn’t.”

I didn’t bother looking up.

“All of that was part of my cover. I had to be the typical human boy, crazy over girls. Your dad said I couldn’t be the popular kind because then you would want me.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Please, don’t fool yourself.”

“I had to be a nerd and get close to you. Be your friend.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. “How did he know it would work?”

“He didn’t. I would be whoever you needed to be your friend. If Ronnie didn’t work, Rochelle would, or Rhonda.”

I wasn’t even going there with all the *R* names. Maybe his real name was Rodkzzk, and he wanted to stick with that letter. I had no idea if grunts had regular names like we did. I mean like humans did. I wasn’t even a full one. I cried harder. No matter how much I did, no matter how many tears fell, I couldn’t go back to my innocent life where it was just me and my friend, hanging out, doing nothing, making fun of other people or going to the movies. All that was gone, shot out the water, and it was my dad’s fault. Because of who he was. Right at that moment, I hated his guts. I wanted to be normal, but it was impossible. I almost wished the vampires had gotten me. Then I wouldn’t have to sit here and feel sorry for myself, getting on my own nerves.

“Why did Mrs...I mean, your sister, why did she leave me?”

Anger filled Ronnie’s eyes. “She was bribed. Jett convinced her that the secret to making her a vampire was in your blood, and after years of research, he found out how to do it. He said if she let them take you, he would make sure she was the first grunt to be turned.”

“I don’t have an endless supply, for crap sake,” I screamed. “Didn’t anybody show up in biology or even health class?”

Ronnie looked like he pitied me. “If you were a full vampire, whenever you take blood into you, it would be like making an antidote for them. That blood would become your blood. Then just like that, they could draw it out and use it. I don’t know how they use it or if whatever changes they can make happen to them would last, but I know they would use you over and over.”

I was only half listening. My brain couldn't hear anymore, or I'd go out of my damn mind. "Did you care even a little bit about me? Was I your friend a little?"

He came over and pulled my hand off my leg. I tried to get away, but he held on and looked into my eyes with these big old fake brown eyes. They might have been fake, but I got the feeling the emotion was real. "You are still my best friend, Tanesha. I've been around for a long time, and I haven't met anyone who could put up with me like you."

I grinned. "Okay, loser. Fine. But how do I know the spell or the hex or whatever my dad did to you isn't making you say that?"

"You don't." He shrugged. "I don't either for that matter. Everybody says grunts are just evil, and they say that about vampires too, but do you think your dad doesn't love you?"

"Bad example."

"Okay." He glanced at me through eyes that were suddenly dark and curious. "What about Lorcan? Is he all evil?"

I leaned back on the bed and closed my eyes. "Don't even go there, Ronnie. Now leave me alone. I didn't sleep enough."

\* \* \* \*

He was calling me, Lorcan was. I couldn't hear him in my head, but I knew just as surely he was calling me. I sensed it somehow, but there was no sound in my mind except my own thoughts. I woke and sat up in bed, glancing around the room. No light shown through the window, and I figured Ronnie had closed the shade to block out the moon. When I listened hard, I picked up his quiet breathing. He was sleeping. For a minute, I wondered if he slept in his shifted form, or if he went back to his natural state.

Aside from that, what about his older brother? I shivered. Eww, I had been lusting over his brother. Gross! Probably another grunt. His cover story had been that his brother was raising him because his mother died. Did he even have a dad? Was that guy his brother? I had asked the questions, but Ronnie acted like he didn't want to tell me anything. Grunts were secretive, like shadows in dark alleys. You never knew how much was hidden in them.

I stood up and crept over to the door. With my hand on the knob, I waited to see if he would wake up, but he continued to snore softly. I slipped out and was soon on the street. Okay, I know what you're thinking. Scary movie, the idiot goes out alone, and all that? Yes, that was me. But I couldn't stay away from Lorcan. I couldn't help myself. Maybe he had done something to my head, or it could be I really did love him. But I had to find out if his feelings were real.

I knew while I strolled down the city street, crowded even at this time of night, that I was risking getting caught by the other vampires, but I was willing to take that chance. Maybe if they couldn't get in my head, they wouldn't be able to track me. Everybody had kept talking about how I had some kind of protection, and I realized it was the two grunts on me, plus my dad's protection. Not one of the others, no matter how old they were, was as powerful as he was, and I had begun to think they resented him for it and the walking in the daylight thing.

I considered going back to the lake but thought that would be too obvious to the others, so I went to the park instead. We'd only met there once, and there wasn't much to the place, not like we had jumped each other there. I shivered thinking that way and laughed nervously.

"Hey, little girl," someone whispered.

I froze. Turning slowly, I looked to the left and spotted a man in the alley. He grinned, glanced up and down the street, and then asked me if I needed drugs. He didn't actually say drugs, but one of those stupid words they used on the street so the cops wouldn't know what they were talking about. Yeah, right, like anybody would be fooled. I wasn't giving him the time of day. Worse things than that dealer were probably in that alley. No thanks.

As if it was proving my thought, a black shadow came up behind the pusher and grabbed him around the throat. All I saw was an arm and sharp fingernails. That was all I needed to see. I bolted, hard and fast, down the street. Zipping through a couple of guys who were staggering around drunkenly, I kept moving. Even when I came up on the corner and saw that the Don't Walk sign was flashing, I didn't slow down.

*"Lorcan, where are you?"* I called out in my mind.

No answer.

A car screeched to a halt to avoid hitting me, and I don't know where it came from, but my palms went down on the hood, pressed, and I flew up and over the car. Someone shouted behind me. "Did you see that jump? Yeah, girl, that's what I'm talking about. Work it out, baby!"

My fear lessened, and I burst out laughing. Another few steps, I stopped to lean on a wall, holding my sides. My throat burned. I stooped and checked down the street the way I had come. No one was chasing me, and the guy in the car that had almost hit me drove on. I stared down at my hands, wondering.

"Dude, you won't find the answer there."

I raised my head. "Hey, Blake." I sighed. "You come to take me back?"

He popped something in his mouth that looked like gum, but it was blood red. I cringed. "No, not exactly."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Lorcan's looking for you." He tapped his head. "We can't get in there, dude. Your daddy blocked you again." He rolled black eyes, circled with thick black eyeliner. "I so don't like him. I hope you don't mind."

I shrugged. "Feeling's mutual."

He tossed the sides of his trench coat back and rested his hands on his hips. I tried to remember if the hand that had grabbed the pusher in the alley had black fingernails like Blake had. I didn't know.

"Look, dude," Blake began, "we're all thinking about blowing out of here. The adult vamps think they know everything, and we're tired of being pushed around. Lorcan's coming with us and—"

I gasped. "Lorcan's leaving town?"

He looked bored and annoyed that I had interrupted him. "Yeah, didn't I just say so?"

I frowned. "Do you need a nap?"

He laughed. "No, I'm hungry. Wanna supply me?"

"Not!" I wasn't scared of his threat. "Where is he? Where's Lorcan? I want to see him."

"Didn't I come to find you to take you to him? What am I the errand boy? Everybody bosses Blake around."

I walked over to him and patted his arm. "Sorry, okay. Chill. Just tell me where he is, and I'll go there. You don't have to get involved."

His nostrils flared. I wondered why he wasn't perfect looking like the others and was glad he couldn't get into my head right then. It was probably the way he dressed that gave the illusion.

"So you can get there safely, on the other side of town, the vampires on the hunt for blood, and the grunts out looking for trouble?"

I gulped. "Ah, yeah, right. Come on, Blake, do me this huge favor. I won't ask anything else of you. I've got to see him tonight, and besides aren't you going to see him anyway. I mean all of y'all are leaving together, right? Please?"

He ran his fingers through his slick hair and growled, then started pacing while he thought it over. Blake had always been nice to me, but he had a selfish side too. When he was in a bad mood, I didn't feel like dealing with it. But I was so not going to miss seeing Lorcan before he left, not for anyone. If Blake wouldn't help me get to him, then I would just have to pull out some more of that power or whatever it was that made me jump that car, and just run all the way there without stopping. It was possible, right? I was my dad's daughter.

Blake stopped pacing and faced me. "Okay, but it's dangerous out here, and I'm not getting into a knock down, drag out fight with one of the stronger vampires over you. Got it?" I nodded. He searched the area again and then looked at me. "You do what I say one hundred percent, right?"

"Right."

He eyed me like he didn't trust my word, and I tried hard to look like he could. After an eternity, he smirked. His eyes lit up with his usual happy-and-don't-care-who-doesn't-like-it look, and he held out his hand to me. "All right, let's go."

I lurched forward, grabbed his hand, and clutched his arm. He pulled me closer, a little too close for my comfort, and he lowered his head to sniff my neck. It was creepy and kind of gross. I shoved at him, but he was a solid rock I couldn't move.

"Your blood smells good," he groaned.

"Eww, maybe you need to...uh...feed first." I shivered, getting nervous.

Blake laughed. "Let's go." I didn't get a chance to say a word before he had taken off running, with me hanging onto to his chest. The farther we got from the safe house, the weirder I felt, like whatever my dad had put over that house was getting weaker. And something else too. The pill was wearing off. The voices were coming in slowly, getting louder. It was different than it was before. The balloons were there, or what I called balloons, the barriers the others would put up in their head so lesser vampires couldn't get in without a fight, and the older, more powerful ones had free reign.

The mind barriers were up, but I swear I could walk right through them. Or think right through them. While I hung onto Blake, I heard his thoughts.

*"When I drain her, I'll be the powerful one. I will be in charge, and I'll hide her where nobody can find her, making her supply me with her power as often as I want."*

Oh crap! He was going to kill me. Fear hit me like a fist in the face. I couldn't let on that I knew his plan because if I did, he might stop and do it right here. I had to make a plan, but first I had to calm down because if he sensed my fear, he would read my mind and know that I knew the truth.

I shut my eyes and took a few breaths, which did nada. Shivers ran over my body, but the night was cool, so I hoped Blake would think it was because of the chill. Stupid me, I had thought he was my friend, but like Ronnie said, all vampires were evil. When I thought that, I remembered what Ronnie had also asked me. *“What about Lorcan? Is he all evil?”*

Well, did I think so? Could he care about me? Or was I his ticket to the sun too? I mean he didn't save me back there. Not that he could. It was daylight. I closed my eyes and shook my head. I couldn't make excuses. Lorcan hadn't come through for me. He had let Blake take me to the mansion. So why did I end up trusting Blake instead of Lorcan? I grumbled at the thoughts rolling through my head and forgot to try throwing up a shield to keep others out.

*“Because you're scared of what you feel.”*

*“Lorcan?”* I called out.

*“Ya think?”*

*“Funny. Where the heck are you? I'm in trouble. Or don't you care?”*

*“I'm tracking you. No one's taking you away from me. Not ever again.”* I kinda thought those words were dramatic and on the silly side, but my heart acted like he had recited mushy poetry and I was some soft-headed girl from those romantic movies on the black and white cable channel. Not that I looked at them. My mother did, tears and snot flying.

When Blake stopped in the park where I had been heading anyway, I was relieved. At least I was near home, and that made me feel a little safer. Except we were on the other end of it, which came out to the street like two miles from my house. Back here, there was only a dead end road leading into the park area, and the clearing here was surrounded by trees but no lights. Only the moon illuminated the area. This was the upper level. The park trail was on lower ground, and when it stormed really badly, the trail would flood with water.

I remembered Ronnie and I used to come out at night when the rain eased up so we could watch the water. I had wondered if a boat could float on it, but Ronnie, the coward had told me not to even think about it. In fact, now that I did think about it, Ronnie had tried to convince me not to go out there, but I had threatened to go alone if he was too chicken. He said somebody had to drag my curious behind out of the water when I fell in, so he better tag along. Whatever. I could out-swim him any day.

My memories came to a screeching halt when I noticed that Blake and I weren't alone. Someone else in a hood came strolling up to us. *“You're late.”*

I gasped.

“I had to get her out of her protection didn’t I?” Blake whined.

I should have known from the beginning. Blake had looked like even more of the good guy next to the cold-hearted Adrienne. And she was beautiful enough that she probably had him wrapped around her little finger. My thoughts were confirmed when she leaned over and kissed him. I made a vomiting sound. She scowled at me and rolled her eyes.

“Stupid, you didn’t pay attention?” she snapped at Blake. “She’s read your mind. She knows everything.”

I blinked. Dang, I didn’t even feel her press in on me. I made a lousy half vampire. I had no choice but to play it off. “Look, I don’t know what y’all are planning, but I’m going to tell you right now, I called in backup.”

Adrienne’s eyebrows went up. “What are you the police?”

“I’m not playing with you!” I tried to put up a shield around my head while at the same time urging Lorcan to hurry the hell up. I considered contacting my dad, but didn’t. After that, I tried to dredge up my power. I was seriously on *E* or something.

Adrienne walked up on me, and I had to admit I was intimidated, but she wasn’t going to know it. I felt her press my head, but I held out and stood my ground, my fists clenched at my sides.

“You want to do this?” I demanded.

She laughed, and her fangs came down. “Do you?”

Not really. I wanted to go home and never come out again. “Oh, we can go, girlfriend,” I told her. “What you got?”

All I know is she raised her hand up to swing at me, and all hell broke loose.

## Chapter Eleven

Something rose up on the inside of me. It burned my belly like fire, and when her pale arm came up, my darker one clashed with it in the moonlight. I couldn't believe I caught her swing. It hurt like nobody's business, but I didn't let on. And I didn't wait for her to come at me again either. I grabbed hold of her and shoved with all my might. To my shock, and hers, and Blake's too, she went flying back to smack upside a tree trunk. When she fell on the ground and then struggled to her feet, there was blood on her lip where her fang must have gone into it.

She glared at Blake. "Get her!"

I didn't have a moment to turn in his direction. He jumped on me and knocked me to the ground. His fangs sank into my neck. I screamed. He dragged on my blood, and my vision blurred. My mind exploded with Lorcan's yell. The next thing I knew, Blake was torn off of me, and he and Lorcan were rolling all over the ground punching each other. The hits were so hard, when they missed and their fists hit the ground, they broke the concrete. My stomach hurt hearing it.

I rolled over to my stomach and struggled to get up, but Adrianne fell on me and forced me flat to the ground. She too bit my neck. I tried to get her off me, but I couldn't.

"Tanesha," Lorcan shouted. Because he was distracted thinking about me, Blake got in a good punch, and Lorcan's head hit the ground with a sickening thud. He didn't move. Blake pulled something shiny from his coat, and I knew he was planning to kill Lorcan for good. My heart shattered at the thought.

"No!" Tears filled my eyes. I was getting weaker by the second. I had no choice. I had to call my dad. "*Dad, please help us.*"

I didn't know if he would hear me, but I kept calling until I couldn't open my eyes anymore, and my mind was so fuzzy, I couldn't put the words together. They made no sense. Somewhere Adrianne was laughing, somewhere far away, and while I couldn't be sure what that skank was saying, I thought it was something like, "Her blood is nothing like I've ever tasted." I hated her guts.

I must have blacked out because when I opened my eyes, the twelve elder vampires were standing in the clearing. Jett had Blake up in the air by the front of his coat, and from the length of his teeth, I thought he could rip Blake apart with no trouble at all. I tried to focus on what they were saying, but my hearing came and went. I could only make out bits and pieces.

"What...think...know, Blake?" Jett growled through clenched teeth. "I...own you."

Frustrated that I couldn't follow what he was saying, I glanced around the ring of people. I looked around for Lorcan. He was still laying there where Blake had knocked him out,



and I was glad to see his head was still attached. At least it looked like it from where I lay. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the truth. I wanted to reach out to him with my mind, but I didn't dare. Every one of these creatures could get in my head, and they were probably aware already that I was awake. Not one paid me any mind.

I began to realize that my throat was dry, and it hurt. Not only my throat, but my arms and legs too. Every part of my body ached. I tried to move, but I couldn't. Then out of the blue, I knew what my problem was. I was low on blood, real low. Not like get dizzy, pass out low, but low to the point that I had been turned. I didn't know which one of them did it—Adrianne or Blake—but when I was stronger, they were both going down, one way or another.

Self-pity tried to come on me, but I shoved it away. At the same time, I forced myself with all that I had left to sit up. I wobbled and would have flopped on my face, but someone caught me. I glanced up to find Lin holding me. Her face was set in an expression of “I can't stand you. I'm just doing my job.”

“Right back at you, sista,” I muttered. And then the strength came for me to attack her. I guess a vampire gathers it up from her toes if it means blood. I took a lot, and she seemed to be trying to fight me off, but my strength was sweet. Someone shouted “That's enough” inside my head, but I ignored him.

The weakness left as fast as the strength could replace it. I was on top of the world. I was superhuman. When I pulled back, I started laughing, and the others gave me dirty looks. I got cocky, pointing at Blake who was looking at me like I'd lost my mind while he was the one hanging a foot off the ground. “You and me,” I told him. I swung my finger around to locate Adrianne. She stood near the woman who she looked like, trying to appear to be the innocent victim here. “You too.”

Her eyes widened, and she looked scared. Jett snapped his fingers, and two younger vampires I hadn't seen came over to me. They grabbed my arms, but I shook them off.

“Don't give us any trouble, Tanesha,” Jett instructed. “You belong to us now. Accept your fate.”

I took on a fighting stance, putting my fists up. Dang, blood was a rush. “That's where you're wrong, homey. I don't belong to you or anybody else here.” I picked up on a scent just outside the circle. So vampires tracked by more than just their thoughts? Cool. I grinned. “It's on.”

My dad came out of the trees, and soon he whipped around the circle of elders sending them flying with one punch. But they recovered fast and came at him. With the vampires who had grabbed me distracted, I ran past them straight for Blake, but before I reached him, he spun around and ran in the opposite direction, straight out of the clearing.

“Coward,” screamed after him. I changed my direction to Adrianne, but she wasn’t there either. I didn’t get to hit anyone.

When I heard a groan, I remembered Lorcan and rushed to his side. He was paler than usual and shaking all over. I helped him to sit up. “Are you okay?”

His eyes drifted closed, and his head dipped. I tugged him closer, tears in my eyes. “Lorcan, snap the hell out of it. Please.”

“Blood,” he whispered.

I swallowed and leaned in to offer my neck, but he drew back. “No, not you.”

“I’m not good enough now?” I put my hands on my hips but realized only afterward that I had to let him go to do it. He thunked on the ground, and I grabbed him up again, feeling bad. I’d never be asked to nurse the sick, that was for sure.

“Not you, Tanesha,” he insisted. “You’re still new, and you need your strength. Someone else.” He said all that with his eyes closed, and his body looking like it was about to go into convulsions. I noticed a dark, wet stain on his shirt, but I wasn’t going to investigate where it came from. Suffice it to say, Lorcan was dying, and if I didn’t get him blood, I would lose him. So I did what any good girlfriend would do. I jumped one of the lesser vampires and dragged his butt over to feed him to my boyfriend.

Just like I did, Lorcan found the strength to hang on and get what he needed. I saw the strength returning to his body. I figured he’d be a while, so I checked on my dad to see if he needed help. Not that I was thinking I was the stuff anymore. That initial rush had eased down, and I knew if I fought those older guys right now, they’d kick my butt. But I was willing to try if my dad needed me.

The elders were all face down on the ground except Jett, who was wobbling on his feet in front of my dad. I got up and walked over to them. My dad looked scary with his brown skin all glowy, and his fangs out. Veins bulged in his forehead and neck. I felt mine, praying I wouldn’t look like that—ever.

Jett’s drooping eyes shifted from my dad to me. “You can’t protect her forever. Someone is going to find out who she is and what she can do, and they’re going to come after her. She’ll be hunted for eternity. You’re the last of the day walkers.” He lifted a heavy hand to his neck, and I noticed blood on his fingers when he brought them down to look at them. “At least let us use her once, to change ourselves. We can grow our numbers and be a fighting force against everyone else out there.”

My dad shook his head. “Not going to happen. I’ve seen your research. You’d make my daughter a guinea pig. She’d suffer forever. I’ll put all of you in the grave before I let you get her. Now, pick up your people and go.”

I couldn't believe him. "You're going to let them live? After what they did? They're not going to stop, Dad, and I'm not living like a prisoner either." I was about to jump Jett and finish it even if my stomach was exploding with butterflies at the thought. I wasn't going to give up my life for these people or my dad either. Not like they wanted.

In the middle of my leap forward, my dad caught me and pushed me back. "No, Tanesha. I'm handling this. Don't worry."

I *was* worried, and with good reason. Jett acted like he was grateful for my dad letting him go. He turned away, his eyes on the ground and a frown on his ashen face. But just that quick, he came back, flying at my dad one last time. What an idiot. My dad caught him in one hand by the neck. He squeezed, and I had to look away, but the next thing I knew Jett was on the ground unmoving. I was pretty sure homeboy wasn't getting up again this century.

The other elders came around slowly like they had been unconscious. They all looked over at Jett and then at me and my dad. None of them showed any emotion like they couldn't care less that he was dead, but I wasn't fooled. Now that I was fully one of them, I picked up what they were feeling. Some felt hopeless. Others felt relieved. Most were scared of my dad, and they all helped each other and limped out of the clearing. A slight wind blew through the trees. I knew they were off to find blood so they could rebuild their strength. I just hoped that nobody would get it into their head that they could ever beat my dad.

Pride swelled in my chest, and I felt like I could forgive him for lying to me all these years. I realized he had only been trying to protect me. Not really liking all the hugging and kissing stuff with my parents, I tossed it aside just this once and threw myself into his arms. He crushed me in a tight hug and kissed the top of my head. He was not like the other vampires. He was warm, and his hard muscles felt like any other man's who worked out. Not like Lorcan who felt like steel.

While I stayed there, feeling safe and content for the first time in seemingly forever, I wondered what he would think about me dating Lorcan. After all Lorcan had been a part of the enemy's coven. He had allowed Blake to take me to them. Then I sighed. Shoot, I was the undead now. My dad couldn't actually tell me what to do. That was for the living.

"Tanesha," my dad growled over my head, "your mind is still an open book, you know!"

I chuckled. "Oh, snap."

He held me back from him and glared at me. "We'll talk later about him." He pointed with his chin over my shoulder.

"Uh, yeah," I agreed, nervous. "Sure, Dad."

He let me go and rolled his shoulders while walking toward the edge of the clearing. I just stood there watching him go, when he called back over his shoulder, “Get your friend, Tanesha, and let’s go. I’m taking you back to my house. I don’t feel like glamouring your mother so she doesn’t ask questions about us showing up at this time.”

I frowned. “Uh, Dad, just how many times have you done that to Ma?”

“You don’t want to know.”

\* \* \* \*

Back in school, I sat at my desk in homeroom glancing out the window at the bright, sunny day. That was one good thing about who I was. Even though I lived off of blood, it wasn’t the trip I thought it would be because like my father, I could exist in the day just fine, and I could still eat regular food. The only problem was sometimes I had trouble filtering out humans’ thoughts, and I didn’t know my own strength. I mean for real, how do you act all cute and feminine with hot guys around when you could bench press their entire bodies with one pinky?

I yanked on my short uniform skirt, hoping the teacher wouldn’t notice its length, and crossed my legs. Leaning toward Ronnie at the next desk, I asked, “So I don’t get it. If a vampire can force a grunt to be a slave, then how did your sister betray that? Why did she double cross my dad?”

Ronnie didn’t look like he wanted to answer, and I tried to feel around in his head to get the answers myself, but grunt minds were different than humans. It was all hazy. His eyebrows lowered over his clear brown eyes, and he frowned to let me know he knew what I was trying to do. At least I could see his eyes now that I had insisted he lose the glasses. Grunts didn’t need them any more than vampires did. We were working on his nerd image too. It was fun. I could make over Ronnie to whatever I wanted, even though it annoyed him that I treated him like my new toy. Whatever, he was still my best friend, so we were cool.

“Well?” I asked him again.

He sighed. “If a vampire can force a grunt to drink his blood, he can then force the grunt to obey him. That will last forever unless the master releases him or another vampire forces him to drink *his* blood.”

My eyes widened. “Whoa. For real?”

He nodded.

“So you think Jett did that to Mrs. Knowles, I mean your sister?”

“Yeah.” He looked so sad, I patted his hand. Mrs. Knowles had disappeared, and my dad hadn’t been able to track her down. I found out that the person she had been speaking to in the grocery store that day was my dad, but by then she’d already become Jett’s slave, and she was just trying to set me up. Also, every time I thought I was somewhere alone, Ronnie had been there. That’s why he had been up around the doctor’s office. He’d even known the vampires were out. Stupid me had run off so many times not knowing I was leaving my protection. Well, that was all over for now. I was glad. I needed a break.

*“Look at that skirt, those legs. I’m going to get a feel and a kiss at lunch. No doubt.”*

I turned to see whose dirty thoughts I was picking up, to find this fine boy staring at me. He had smooth dark chocolate skin and big brown eyes, framed with thick black lashes. He slouched at his desk, his legs spread wide and big feet blocking the aisle like he was the you know what. He narrowed his eyes, licked his lips, and greeted me with a raise of his chin.

I swung around a little to face him but gave him a little attitude with my expression. His excitement tickled my senses. And then the door to the classroom swung open, and in walked Lorcan, commanding, sexy, and not giving a crap that he was late. The bell was about to ring for first period.

The trench coat was gone, and I had to admit he looked good in the school uniform, even if I did hate it most of the time. His blue-green eyes scanned the room, and he spotted me, and then he spotted the boy who was interested in me. I knew by the hardening of Lorcan’s expression that he had scoured the poor human’s mind and didn’t like what he read there.

Lorcan had the nerve to stomp up the aisle and stop at my desk, lean over, and kiss me right there in front of everybody. After that, he snapped his fingers at this little scrawny kid, and the boy shuffled out of the seat next to me. Lorcan dragged the desk and chair over and parked in it with his arm slung around me. The mental buzzing all around the room was at a high, and I couldn’t seem to block it out. What was I thinking letting Lorcan drink my blood so he could spend about six or seven hours in daylight?

This school year was going to be a real trip, and I was looking forward to every minute of it.

The End