

Heather Killough-Walden



Redeemer

# **Redeemer**

*A Syndicate Novel*

By Heather Killough-Walden

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## Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to my husband, who dutifully takes care of our child while I write, who stanchly reads all of my books, and who brainstorms with me when I'm stuck. He is ever faithful. I think he wants me to buy him an HD TV.

It is also dedicated to my daughter, who doesn't care at all about my writing at the moment, but will when it pays for her clothes ten years from now.

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Oh. And to my shower. For all the ideas.

Dear Reader,

This is a work of **fiction**. Though my degree is in religious studies and much of the information presented here is based on Gnostic scrolls, dramatic license has certainly been taken. Historical and religious references were **not** meant to offend, but to entertain.

So, relax, read, and enjoy.

Thank you,

Heather Killough-Walden

## Prologue

The smell of fresh paint assaulted his nostrils as he made his way down the newly carpeted hallway and peered through the glass walls he passed. Men and women in business suits sat at computers or stood at book cases, pulling down volumes in red and gold and thumbing through them at a quick pace.

In one room, behind sound-proof glass, a tall man in Armani briefed a group of three – one woman, two men – who sat on the opposite side of a polished mahogany table, single blank white sheets of paper and unused pens placed before them.

As Michael passed by, the Armani man glanced up. The two exchanged quick nods, and the man went back to his briefing. Michael continued to walk, his gaze skirting from the men behind the glass to the reflection he cast upon it. He was a tall man at 6'3" and had been especially tall in the time that he was from. People had been more than a foot shorter, then, on average, making Michael nothing short of a giant.

His hair was thick, wavy and more or less short, though perpetually in need of a cut. Other than his height and build, though, which were somewhat intimidating, it was his eyes that people remarked upon the most. They were royal blue, without a speck of discoloration to their ocean-depths, and he knew that his gaze was disconcerting. It always had been.

Michael smiled a slow smile and eyed the reflected suit he was wearing. This morning's call precipitated the need for something practical as well as stylish, and so he wore a tailored ensemble made for him by a very special man in Cuba. It hadn't been cheap, but it was well worth the cost.

Michael took a deep breath and paused before the door marked #314 B. Then he reached out and turned the knob, opening the door outward into the hallway he peered into the room.

“Michael, I’m glad you could make it. I think you need to see this.”

Michael ducked his head into the office and searched for a seat. A dozen business-clad men and women occupied the meeting room, all sitting in plastic and metal chairs, legs crossed at the ankle or knee. The Spartan, chilly atmosphere of the room was at sharp contrast to the warm, plush briefing room that Michael had passed only moments before, but Michael was used to such discrepancies.

A man at the front of the group gestured to an empty chair beside him. Michael nodded and sat down, then leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

“What is this about?” His British accent was crisp and clear and his words, though spoken casually and softly, carried easily across the room’s expanse. He addressed the redheaded woman who stood beside a large flat-screen television mounted on the wall at the front of the room.

“A private anonymous recording, out of Lubbock, Texas. Recorded at 8:13 yesterday morning and delivered to us by an operative who claims the tape appeared on his desk, no label, no address. ” Her green eyes settled on Michael’s blue eyes and held them fast. “We have a problem.” She pressed a button on the remote in her hand and turned her full attention to the screen as it flashed to life. “You’ll see what I mean.”

Michael peered at the screen. Everyone in the room had gone deathly still as the image of a man in long white robes appeared, standing before a congregation of more than a dozen similarly dressed people.

A strange thrumming began to course through Michael's veins as he listened to the stranger in robes begin to speak.

"...Body of my body, blood of my blood," the man began. He paused and pulled his robes open, revealing a thin, pale chest underneath. He wore nothing more than a loincloth, the bones of his pelvis jutting out painfully. His ribs could easily be counted. Michael's gaze narrowed as one of the men in the front row of the strangely attired congregation handed the skinny man a knife. Michael could read the buck name on its hilt, though he doubted that any normal human being would have been able to spot it.

"I give of myself so that you may be whole..." the man continued, his voice gentle and lulling. Piercing brown eyes gazed out from a gaunt, bearded face, but something in his countenance suggested a calming aura. Michael thought he knew what, exactly, that something was.

As they watched, the man sliced into his own hand and held his palm over the rim of a cup that another figure in the front row held out for him. The blood spilled and gathered until he closed his palm and moved his hand away.

Michael swallowed. Sweat beaded upon his brow.

The man then took the same knife and held it to his concave abdomen. After a breathless hesitation, he pressed the knife's razor-sharp blade into his flesh and sliced a clean, straight line across the expanse of his pale flesh. He followed this up with two more quick slices, running parallel to each other and ending at the peaks of his hipbones. With one final redline across his lower belly, he'd formed a perfect, bloody square.

Michael felt the nearly uncontrollable urge to close his eyes then. He simply knew what the man was going to do next. Everyone in the room did. There was something so



painfully obvious about it – as if it were the inevitable period at the ending of a messy and brutal sentence.

The man handed the blade to the robed individual who had originally given it to him, and then he placed his hands on either side of the crude square upon his stomach. With one abrupt movement, he dug his fingers into the bleeding gashes and ripped the square of flesh away from the muscle and bone underneath.

Blood went spraying out toward the audience in a red arc. Pieces of flesh that had stubbornly stuck to the muscle beneath flopped and dangled, red and torn in the shocked silence. The robed audience gasped and screamed, and in a wave of terrified movement, stood from where they'd been sitting and scrambled back several feet.

But by that time, the man's horrible wound was already beginning to heal.

Michael could not move, could not even breathe as he watched and listened to the man once again speak.

"Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be afraid." The man's melodic voice hitched only once, as he swallowed, and his brown eyes momentarily closed. The gaping hole in his abdomen continued to close, new skin forming over muscle and intestines even as he swooned, for only a second, on his feet.

"... Fear not, for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee." He opened his eyes and fixed them upon his companions, one after the other. "He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee."

The small crowd of robed men and women stood still where they had scrambled to, the expressions on their faces nothing short of mesmerized. They watched, in utter shock and silence, as the man's body continued to heal itself. Within less than a minute, the

horrid wound had returned to nothing more than what appeared to be a puckered, red square upon his stomach.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish.” The man gestured toward the shrinking scar upon his flesh. “But have everlasting life.” And then he looked up once again and turned a gentle, reassuring smile upon the men and women who were very slowly returning to their seats before him.

The red-haired woman pushed a button on her remote and the screen went blank.

The room remained quiet for a very long time.

Ever so slowly, Michael blinked. Then he turned his blue eyes to the woman. “Who is he?” He spoke softly, his tone low and laced with something threatening.

“We’re not sure. Unfortunately, we’ve found very few records that might pertain to him. We believe he is one of us, of course. The fact that the tape found its way to one of our agents suggests he, at least, knows of our existence. And, to my knowledge, only vampires know about vampires.” She turned toward the blank screen, as if seeing what had been on it only moments before. “We think his name is Victor Anson. The portrait we found of Anson bears an uncanny similarity to this man.” She absently gestured to the blank screen. “Anson was born in 1495, in Augsburg, Germany. He died in 1528 after attending the University of Freiberg, and receiving,” she faced Michael again, a slight smile playing across her lips, “a doctor of theology degree from the University of Ingolstadt, where he became a professor. Just before he died, he traveled to Regensburg and the cathedral records show that he pulled the personal notes of one Balthasar

Hubmaier, who had once been chief pastor there. That same year, as you may know, Balthasar was tried and convicted of heresy in Vienna, and burned at the stake.”

Michael nodded. “I vaguely recall such a thing. He was infamous for embracing Protestant theology. Apparently baptized more than six thousand people by immersion. Didn’t the church drown his wife in the Danube?”

“Yes.” The woman nodded and moved to a chair that waited, empty, against the nearest wall. She picked the chair up, spun it around, and sat in it backwards, draping her arms over the seat back. “Victor died that same year. No one knows how. He was buried in a Roman Catholic cemetery in Regensburg.”

“Who assisted him?” Michael asked, wondering which adherent had been appointed to the task of freeing Victor Anson from his grave and covering up the evidence.

“That’s just it,” the woman sighed. “The record goes blank there. We have no evidence that any adherent was assigned to Anson at all. As far as we know, we’ve kept careful track of every one of our adherents for the last three thousand years, and none can recall ever having worked with him.”

“So, he’s a pariah.”

It happened sometimes. A vampire would die without the Syndicate knowing what they were. They would be buried without the promised aid of an appointed adherent to dig them up and help them along in the first few years of their immortality. Such pariahs had to dig their ways out of their graves, and for many, the task took weeks, if not months. A few vampires went insane. It was rare, but it happened. And it was most likely one of the reasons the Syndicate believed the man on the screen to be Victor Anson. He certainly fit the bill sanity-wise.

“I have no idea, unfortunately,” the woman replied softly. “Over time, nearly all vampires are detected by our guardians and reported on. However, this man’s existence has gone undiscovered until now. At the same time, Victor Anson seems to have remained under our radar for more than five hundred years. All we were able to find were his birth date, school, employment and travel records, and record of his death. Nothing since then. Nothing more.”

The woman fell into silence and the room lapsed into quiet around him.

The scene from the television screen played out in Michael’s head. He closed his eyes and saw the wound upon Victor’s chest closing. His head began to ache. He rubbed his eyes and sighed. “*Christ.*”

“I think that’s the idea,” someone muttered behind him.

“This is very, very dangerous, Michael.”

Michael looked up and met the red-haired woman’s gaze once more. She had stood, silent as a cat, and was once more standing at the front of the room.

“It is crucial that Anson be brought in. As I said, there was no message with the tape, but we assume that whoever filmed it intended for this to be newscast, sooner or later. It may be sooner. Possibly as soon as tonight.”

Michael nodded, tension mounting in his system. “What procedure do you want me to use with him?”

“He has threatened disclosure. Use whatever means necessary to get him back underground. I’ve assigned four minor enforcers to your aid. You’ll have some memories to erase as well, obviously, and you’ll need to do it fast to prevent further exposure. These things can have an exponential effect.”

“Someone really messed up here,” said a heavily accented voice behind Michael. He turned in his seat.

“Nothing spreads faster than zealotry. And nothing is more deadly. I should know.”

Michael eyed the man with curiosity. His physique was on the small side, his skin tone dark, his features either Mediterranean or middle-eastern.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think we’ve met.” Michael extended his hand. The small man beamed.

“I’m Wasim. I’m new.”

They shook hands, and in that instant, Michael absorbed everything he needed to know about Wasim Batul. He was a thirty-one-year-old graduate student of commerce at the University of Delhi. Or, he had been before he’d died in a motorcycle accident, in Delhi, three weeks ago. He’d already been informed of his immortality by a well-assigned adherent and though the accident and death had been real enough, the funeral and cremation had been simulated, as usual.

Wasim Batul was a non-practicing Muslim and, since awareness, had questioned not only Islam, but also religion, in general.

“Welcome,” Michael said. “I’m Michael.”

Wasim smiled, but his expression was one of expectation. He cocked his head to one side, as if waiting. Michael knew he was waiting for a last name.

“It’s just Michael.”

Wasim blinked, and then he nodded. “Oh. Okay. Michael.”

A throat cleared behind Michael, and he turned in his seat.

“Sorry, Anna. We’ll leave within the hour.”

“Glad to hear it.” The red-haired woman nodded, her green eyed gaze never wavering. Michael rose from his seat and walked to the door. Behind him, Wasim rose as well, and followed in his footsteps. Michael paused and turned to face him.

Wasim shrugged. “I’ve been assigned, Mr. Michael.”

Michael looked at Anna, who smiled tightly. “His skill may prove useful.”

Michael eyed the small man again and wondered just what the Muslim’s skill might be. It was the one attribute Michael could not read through touch – a vampire’s unique talent. Wasim merely smiled broadly.

“Very well.” Michael nodded, and with one last rather nervous glance at the flat, black television screen, he exited the room, Wasim Batul hot on his heels.

## **Chapter One**

“So...” Michael checked his rear-view mirror and pulled the Lincoln Continental out of its designated parking space. “Who was it that told you you were one of us?”

Wasim had been staring out the window, as if counting the cars parked in rows in the darkened garage. Now he straightened and turned to peer up at the significantly taller vampire beside him. “Mirabel,” his heavily accented voice replied. “She had been teaching my course for two weeks. She claimed that the professor was out with some kind of lung disorder. Two days before the accident, she asked me to stay after class.” Wasim paused and ran a hand through his thick black hair. “She explained everything.”

Michael cut his gaze to the man beside him and then turned his attention back to the traffic ahead of him. “You didn’t believe her.”

“No.”

“And now?”

“Well, now I am dead, aren’t I? I suppose I believe her. Now.”

The two fell silent for several minutes. The sun had been set for several hours and the lights of Chicago’s downtown area became a steady blur of neon and street lamp as the Continental navigated its way toward the interstate and the airport.

“Do you think we will catch him?” Wasim finally asked.

“Yes.”

“You are going to kill him?”

“Yes.”

“Does not even the smallest part of you wonder whether he may not be who you think he is? What if he really is the second coming of Christ or whatever it is you people believe?”

Michael smiled a slow, wry smile and once more cut his gaze to the dark man beside him. “Do you think he’s telling the truth, Wasim?”

Wasim stared up at him for several long moments and then, finally, he shook his head. “I do not believe anything any longer, Mr. Michael.”

Michael said nothing and turned his gaze to the road.

“Do *you* believe him?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Michael’s gaze took on a distant quality. “I have my reasons.”

“How long is the flight to this Lubbock, Texas?”

“Roughly two and a half hours.”

Wasim seemed to think about it for a moment, and then he nodded. Once more, they fell into a companionable silence and each looked out their respective windows. Then, as if he couldn’t stand the silence, Wasim spoke up.

“So, what is your story?”

Michael didn’t answer. After several long minutes of silence, Wasim’s brow furrowed. “How old are you?”

Michael took a deep breath and sighed. “Older than you are.”

“By how many years, exactly?”



“A few. Now, you need to listen carefully,” Michael’s British accent rang clear and deep in the car’s plush interior. “We will be meeting up with four minor enforcers when we land in Texas. They have been assigned to and briefed on the case. From there, we will split into teams, and each taking a contingent of roughly a dozen assignees, we will begin to comb the mapped-out area.” Michael cut him a glance. “You’ll remain with me, as apparently you possess a talent I can’t succeed without.”

Now it was Wasim’s turn not to say anything.

Michael seemed satisfied with his silence. The shiny black car continued down I-55 at a safe and inconspicuous 65 miles per hour.

\* \* \* \* \*

Abigail Lucia turned to look over her shoulder. The men were still there. Two of them. They seemed to have followed her from the Science Spectrum to the grocery store, and now here. Coincidence was one thing, but they’d managed to remain within fifty yards of her as she’d crossed town to arrive at three different locations.

“Mama, I have no food. Have you ever seen any food?”

Abbie glanced down at the little girl holding her hand. Big gray-green eyes peered up at her from a tiny face framed by two very blonde and very small pigtails. “Are you already hungry again? Didn’t we just eat?”

“I want some more French fries.”

“Jessie, you can’t have French fries for every meal.”

“Pwease?”

“No, sweetie.”

“Pweeease?”

“Here, I’m going to carry you for a little while, okay?” Abbie bent and lifted the two-year-old into her arms. With another glance over her shoulder and a furrow of her brow, she ducked into Target and placed her daughter into a cart.

“Can we get popcorn and wemonade?”

“Sure.” Abbie wasn’t really listening now. The men had crossed the parking lot and were entering the store. They were speaking to each other and neither was looking her way, but something about them nagged at her.

This time, as she peered at them, she took a moment to memorize details. The pair was dressed similarly. The taller of the two most likely reached six feet or a little over. His hair was black, streaked at the temples with gray and he wore a black t-shirt tucked into a pair of black jeans, with black motorcycle boots that had seen plenty of use. The slightly shorter man had long brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and wore a gray t-shirt and blue jeans with white Nike’s on his feet. The taller man had a scar across his right eye, beginning at the center of his forehead, and ending about an inch above the left side of his mouth. The eye seemed to be intact, though it had no doubt been a close call. His eyes were gray. The shorter man had very light blue eyes, nearly white. Abbie stored this information away in her brain and looked away, pushing her cart toward the snack bar.

“Excuse me.” She maneuvered the cart between two employees in red shirts who were obviously on break and pushed her daughter to the snack bar counter. “May I have the number one popcorn combo, please?”

She found herself wondering who the men were. Farmers? Ranchers? Lubbock was full of them. But neither had been wearing the right shoes. Construction workers? But the taller of the two had been dressed in black. Not smart in this heat if you had to work out in the sun all day. And they'd been clean... Just friends, then. Running errands.

So, why was she sweating?

Abbie started when she realized that the man behind the counter had had to address her twice to get her attention.

"Sorry," she said softly as she took the container of popcorn and handed it to her daughter. "Thank you."

"Oh, fank you, mama!" Jessie grinned. Deep dimples formed in her cheeks. "May I have some wemonade?"

"Yes, sweetie, I'm getting it." As if on impulse, she chanced another glance over her shoulder.

The men were gone. She turned fully around and cast her gaze up and down the aisles that were visible from the snack bar. There was no sign of them.

It was all in her imagination. With three stores in a town as small as Lubbock lots of people had to shop and this was Saturday. Maybe it really was coincidence.

"One-oh-seven, ma'am."

Abbie pocketed the change. After maneuvering the cart to the soda fountain, filling the empty container with lemonade, and handing the cup and straw to her daughter, she pushed the cart out of the snack bar area and tried to remember why she'd needed to come to Target in the first place.

In forty minutes, she was through the checkout line and heading toward her car. The sun had already begun to set and, for some reason that she couldn't put her finger on, Abbie's nerves were raw. She combed the parking lot with darting eyes, her right arm hefting her daughter, her left hand curled around the thin, cutting handles of three white plastic bags.

"I wanna hode one."

"Fine, but don't drop it, okay?"

"Okay."

Abbie lifted the bags and expertly separated one out without dropping either the bags or her daughter. "Put your arm up and hold out your hand."

Jessie held out her hand and Abbie's attention was snagged by the small birthmark between her daughter's thumb and forefinger. It was shaped like a series of geometric symbols or lines, etched in strawberry across perfect pink flesh. She'd grown used to it, but for some reason, it looked as if it had darkened.

Abbie placed the lightest of the three bags in Jessie's small hand and curled the child's fingers around it.

"Promise you won't drop it?"

"Yeah."

Abbie stilled. A sudden chill raced down her spine. She glanced in every direction, peering in between the rows of cars on either side of her. A morbidly obese woman was pushing a cart across the loading zone, a roll of her stomach poking out from in between her jeans and the bottom of her brown t-shirt. An old man was slowly getting into a car

parked in the handicap lot. Two young Hispanic boys ran past him, the taller of the two chasing the shorter one.

Traffic zoomed past on Loop 289 and cars were stopped at a red traffic light under the bridge beneath it. The wind picked up and the air smelled of feedlot manure and popcorn. She glanced back down. The popcorn smell was coming from Jessie.

Everything looked normal, as it always did.

Abbie took a deep breath and continued toward her car. As they approached it, Jessie whispered, “uhoh” and the bag slipped from her hand. Abbie closed her eyes when something inside the bag made a strange crunching sound.

She sighed and, leaning against her car, she bent down to pick it up. She had the bag in her hand just as a popping noise sounded above her and a strange vibration thrummed through the car. She straightened and turned around.

A large dart was embedded in the left passenger window and a spider web of cracks had spread from the contact point.

“What the...” Reality hit her like a sledgehammer and Abbie’s heartbeat sped up. She stared at the dart for several long moments. Her vision blurred and then cleared again and her arm went numb where it was wrapped around her daughter’s small body.

“Mama, what’s dat?”

Suddenly spurred into motion at the sound of Jessie’s voice, Abbie ducked beside her car, just as a second dart shot noiselessly past her and hit the metal between the windows at eye level. Abbie stifled a shriek, crouched lower, and put her hand over Jessie’s mouth.

“Hush, baby. Don’t talk.”

She peered down the alley between her car and three trucks, her breath now caught in petrified lungs.

*This isn't real. This isn't happening...*

Jessie seemed to sense her mother's fear, because she said nothing further and didn't struggle in her grasp. Abbie went still, waiting several long moments before she even remembered to breathe again. Then she slowly placed her daughter's feet on the ground and dug her keys out of her purse.

*Who the fuck is shooting at me?* She cut her gaze to the second dart, which lay on its side on the ground a foot away. Thin, clear liquid pooled around the dart's long, metal needle. *And, what are they shooting at me?*

Several more tense moments went by and she cursed fate that no fat woman or crippled old man or even a pair of screaming children happened by.

Abbie took her daughter by the upper arms and held her tight, peering hard into her big eyes as she spoke. "Jessie, listen carefully to Mama, okay?"

"Okay."

"I'm going to unlock the car and put you on the floor behind the seat. I want you to lay still and not get up until I tell you, do you understand?"

"Okay." Jessie nodded, her gray-green eyes searching her mother's face for some sort of reassurance.

"I mean it, Jessie. You can't move, baby. You could get hurt. You have to stay down."

"Okay."

Abbie pressed the automatic unlock in her keypad and all four locks switched off. Then she eased her arm up and laced her fingers around the handle. She popped the door open and, as if she'd been called, Jessie immediately moved toward her, allowing her mother to pick her up and slide her small form into the large crack between the seats.

“Don’t move, okay, Jessie? Do. Not. Move.”

This time, the toddler didn’t answer and Abbie could tell that she was scared. Abbie shut the door. Tears formed in her eyes as she duck-crawled to the front door, popped it open, and crawled inside. Once there, she reached for the cell phone in its recharging station.

It was gone.

A third dart zinged into the car door, nicking her thigh through her jeans as it raced past and slammed into the door’s speaker, cracking the plastic. The pain didn’t even register and logical thought was no longer an option as Abbie jumped up into the seat, slammed the car door shut, and jammed her keys into the ignition.

She plunged the car into reverse and stepped on the gas. The car lurched into motion, screeching backward fifteen feet and coming to an equally loud stop. Abbie thrust the gearshift into drive and yanked the wheel to the right, slamming her foot down on the gas pedal as she did so. She managed to pull out of the lot without hitting the giant diesel beside her, though she would later wonder at the miracle. The car tore across the asphalt at a wide arc, heading straight for the exit onto University Avenue without slowing. Oncoming trucks and SUV’s began honking as Abbie paused only long enough to make certain nothing would sweep her off of the road and then drove straight out into traffic, accelerating to fifty miles an hour as quickly as she could manage.

Once she'd gone several stoplights and had the incredibly bad luck not to get pulled over in the process, Abbie slowed. "Jessie, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just hit my head."

"I'm sorry, baby. You'll be okay. Stay down, all right?"

"Okay."

"We're almost home." A wave of dizziness swept over her, and her hands instinctively tightened on the wheel. She closed her eyes and opened them again, refocusing on the road.

Her arms began to feel heavy. "No. No, no." She muttered to herself, remembering the dart and the tear it had made in her pants leg.

She willed herself to stay focused and took the most direct route possible to her neighborhood, merely slowing at stop signs and driving well over the speed limit.

Finally, she pulled into her driveway and rammed the car into park. She threw open her door, jumped out of the seat, and nearly fell as her legs buckled beneath her. With great effort, she forced herself to stand and moved around to the back of the car, pulling the back door open as she went.

Jessie immediately rolled over and pulled herself up and into her mother's arms. She said nothing but curled up tightly against Abbie and hid her face in the curve of her mother's neck.

Abbie limped from the car to the front door of the house, slid the key in the lock with a fiercely shaking hand, and kicked the door open. She needed to get to the phone.



## **Chapter Two**

“There are no four-star hotels in Lubbock.” Michael pulled the Lincoln off of the interstate and onto a frontage road. The speed limit slowed a mere ten miles an hour, so the Continental, the second of the same model that they’d ridden in that night, continued to cruise at fifty to the next stoplight.

“Not even one?” Wasim’s heavily accented tone was one of disbelief and indignation.

“Not according to the information in the folder. We’ll stay at the Ashmore; it’s in our quadrant. First, however, we’ll run by the local office. I want to have a word with the vampire that turned in the tape.”

“What is the Ashmore? Is it at least three and a half stars?”

“Not a clue, Mr. Batul. Perhaps you should open the folder and read for yourself.”

Wasim rolled his eyes and bent to lift a manila folder from the floor boards of the large vehicle, muttering under his breath something about immortality and money.

Michael suppressed a smile and reached for the stereo dial.

“Turn left!”

Suddenly, Wasim straightened, his arms shooting out to either side of him, knocking Michael’s hand away from the stereo and gesturing wildly to the lamp-lit side street that approached in that direction. The outburst surprised Michael, but he kept his grip on the wheel steady, even as the smaller man reached for the wheel himself.

“Turn! Turn! Quickly!”

Michael’s brow furrowed, but without argument, he knocked Wasim’s hand away and pulled the car into the turning lane. He switched on the turning signal.

“No, no time! Just go now!”

Michael stepped on the gas and cut out into oncoming traffic, taking full advantage of the five-second window he had between cars. A couple of horns blared, but he continued undaunted. He’d lived long enough to know when to take things in stride, and now was one of those times.

“Now, right!”

Michael yanked the wheel to the right and sped down an adjoining street. They were in a residential neighborhood now, the houses mid-income range, with front-facing garages and small yards.

“*Shit!* A fence!” Wasim was throwing open the door and jumping out of the car before Michael had the Lincoln in park. They’d pulled into a cul-de-sac. In a few seconds, Michael was out of the car and running behind him, following closely on his heels.

Wasim bounded across two long manicured lawns and then leapt at a fence that stretched across the dividing ditch. Without pausing, Michael helped him over and then reached for the top of the seven-foot gate, barely noticing as splinters embedded themselves into his hands.

\* \* \* \* \*

Abbie put her daughter down and then turned around and shut and locked the door behind her. Her heart raced too hard and the small entryway swam before her eyes. On the countertop between the dining room and kitchen lay the phone that was supposed to

have been in her car. Inwardly, she cursed herself, but, at the same time, was grateful to have it right there in plain sight at the moment.

She limped forward and grabbed the phone, her disorientation increasing slightly when her daughter asked, “Who is dat man?”

She screamed when a hand wrapped around her wrist, squeezing painfully. Jessie rushed forward, attempting to hug her mother’s legs. The blue-eyed man yanked the phone out of Abbie’s hand and shoved her toward the living room, where she tripped over her daughter.

Jessie screamed as Abbie’s knee-cap made contact with her cheekbone and the two slammed into the carpeted floor. Abbie caught herself as best as she could on her hands, the jarring impact sending shooting pain through her arms and shoulders. She ignored the pain, rolled over, and pulled her daughter tightly against her. She felt and heard Jessie sob into her shirt.

“I don’t know why Otto insisted on drawin’ this out and doin’ things the hard way,” the man said. His voice was smooth and even, his Texas drawl heavy. Fear caused Abbie to shake so hard that her teeth rattled in her head and she wasn’t sure she was hearing him correctly. All she could really concentrate on was the gun the blue-eyed man held in his right hand. It was an automatic and its barrel was lengthened with a silencer. It was pointed at her head.

“Shootin’ them stupid darts and what not. Horrible shot, too. Man’s a biker, not a hunter. Think he wanted ta take ya in. Hopin’ ta get extra points.” The man shook his head. “S easier this way, dontcha think? You go first so’s ya don’t haffta see yer kin go next. I wouldn’t wanna make things harder than they haffta be.”

Abbie could not move. She could not speak. She could think of absolutely nothing to do, in that moment, except curl around her daughter's tiny, shaking body, and squeeze her tight.

*I'm going to die.*

*My baby is going to die. This is it.*

*I can't believe this is it. We're going to-*

The front door came crashing in, splintered into a hundred different jagged wooden pieces that went flying in every direction. In the next millisecond, something popped and whizzed and a picture frame hanging on the wall behind Abbie shattered. The photograph toppled loudly to the floor.

Abbie glanced up in time to see the blue-eyed man turn on a tall stranger who was barreling through the entryway toward him. She turned, picking up her daughter as she stood. She felt something in her hair and saw shards of glass fall through her bangs and onto Jessie's t-shirt. She ignored them and made a break for the hallway. Her entire body was numb and she had no clue how she was managing to keep her arms so tightly wound around Jessie, much less stand and run. She figured it was some sort of shock and fight or flight mechanism. The world was moving in slow motion.

A man shouted something behind her and the silenced gun went off again. This time, the bullet landed nowhere near Abbie, and she didn't slow to find out what or who the man had been aiming at. She headed for the hallway that led to the sliding-glass door to the back yard as if it were a destination at the end of a very long, dark tunnel. Her right leg suddenly gave out from beneath her and she shouldered the framed photograph on her

right, knocking it from its nail and sending it to the carpet. She angled her daughter in her arms and lifted back up again.

Suddenly, fingers curled around her biceps, bringing her to a fast halt. She immediately bent, setting Jessie down in front of her.

“Jessie, run to your bedroom! Go, run to your room and close your door! Go!”

Jessie took an uncertain step back and then broke out crying again and lunged toward Abbie’s legs, holding tight.

Abbie was spun around then, and the momentum sent Jessie flying. The same hands that spun Abbie around steadied the tiny toddler and Abbie got a first real look at the man before her. He was dark-skinned and about four inches taller than Abbie, which would put him at five-foot-eight or nine. His brown eyes were dark and, as insane as it was at that moment, they appeared for all the world to be the most concerned, friendly eyes Abbie had ever seen.

“Stop! You must not leave! There is another-” He was yelling instructions at Abbie over the sound of struggle behind him, but a crashing noise cut him short and the man turned to peer back into the living room.

Abbie could not help herself. He still held her arm, but somehow, the contact calmed her enough that she did not try to run. Instead, she peered around the man’s shoulder at the scene taking place behind him.

A tall man in a charcoal gray suit and black business shirt was standing over a bent figure. The bent figure was the blue-eyed man who had been planning to shoot Abbie and her two-year-old daughter. It looked as though the suit man had just thrown the smaller man into the counter top, slamming his head against the white tile and leaving him dazed.

Slowly, the blue-eyed man sank from the counter to his knees, rocking slightly as he landed.

Suit man came forward, grabbed the other man by his hair, and yanked his head back. He then pressed the palm of his right hand onto the prone man's forehead. Abbie watched in numb fascination.

And then the giant floor to ceiling windows against the Northwest wall exploded inward and chunks of the wall began spraying out in a line of black spreading spots. The dark-skinned man in front of Abbie screamed something and roughly pushed her head down. Abbie fell, positioning Jessie underneath her, and curled around her daughter, covering the back of her own head with interlaced fingers.

*Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk.*

Popping and bass thumping noises raced all around Abbie as darkness swirled inward behind her eyes. Somewhere in the periphery of her consciousness, she noticed Jessie breathing quickly, mewling in distress. Her tiny voice was muffled by Abbie's body, but the child did not squirm.

Plaster from the walls sprayed down atop Abbie's back and landed in her hair. Something hard hit her leg, jerking it across the carpet and sending her spinning just a little clockwise. She braced herself and curled tighter around Jessie.

Again something slammed into her, this time piercing her left shoulder, and Abbie felt as if she had been blasted by a blow torch, the fire searing straight through to the ribs on her right side. But then the pain was gone and she was numb again and all that existed was a fading popping and thunking noise and the ever-present sound of her daughter's whimpering.

Abbie closed her eyes when the blood began rushing through her ear drums, and then there were hands on her and she was being lifted off of her daughter.

“Mama...”

Abbie opened her eyes. She was sitting back against the base of the couch and Jessie was leaning into her, looking up at her with the most bewildered expression her mother had ever witnessed.

“... your name? Can you hear me? What’s your name?”

Abbie looked away from her daughter and up at the man who was bending over her. It was suit man and he had the most incredible sapphire-blue eyes.

“Abbie.”

Abbie said her name, her voice much quieter and mono-tone than she’d expected. It sounded as if it were coming to her through a tunnel.

“Abbie? What is your daughter’s name, Abbie?”

He had a British accent. Calm, commanding tone.

“Jessie.”

“Abbie, hold Jessie and tell her everything is going to be all right.”

Abbie didn’t even pause to consider the logic of such a statement. She held her arms out to Jessie, who immediately hugged her back, burying her face in Abbie’s shoulder.

“Going to be all right, Jessie.”

Abbie’s vision blurred momentarily and then cleared again and she looked away from the suit man to what was happening behind him. The dark-skinned man was standing over two prone bodies. They were the bodies of the men from Target. The man in black and the blue-eyed man appeared to be dead. The blue-eyed man’s head was half

missing and blood and pieces of internal organ were scattered across Abbie's living room carpet, coffee table and walls.

The man in black appeared to have been shot in the chest, as his black shirt was plastered to his chest in wet darkness.

Abbie stared at the scene as if it weren't real. It didn't *feel* real.

Nothing did.

But then nausea roiled up in her gut and she didn't even possess the strength to lean over to vomit. Instead, it came up her throat and she began to choke on it, her head falling back, her eyes rolling upward. The world spun away from her a little bit at a time. Fingers grasped her head, turned it to the side. She coughed and spat, her tongue feeling bloated, numb and awkward.

"Tell her that you love her, Abbie."

"... love you, Jess... I love you, baby."

And then she felt nothing. Everything was white.

"She's gone." Michael released the woman's head and sat back on his heels. Disappointment coursed through his body, hitching somewhere in his chest. It was followed by anger, raw and red. He stared down at the toddler who still held her mother tight. The woman's long, thick brown hair slightly obscured the child's features, but not the sound of her voice.

"Are you ouchie, Mama? You need a band aid?" she whispered. Her fingers clenched and unclenched her mother's shirt and smooth, olive skin. Blood had drenched both of them. Abbie's blood. Bullets had pierced the woman through the thigh and



shoulder. The shoulder wound had gone straight through her chest, ripped through her internal organs, and exited through her right side.

Miraculously, none of them had hit the child.

“I know she is.”

Michael turned to peer up at the man beside him. Wasim had come to stand near them, his brown eyes almost black, his expression pensive. He turned to Michael and stared meaningfully. “I knew...”

Michael’s gaze narrowed. He stood, suddenly towering over the smaller man. “You knew?” He looked from Wasim to the child and her dead mother. “You knew the men were attacking?” He turned back to his companion. “That she would die?”

Wasim said nothing, but blinked slowly and nodded his head, looking down.

And then Michael understood. “My God. You *knew*.” He again turned from Wasim to stare down at the quivering child and then at her mother’s pale, bloodless face. Softly, as if to himself, he whispered, “You’re a head hunter.”

“Yes.”

And then Abigail Maria Lucia opened her eyes and inhaled violently.

### Chapter Three

Michael immediately knelt beside the woman once again.

“Impossible! She has a child!”

Wasim knelt alongside him. “Adopted?” He leaned forward, pulling the toddler away from her mother.

“Mama? What’s wrong? Mama!” Jessie squirmed in Wasim’s clutches, fighting to get to her mother as spasms wracked the small woman’s body, sending her into convulsions that resembled epileptic seizures.

“Get some salt!” Michael hollered at his companion and the smaller man jumped up, taking the toddler with him. Jessie began to scream and kick in his grasp, and then he whispered something at her and she settled down, her eyes immediately finding her mother on the floor again, watching her writhe in apparent agony.

Wasim carried the child into the adjoining kitchen and began rapidly going through cabinets until he found the blue and yellow cylinder of sea salt and tossed it over the bar to the taller man.

Michael caught it and grasped Abbie under the chin. Her eyes were open, but they were unseeing. He squeezed her jaw until he’d managed to pry open her mouth and then he poured the white substance onto her tongue.

Abbie’s convulsions continued for several more long seconds and then gradually settled down. Her eyes closed once more and her breathing lapsed into a normal pattern. She appeared, for all the world, to be asleep.

Michael swallowed, released her jaw, and stood once more. He tore his eyes off of the sleeping woman and stared over at Wasim.

“That was why Anna insisted you come, isn’t it?”

Wasim’s brow furrowed. He was holding Jessie, who was watching her mother with wide eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“Anna’s gifted with visions,” Michael said, “She obviously foresaw this woman’s death.” Michael turned from Wasim to stare down at the woman. Color was returning to her cheeks, flushing them a gentle peach-pink. Her lips were no longer whitish yellow, but a darkening rose. “She just didn’t know the significance of said death.”

Wasim came around the adjoining counter and bent to put Jessie down. Jessie walked shakily to her mother’s side and knelt down beside her. She placed her small hand on her mother’s cheek and rubbed softly. “Mama?”

“What is the significance? Were you able to read anything off of either of them before they died?” Wasim asked the question, but his eyes were on the child.

Michael turned to him, cocking his head to one side. “How did you know?”

Wasim cut his gaze to the tall man. “You mean about your gift? Everyone knows, Mr. Michael. We know you have several, because you’re so old.” He smiled wryly. “But everyone knows about your touch.”

Michael peered at him a moment longer and then sighed and nodded, turning his attention back to the child and her sleeping mother. He contemplated that particular gift. When he chose, he was able to read information off of people by simple touching them. It was like combing a lake. Some smaller, older, much dissolved thoughts easily sifted

through the prongs, but larger thoughts and surface information were readily attainable.

“Yes, I was able to read a little. Enough to know that they’re Victor Anson’s goons and that they were sent to kill Abbie and her daughter and, should they fail - themselves. An order they took to heart.”

“Mama? You sweeping? Mama...”

Michael knelt beside the child. “She’s going to be all right, Jessie. She’s resting, that’s all.”

Jessie turned her green-gray eyes upon the tall man and her steady gaze was unsettling. “You give her sawt? Is she hungwy? Does she need a dwink?” Her voice was clear as a bell, and her questions momentarily threw Michael.

“Well... I suppose she will when she wakes up.”

“You make her some warm soy. Okay? Okay.” Jessie gave the order gently, nodding to emphasize her words. Michael’s brows rose.

“Very well. Warm soy.” He stood and glanced at Wasim, who shrugged. And then his eyes skirted over the wreckage of the room. He had to get them out of there. If he’d read the gunman right, if these two didn’t complete the task properly, others would be sent to finish the job.

For some reason, Victor Anson wanted Jessie and her mother dead. Michael wondered whether the man was aware that Abbie was a vampire. Was Jessie really her daughter? By birth? If she was, it would be the first time such a thing had ever occurred in Syndicate history. Vampires could not father or give birth to children. It had simply never been done.

And if Jessie was truly Abbie's daughter, did that have something to do with Anson's desire to see them both dead?

Michael's expression was dour. He took a slow, deep breath and then turned to Wasim. "Mr. Batul, please bring the car around. I will help Abbie and her daughter pack. We need to leave as soon as possible."

Wasim nodded, glanced once more at Abbie, who seemed to be coming around, and then exited through what was left of the front door.

Michael watched him go and then moved to the hallway. He found Jessie's room at the end, decorated in pink and yellow painted stripes and wooden art depicting Winnie the Pooh, Tigger and Eeyore. He entered the room, immediately feeling as if he was trespassing, and passed the adjustable crib-bed on his way to the closet. He pulled the double-doors open and gazed inside. He selected several outfits of shirts, skirts and shirts, and then opened the top drawer of the chest of drawers that sat at the center of the closet. Inside were a variety of colorful tights, ruffled socks and a stack of pull-up diapers.

Michael selected several more items, found the shoes and sandals on the floor beside the chest of drawers, and picked them up as well. Then he stuffed what he'd chosen into a diaper bag, the largest of three hanging in the closet, and lifted the bag off of its hanger.

He placed the bag's strap over his shoulder and re-entered the living room.

Abbie was sitting up now, holding her daughter in a death-grip as she gazed over her shoulder at the mess that was scattered across her living room floor.

"Abbie."

Abbie jerked in surprise and looked up at Michael. Her eyes were wide, the whites clear on all sides.

“Abbie, my name is Michael.” He slowly lowered himself to her level and eased the bag off of his shoulder. He spoke softly, calmly and clearly. His voice resonated with a hypnotic tone. “I am going to help you and your daughter. You have nothing to fear from me or from my friends. Do you understand?”

Abbie stared at him for a several long moments, her hand absently caressing her daughter’s blonde locks. And then she nodded, jerkily, not speaking.

“Good. Here are clothes and diapers for Jessie. Now I need you to pack your own clothes and anything you’ll need for about a week. I can help you.” He smiled gently, his blue eyes sparkling with otherworldly brightness. “All right?”

Again, Abbie nodded.

She pulled her gaze away from his and found herself staring down at the top of her daughter’s head. Her body felt disconnected. Strange waves of numbness and tingling rode through her body, from head to toe. Her tongue hurt. She rubbed it against the roof of her mouth and found that it was raw. There was a strange thrumming in her ear drums and her body felt light, as if she’d just taken too much prescription pain killer. A hangover without the ouch-factor.

She continued to gaze down at Jessie’s blonde head and vaguely, as if the realization was coming to her through a dream, she took in the blood staining the front of her own yellow and blue t-shirt. It had spread across her chest and was crusting locks of Jessie’s hair, her cheek and her left ear.

Fear suddenly arced through her and she sat up straighter and held Jessie out at arm’s length. “Jess, are you hurt, baby?”

“No, Abbie. The blood is yours.”

It was the man's voice again, cutting through her terror, instantly embalming her with a sense of calm. Abbie turned to gaze up at him.

*My blood?*

She looked back down at her shirt, following the path of the blood from her chest to her shoulder, then back down again to her rib, her stomach and her leg. She was covered in it, nearly from head to toe. There was a rip on the outside of the pant leg of her left thigh, and a much larger star-shaped tear on the inside of the same thigh. Had she been stabbed? Vaguely, she recalled the thumping sounds, the shattering glass and flying plaster.

*Shot?*

Her gaze skirted back to her shirt. There was so much blood, red, brown and drying, that she couldn't tell where the tears might be.

Was she going to die? Why didn't she feel any pain? Was she already dying?

Another dose of fear coursed through her and her heartbeat hammered in her ears. She couldn't die. She couldn't leave Jessie...

"You were shot twice, but you're going to live. Now, we have to leave, Abbie. You need to get up and pack."

Abbie slowly looked back up at the man beside her. He was tall and, even though he spoke gently, he seemed formidable, somehow. And, despite her fear and obvious loss of copious amounts of blood, for some reason she believed him. He'd said his name was Michael.

"Michael?"

“Yes. Michael. Abbie, I’m going to help you up.” He rose, gently taking hold of her arm as he did so. She rose with him, standing on surprisingly steady legs. Jessie eased her grip on her mother momentarily and stared up.

“You need some soy, Mama?”

Abbie blinked. “Soy...”

“I promised her I would make you some warm soy when you awakened. I’m assuming she’s referring to soy milk. Lactose intolerant? I’ll make it if you go back to your room and pack. Enough clothes and supplies for a week, remember. And make it fast.”

Abbie blinked once more, then nodded quietly and took Jessie by the hand. “Come with me, little one. Come to Mama’s room.” She led her slowly down the hallway, past the hall bathroom, to the second door on the right. Then, on second thought, she entered the hall bathroom and, without looking in the mirror, she washed her hands. When the water turned pink in the basin, she closed her eyes. When she re-opened them again, the water was clear. She dried her hands and left the bathroom, taking Jessie’s hand once more. They approached the second door on the right. Abbie opened it and Jessie ran in, immediately pulling the stuffed elephant off of the queen-sized bed.

Abbie watched her for a moment, bewildered by the contrast of the dimpled, happy expression on her daughter’s face and the blood that coated the child’s entire left side. And then she blinked, again wondering whether she were dying and this were some sort of death-related dream, and walked, zombie-like, to the closet.

She switched on the overhead light and stared blankly at the two rows of clothes before her. Without giving it a fraction of the kind of thought she normally did, she began



pulling down jeans and sweats, t-shirts and shorts, and a couple of sweaters. She dropped them in a pile in the center of the closet and then opened the drawers of her dresser one at a time, selecting underwear and bras and socks without a concern for color or pattern. If she'd been more aware of her actions, she would have realized that she was selecting items based on their comfort. She chose soft clothes, cotton, fleece, and the one cashmere sweater she owned. She chose thick socks, despite the West Texas summer heat. She chose twice the number of sweats as shorts and even stared longingly at a folded fleece blanket before deciding against it.

She bent, picked up the pile of clothing, and headed back into the bedroom, dropping the socks and underwear as she went.

"Oh!" Jessie watched her mother drop a few items. "I hewp you!" She rushed forward and picked up the socks and underwear and followed Abbie to the bed.

Abbie smiled down at her. As she did so, her head felt as if it were floating and her fingers tingled. "Thank you, sweetie. Help me fold them and put them in the bag?"

"Okay."

Abbie pulled a bag out from underneath the bed and began to fold and roll the jeans into tight bundles. As she placed the items she folded into the bag, she had to work around those that Jessie haphazardly inserted as well and even had to pull a few articles of clothing back out, re-fold them, and re-pack them. When she was done, she ruffled her daughter's head and, still in a daze, she took her hand and walked back out into the hallway, her bag over her shoulder.

Michael turned as they entered the living room. “Good.” He nodded at the bag she carried. “No need to pack toiletries. The hotel will have them and if not, we can send out for whatever you’ll require.” He was holding a steaming mug in one hand.

He moved forward and placed it in Abbie’s empty hand. “The soy.” She glanced down at it and found herself smiling. But it was surreal when the line of her vision ended at the blurred remains of an attempted murderer’s broken, bloodied skull. Instinctively and with expert skill, she bent and lifted Jessie up with one arm, angling her so that the child couldn’t view the ugly mess. She managed not to spill the soy milk.

Michael watched her for a moment and then looked out the front door, askew on its hinges, and waved at someone outside. “Let’s go.” He gestured for Abbie and Jessie to go ahead of him. Abbie held tighter to her daughter’s hand and stepped forward. Then she stopped.

“What about food for Jessie?” Her tongue scraped painfully against the top her mouth as she made the “J” sound, and she wondered what the hell she’d done to irritate it so badly.

“Can she eat what you eat?” Michael asked.

Abbie nodded. “Yes.”

“Then we’ll order out.”

Abbie continued forward and, without glancing back, she walked down the front steps, put her daughter in the back seat of the Lincoln Continental, and then climbed in beside her.

## **Chapter Four**

No one in the car had spoken except Michael, and that had only been to give instructions to the man behind the wheel. The radio was off and the night was absolute, the heat pressing in at the windows even as Abbie continued to shiver beneath the car blanket she'd found in the back seat. Jessie was buckled in beside her, dwarfed by the giant bucket-bench seat and adult seat belt. Abbie had given most of the soy milk to her, as she had virtually no appetite at the moment.

She was cold. And nauseated. And confused. And scared.

She felt like she was coming down off of something that she'd taken way too much of. The past hour felt like a nightmare she was waiting to awaken from. Everything seemed surreal and dizzying. Had any of it really happened?

She pulled her arms around her stomach and flinched when her t-shirt crunched beneath her grasp, crusted with dried blood.

It had all really happened.

"Abbie, I'm going to explain some things to you now."

It was Michael's voice, floating to her from the front passenger seat, which felt miles away in the dark interior of the silent car. He turned in his seat and faced her. His sapphire eyes penetrated the darkness like beams of blue light.

"The men at your house were assassins sent by a man that they referred to as 'the Redeemer'."

"The Redeemer." Abbie turned it over on her sore tongue. "Who is he?"

“His real name is Victor Anson, but at the moment, he happens to be a very charismatic, powerful human being masquerading as the second coming of Christ.”

“Jesus?”

“I know of no other Christ.”

Abbie stared at him, her own gaze narrowing. “Okay. Why does he want me dead?”

“From what I could gather, it isn’t really you they want dead. It’s your daughter.”

Michael nodded toward Jessie, who watched him with a somewhat blank, very tired expression.

“Jessie? Why?” Abbie asked, her voice incredulous.

“They believe her to be some sort of anti-Christ, I think. I couldn’t get many details on it, to be honest. Something about being marked.”

Abbie stared down at her daughter. Marked? Did they mean...

She reached over and gently took her daughter’s right hand and turned it over. The strawberry birthmark was visible even in the dim light and Abbie’s brow furrowed.

“Yes, that could be it.” Michael leaned forward a little, taking the toddler’s arm in his hand and switching on the overhead light. He’d never seen a birthmark quite like it, though it wasn’t by any means evil-looking or even unnatural. It was a strawberry birthmark, somewhat darker than most, and seemed to mark out a series of crooked but vaguely geometric lines or symbols. It reminded him of something, but he couldn’t put his finger on what, exactly. “She has always had this?”

“Yes. She was born with it.”

Michael looked up at Abbie and let go of Jessie's hand. "Which brings something to mind, Abbie. You'll have to excuse me for asking this, but it is rather important. Is Jessie your child by birth?"

Abbie blinked at him and then appeared cross. "Yes, she's mine by birth. Why?"

Michael took a deep breath and then sat back in his seat once more. "Suffice it to say, people like us don't normally have children."

"People like us?"

"Like you, Abbie. And me."

"And me." Wasim spoke up from the driver's seat.

Abbie cut her gaze to him and then back to Michael. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You were shot twice back there. One of the shots was fatal, entering your heart and piercing your right lung, and the other was critical, in the very least, since it penetrated your femoral artery." He paused, allowing the information to sink in just long enough, and then he asked, "How do you feel?"

Abbie stared at him in silence. She felt fine. High and weary and scared – but fine.

"You are alive, Abbie. And, less than twenty minutes ago, you were otherwise."

Abbie looked away from Michael and gazed out the dark window. She had never had a dream this detailed before. And, normally, she could control the fate of her dreams and, *normally*, she would be *driving*, not riding in the back of whatever car she was in. This was a very strange dream indeed. In fact, normally, she didn't experience pain in her dreams. Certainly not nausea. Was it something she'd eaten? She rubbed her tongue

against the top of her mouth and winced. Maybe in her sleep, she was biting it or something.

Then again, if this was a dream, why hadn't something stupid happened, like the car turning into a bicycle? Where were the fuzzy edges?

No. This was real. Somehow, horribly and irrevocably, Abbie knew that everything that had transpired, from the Target parking lot dart dodge to the shoot-out at her home, had been real. This was real. She was sitting in the back of a Lincoln Continental with her daughter, both of them drenched in blood, two complete and utter strangers driving them to an unknown destination.

And her home was covered in a would-be child murderer's brain bits.

Michael watched Abbie's gaze distance itself and sighed. He'd seen it before, of course. Many times. But sooner or later, the truth sank in. Sooner or later. No matter what.

When she suddenly began to laugh, he realized the sinking-in had begun, and it wasn't having the most desired effect possible.

"Abbie, listen to me."

"Yeah?" Abbie said as she continued to laugh. In her mind's eye, she was picturing Michael, in his charcoal gray suit, peddling the Lincoln Continental, which had become a very long tandem bicycle. She knew she was laughing out loud and also knew that it was coming out louder and longer than she intended.

"What you waffing at, Mama?"

Abbie swung her head around and peered down at her daughter. "Nothing, baby," she said, but stifled yet another round of giggles.

“Abbie, tell me what it is you do for a living.” Michael’s voice cut through her ridiculous reverie and brought her attention back around to him. He was staring at her intently, and the piercing gaze of his deep blue eyes was unnerving.

“I’m a freelance photographer,” she said as the giggles worked their way down into her stomach and began to fade.

Michael had already guessed as much, having ascertained a lot from the few minutes he’d had to look around her home as the soy milk was in the microwave. He’d noticed the photographs on the walls, some in shadowbox frames with attached award ribbons. Many were wildlife and nature shots; a monarch butterfly on a lilac petal, a pigeon taking to flight a mere foot from the camera lens, a green-eyed cat staring intently at the camera through grass the same color. Others were photographs of Jessie in different stages of growth. All were excellently captured and artistically displayed and most were signed at the bottom right hand corner: *AML*.

But it was a question which required Abbie to focus on something other than whatever was currently running through her mind, and that was what she needed. So, after she answered, he asked another.

“Is Abbie your full name, or is it short for Abigail?”

“Abigail Maria Lucia. Why?”

“Only curious.” He looked at Jessie. A small gold chain around the toddler’s neck sported a tiny “J”. “What about Jessie? Short for Jessica?”

“No.” Abbie shook her head and another smile crept to her lips. Michael caught the blooming expression and wondered whether he should again change the subject. But she continued.

“It’s short for Jezebel. My labor was long and hard. Eighteen hours into it, my mother started on me about giving the baby a biblical name. She wouldn’t shut up.” Abbie shook her head, her smile growing bigger. She looked out the window again. “So, in between yelling at the nurse to get the anesthesiologist back in the room and telling my father to get the hell out of it, I agreed. Jezebel is a biblical name, right?” She laughed then, and Michael’s expression became more stern. “Besides, I’ve always kind of liked it. Especially ‘Jessie’.” Her laugh quieted, and she glanced once more down at her daughter. Jessie looked up at her and then at Michael. It was clear she wasn’t sure what they were talking about.

“I see.” Michael watched Abbie a few seconds more and the worry in his expression eased away. Whatever hysterics she’d been experiencing earlier had run their very short course. She was stronger than he’d initially given her credit for. And she had a wicked sense of humor. He was still troubled by the fact that Jessie was obviously the birth daughter of a vampire, however, and he would make a point to delve further into that mystery later.

“Left here. Let’s make a run around the perimeter before heading in.” He turned back around in his seat and gave Wasim further instructions. A few minutes later, they were pulling into the circular drive of the Ashmore Inn and Suites.

Wasim stopped the car. Michael opened his door and got out, then leaned his head back inside. “I’ll get the key. Take them around to the back and wait for me.”

In another ten minutes, Abbie was following Michael and his companion up the stairs to Room 103, Jessie held tightly in her arms. Even at the back at the hotel and even



at this late hour, she was admittedly a little nervous that someone would see them and immediately wonder at the blood on their clothing.

However, no one crossed their paths and they made it into the room without incident. Abbie set Jessie down and then turned to Michael, who had been carrying her bags. He handed them to her and she took her daughter by the hand and led her into the adjoining bathroom.

Michael watched them go and then turned to Wasim.

“I was able to read an address from the man in black before he died. However, I think he was dyslexic, so I’m not positive on the numbers. Either 6472 or 6742.” He ran his hand through his hair and sat on the edge of one of the two queen-sized beds.

“Something like that.”

“Do you believe that to be the headquarters of Victor Anson?”

“I’m not sure.” Michael’s British accent was stronger now than it had been earlier, a sure sign that he was growing tired. “We’ll have to investigate tomorrow. We also might need to erase a few memories. Right now, we have to figure out what to do with our guests.” He gestured to the bathroom, from which the sound of a running shower could now be heard, and then looked meaningfully up at Wasim, who was standing beside the television set, leaning against the mirror, his arms crossed over his chest.

“She is a vampire. Do we not need to contact an adherent and turn her over for guidance?”

Michael shook his head. “No. Not this time. There’s more to this than meets the eye, Mr. Batul. There’s something about that child...”

“You are speaking of the mark on her hand?”

Michael nodded and then sighed. “Yes and no.” There was more to it than that.

“The fact that she is the daughter of a vampire is strange, is it not?”

“Yes. And I’d like to discuss the issue with Miss Lucia. I also want to know exactly what she and her daughter have to do with Victor Anson.”

“Perhaps he is the father?” Wasim sat on the other bed, drawing his legs up under him Indian-style.

“I don’t think so.” Michael had seen no sign that Abigail was living with a man in her home and something about Jessie’s demeanor or appearance told him, instinctively, that Victor Anson could have nothing to do with her birth. Plus, it was strange enough for a female vampire to mother a child; for a male vampire to father one would be doubly unlikely. “But it’s worth asking.”

Wasim did not answer. Instead, he reached for the remote on the nightstand between the two beds and pointed it at the television.

## **Chapter Five**

*(Approximately 2,000 years B.P.)*

Michael moved slowly through the crowded, dusty city of Sepphoris. The lengthy linen garments of his meil and kethoneth shielded his skin from the unforgiving sun, but locked its heat against his body, and had he not been so devoid of moisture to shed, his robes would be soaked with sweat.

He scanned the faces of the people he passed. The market was bustling and chaotic. Ever present were the guards of Herod Antipas, who moved like animated statues of red and gold through the streets of people dressed in robes of fawn and white. Michael was looking for someone. He knew that he would not find the subject of his quest within the city limits. The man he ultimately searched for was wanted by Antipas's men and had gone into hiding a year ago. However, there were contacts within Sepphoris who knew where to find him.

It was one of those contacts that Michael sought out now. He peered through the undulating mass of people selling and buying, carting and carrying, running and walking through the dusty streets. There would be something to mark the contact for what he was. Some brand of color, some mode of dress or behavior that stood out from those around him.

He was lost in his thoughts when someone brushed past him, grazing his bare hand with their arm. A flash of images exploded in Michael's head, the grief of the passer-by too strong to block. He hadn't been prepared to filter raw emotion such as this without warning.

*“Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba...”* Voices chanted in his head, a background to the alternating but unbroken series of scenes that played out before his mind's eye. It was a Jewish Kaddish, or funeral song, and though Michael's immediate surroundings were devoid of any kind of music, the hymn played loud and clear in his head.

Michael saw a group of women kneeling on a dirt-packed floor, tearing at their robes, their heads thrown back in agonizing anguish, their faces red and tear-streaked. A man rocked back and forth, the left sleeve of his kethoneth torn to the elbow. Before him sat a tiny wooden box, no more than two feet long. The pain within him was indescribable.

The box was a coffin. The man's infant son. He had been no more than a year old. The man's name was Abidan. His son's name had been Jesse.

Michael watched the now silent man walk away. Abidan shuffled slowly through the dirty street, no sandals on his feet. It was customary not to wear sandals when mourning. He was oblivious to his surroundings, encompassed utterly and completely in the shroud of his grief. His fists were filled with small round pebbles, which the man mindlessly turned in his fingers. They were for his son's grave. That was where Abidan was headed now.

Michael watched for several more long moments, and then turned away, only to come face to face with another man.

“You are the one looking for the Nasi, Yeshua Bar-abba.”

It was a statement, not a question. Michael studied the man before him. He was, perhaps, six or seven inches shorter than Michael, which was normal; Michael was very tall. He was also darker skinned, and utterly devoid of any kind of distinctive, singular or

otherwise identifiable feature. He simply looked like a man. Michael had been completely wrong on that note. Obviously, however, Michael was recognizable to him.

He yearned to touch the man. Just a brush and Michael would no longer feel at such a disadvantage. But he stayed the urge for now and merely nodded.

“He is outside the city. When you have walked a mile past Nazareth, venture off of the path, toward the mountains. If he deems you trustworthy, the Nasi’s chosen will find you.”

Michael again said nothing and simply nodded. The man turned and moved through the crowd, quickly disappearing among them, blending like one grain of sand on a beach. Michael watched him go, wondering at his use of the term “nasi” for Yeshua Bar-abba. It meant “prince”, and “Bar-abba” meant “son of the father”. Those that believed in what Yeshua taught referred to him as the prince of their people, the son of God, the messiah who would usher in the miracles that would bring about God’s kingdom in Israel.

Michael headed toward the city gates. He had lived a long time, and yet today had managed to throw his normally calm and focused thoughts into disarray. He had received orders from his leaders to find the man who was supposedly performing miracles for his followers. The miracles described bore an uncanny resemblance to some of the abilities demonstrated by vampires. Michael was supposed to find him and learn as much about him as possible. Was he one of them? If he was, he’d been assigned no adherent. He’d made his way back from the brink of mortality all on his own. Such a thing almost never had a positive effect on a vampire’s mind.

Michael was to track the man down and join his group of followers, those that the people of Israel referred to as his disciples but that the government believed were no more than a band of insurgent militants, all armed and led by the *Nasi's* "generals".

With those thoughts in his mind, Michael left the city of Sepphoris and made his way down the dirt-packed trail toward the town of Scythopolis, which was West of the Jezreel Valley. Nazareth was no more than a tiny settlement along the road and could be reached in the time it took for the sun to rise directly overhead.

As he walked, he passed the cemetery on his right and his eyes automatically scanned the small clay markers and their scattered mourners. He found Abidan in the third row, kneeling over the tiny fresh-packed earth of his son's grave. He watched as Abidan laid one small smooth stone on its surface and cried silently.

He did not know it at the time, but it was an image that would haunt him for more than a thousand years.

At the small cypress-wood mile mark South of the village of Nazareth, Michael ventured off of the trail and headed East, toward the mountains of Lower Galilee. He walked for a very long time, and the sun was setting behind the mountains before him, when a robed figure in white appeared against the backdrop of foothills.

Michael stopped walking and waited, his arms held non-threateningly out at his sides. The robed figure approached him slowly. He wore cloth over the lower part of his face and carried a long bow in his right hand. A full quiver of arrows was slung over his right shoulder. At thirty paces, the man stopped, pulled an arrow, and nocked it, pointing the weapon in Michael's direction.

“What have you come for?” the man asked, his voice carrying over the rocky desert plain.

“I am searching for the Nasi, Yeshua Bar-abba. I have come to learn his teachings,” Michael answered calmly.

A twig snapped to Michael’s right, and he let his gaze wander. A second robed figure stood not twenty feet away, this one armed with a spear. Michael kept his arms out at his sides and very slowly turned in a circle, taking in at least five more robed men, all of them armed, surrounding him. They all wore the cloth over their faces; only their eyes were exposed. His sources had been right about Yeshua’s followers bearing weapons. And he imagined that they kept hidden to avoid recognition by the Roman authorities.

He turned back around and waited as the first man lowered his bow just enough to indicate that Michael was not in immediate danger from him. He came to stand a yard away from Michael and Michael took the opportunity to swoon.

He closed his eyes briefly and made as if he were toppling forward. The man before him hurriedly caught him and righted him, brushing his hands against Michael’s in the process. Michael read his thoughts in that instant and, in the place of the secrets and memories that he pilfered, he laid his own suggestion, ever so gently in the man’s mind.

“I am trustworthy,” he very softly told the man, whose name was Mattai.

Mattai made certain that Michael was not going to fall over again and then stepped carefully back. His features were gentle and his expression was one of concern. “I believe you speak the truth, and you are in need of water. Come with me.”

Michael nodded slowly and followed Mattai over a series of hills, through a small valley, and, finally, into a cave in the side of one rocky cliff. All the while, the other armed men walked behind them at a good distance.

A figure appeared outlined in the cave and Mattai waved. The figure nodded and let down a crude ladder constructed of hemp rope. Mattai gestured toward the ladder and instructed Michael to climb. Michael did so. He was at once grateful for the extra strength that being a vampire imbued him with.

When he reached the top, the man who had waved to Mattai searched Michael's robes for any weapons he might have hidden on his person. When nothing was found on him, he was nudged back toward the cave tunnels, which stretched in relative darkness, but for the sporadic and leaping light of several lit oil lamps that hung from nails embedded in the rock along the natural walls.

Michael followed the twisting tunnels until he came to a large open cavern in which sat more than a dozen robed men, their faces covered but for their eyes. They were seated at the foot of a man in robes of blue and white. His face was uncovered. He sported a very long wiry black beard and very dark brown eyes. The room smelled of human sweat and the men who were seated passed around a large earthen bottle of red liquid. They lowered their cloth only to drink. The standing man stopped speaking and looked up as Michael entered.

Michael stood still and waited to be addressed.

"Why have you come, brother?"

"To learn, master."

"What is your name?"



“I am called Judas.”

The man watched him in silence for several long moments. Michael knew he looked different from most men in this region. He was, on average, a foot taller than the majority of them and his eyes were blue. While blue eyes were not unheard of, they were rare, and Michael’s were very, very blue. They were often likened to Lapis Lazuli and, in some countries, this was considered a boon. In some, a bane.

He wondered what the man made of his appearance.

And then the man smiled gently. “Please, come and sit, brother. You are welcome here. But do not call me ‘master’. You have but one master, your God. Exalt to him.”

Michael nodded once and went to sit among Yeshua’s other disciples. The bottle was passed to him and he took it. He’d been promised water, not wine, but in reality needed neither. For now, he would join them in drink and listen.

“Bar-abba, what do we seek here?” one of the robed figures asked.

“You seek wisdom. It is the most important thing, for with wisdom comes understanding.”

“But you said that loving God is the most important thing,” another man spoke up, his tone gentle but inquisitive.

Yeshua smiled at this and nodded. “Indeed, it is. If you were wise, you would understand this.”

The men sitting in the group laughed quietly. Michael studied the one they called Yeshua Bar-abba. He raised his hands as he spoke and paced animatedly in the small space afforded him at the front and center of the group of apostles. Michael noticed a

small red line across the back of his right hand, between his thumb and forefinger, and wondered if he'd somehow harmed himself.

Yeshua continued, "Hear and receive my sayings; and the years of your life shall be many." His eyes sought out Michael's amidst the small crowd and their gazes locked. "I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in right paths." He looked away, gazing at each of the men in turn. Their chuckles faded gradually and they nodded respectfully.

## Chapter Six

*(Present day)*

He didn't open his eyes when the footsteps crossed the threshold of his room. He let them come, listening to them as if from far away, focusing instead on the words that ran in a loop through his restless mind. They'd been there, swimming in circles, for what seemed an eternity now. They had no beginning and no end.

*I am the alpha... the omega...*

They told a story, but one without origin or destination. It hinted at eternity but refused to allow him a glimpse. What was the reason? He could only trust. He believed, deep inside, that there was a reason, and that, if he could only remain on path, that reason would become clear in time.

Right now the story spoke of a child with a mark. It spoke of war and hatred and pain. It whispered of-

"My Lord."

Still, he did not open his eyes. Instead he listened again. He listened to the tale in his brain and to the utterances of those that had come to beseech his guidance. He somehow quieted the precedence of the former and processed the importance of the latter. When they had finished, he remained silent for several long moments.

Voices whispered into his mind and visions cleared and blurred, shifted and changed, dancing from one to the next before his closed lids. He waited, as always, for the story to change its course, to show him the new path that he would have to take.

When it finally did, he nodded, almost imperceptibly, and found the words to speak as if they'd been laid upon his tongue as a gift.

"I will love them no more because all their leaders are rebels. The people of Israel are stricken. Their roots are dried up; they will bear no more fruit." He opened his eyes and stared straight ahead as one last scene solidified into internal sight. A building in the night, stairs leading to a room. A number. 103.

"And if they give birth, I will slaughter their beloved children." His voice was mere more than a whisper, but the men and women around him heard him clearly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jessie sat down in the tub and took the soap from the dish to her right. Abbie once again reminded her not to touch her eyes after handling the soap and then she leaned back into the shower spray and closed her own eyes. As the water warmed her skin and eased the tension from her shoulders, she tried to make sense of her day.

It seemed so long, so disjointed, that it felt it had begun a week ago, not only that morning. So much had happened, from the photo shoot she'd attended that morning to the luncheon with Jessie's play date at noon to the Science Spectrum that afternoon and then the grocery store, and finally Target. A week, at least.

And from the moment she'd stepped out into the Target parking lot, an entire year had gone by. Abbie leaned forward again, ran her hair back out of her face, and rubbed the water from her eyes so she could open them. She peered down at her body. Smooth olive skin ran over well-toned legs and arms and a stomach that had once been perfectly

flat but that now bore the minor but tell-tale signs of child birth. At least nursing hadn't caused her small breasts to sag.

She knew she'd been shot. What Michael had said was true. There could be no denying it now. It was plainly clear that this was, by no means, a dream. But there were no visible signs of the wounds that the bullets would have left. No entries, no exits – not in her leg, shoulder or chest. Even the tiny cut the poisoned dart had made as it had grazed her thigh was gone.

She was completely healed. And she wasn't even tired. Any normal day with Jessie left her beyond exhausted by night fall. But not tonight. So, what did that mean?

She bit her lip. Michael's words echoed in her head. ... *people like us...Like you, Abbie, and me.*

"Owww... Ow, ow, ow, my eyes!"

Abbie sighed. "Jessie, I told you not to touch your eyes after handling the soap. Close them tight." She leaned down, cupped her hands, and poured the water she caught over her daughter's face, clearing away all traces of the bubbles and film that Jessie had rubbed in.

"Okay, open them now."

"Ow, no!" Jessie opened them and then immediately closed them again, her eyes still raw from the sting of the soap.

"It'll go away in a second, okay?"

"Okay."

Abbie finished rinsing the shampoo from her own hair, dabbed on the ineffective conditioner the hotel supplied, let it sit for a few seconds, and then rinsed that as well.

She left the water running, pushed the shower curtain to the side, and stepped out into the bathroom, leaving the curtain open so that she could watch Jessie, who was now wide-eyed once more and fiddling with the empty conditioner bottle.

The towel provided was at least soft and fluffy and she wrapped it tightly around her torso and then ran her wet hand over the mirror to clear a spot. And then she screamed.

The door came crashing open almost instantly and Michael stood in the threshold, a gun in his right hand. It was pointed at the floor and his eyes scanned the steam-filled room. Jessie sat motionless in the tub, mouth open, eyes wide, staring at her mother. Abbie stood plastered against the wall, her face ashen.

“What happened?” Michael asked, his tone as calm as he could make it.

“The mirror,” Abbie answered. She swallowed and blinked and swallowed again.

“There was a man’s face in the mirror. I’m going mad.”

Michael looked from her to the mirror and back again. He took a slow, deep breath and re-holstered the gun in its shoulder harness. Then he moved into the bathroom, took the bar of soap that had found its way back into Jessie’s hands, and rinsed the child off. All the while, Abbie looked from him and her daughter back to the mirror, where the image she’d glimpsed had faded but still haunted.

She was definitely losing it. This was too much for her to handle. She needed to concentrate on something – *anything*.

“Let me,” she said as she pushed away from the wall and took Jessie from Michael’s arms. He’d wrapped her in a second towel and all that peeked out was her blonde head, wet curly locks sticking to the sides of her smooth face. “I’m sorry,” she said then, as she

proceeded to take a smaller towel from the rack and dry Jessie's hair. "I thought I saw something. I guess I'm tired."

"You're not tired. You saw something," Michael told her gently. He leaned against the wall and slid his hands into the pockets of his charcoal-gray trousers.

Abbie paused in her drying and looked up at him. "What?"

"You saw something. It must be your gift. Or one of them. A few of us have more than one." He spoke matter-of-factly and yet conversationally, as if what he was saying didn't sound absolutely insane.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Abbie finally asked, not particularly caring, at the moment, whether Jessie heard her curse or swear or raise her voice.

"We have a lot to discuss, Abbie. Get dressed and come out so that we can talk." He pushed away from the wall and left the bathroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Abbie stared after him a moment and then blinked again, hesitantly glancing once more at the mirror. Only her own face stared back at her. But it was the most terrified reflection of herself that she'd ever seen.

When she left the bathroom ten minutes later, she was fully dressed in sweats, a t-shirt and her cashmere sweater and was carrying a pair of fleece socks and her sneakers in one arm. Jessie came running out from behind her, dressed in footed pink pajamas. She wound around her mother's legs and headed straight toward the bed. Wasim helped her climb atop it.

Neither of the men had changed yet, but neither had been as covered in blood and mess as Abbie and Jessie. In fact, Michael's clothes appeared virtually untouched.

Michael smiled gently at Abbie and gestured to the bags of food on top of the small round table in one corner. “Hamburgers and French fries.”

“Thank you,” Abbie said and headed toward the bags. She pulled out the large fries and sat down on the bed beside her daughter. Jessie immediately reached for a handful, and Abbie stayed her hand, pulling out a few long strips and holding them out for the child.

“You do not want the sandwich?” Wasim asked from where he sat on the other side.

“We don’t eat meat, but thank you for the thought. You’re welcome to have them.”

Abbie stood again. “Did you get ketchup?”

“In the bag,” Michael answered. “So, you’re vegetarian. Is it a religious preference?” He hadn’t noticed any religious memorabilia in Abbie’s home, but a ring on her finger read the words, *Harm None*, and Michael vaguely recalled such a phrase bearing a religious significance of some sort.

Abbie shrugged and began digging through the bags. “No. The first time I gave meat to Jessie, she spat it out and refused to even try it from that point on. So, I stopped buying it and then got used to not eating it.” She came back with the ketchup packets and sat back down. “I’m Abbie, by the way.” She held out her free hand.

Wasim blinked at it momentarily and then smiled. “Wasim. Wasim Batul. I am sorry that we must meet under these circumstances.”

She handed the packets to Wasim, indicating that he should open them and help Jessie with her fries. “You’ll have to forgive me for asking,” she said plaintively, as she pulled on her socks and shoes, “but are you Hindu or Muslim?”

“Neither.”



Abbie studied him for a moment. He'd looked away from her and was squeezing ketchup out of a plastic packet onto a bunch of piled napkins on top of the bed spread. He didn't volunteer any further information, so she decided not to ask. Instead, she pulled a French fry out of the bag, bit the tip, and chewed slowly. And then she turned her full attention to Michael.

"So," she said, "Start talking."

He smiled at her, flashing straight, white teeth. "Very well." He took a seat in a chair at the table, leaned back, and crossed his legs at the ankle. "Mr. Batul and I are members of an organization known as the Syndicate." He spoke calmly and clearly, his British accent crisp, his words apparently carefully chosen. "Every member of the Syndicate bears one foremost trait in common. We have all died and come back from death. Entirely healed." He paused, as if for effect. "And enhanced."

Abbie looked at him for a long, silent moment. The only sound in the room was the slurping noise Jessie made as she sucked the ketchup off of the fry she continuously dipped into her heap of ketchup.

"You've died." It wasn't a question. It was a statement, made incredulously.

"Indeed. As has Mr. Batul." Michael waited, patiently, as he always did during this part of this particular conversation.

"How did you die?"

"It isn't important. Suffice it to say, it was a long time ago. The crucial facet to this information, Abbie, is not the death itself, but the rebirth. When I awakened on that day, it was to find that I no longer bore my mortal injuries and that every injury I would ever sustain again, from that point on, would likewise heal almost instantaneously." And so it

would be for every vampire from that point on. Of course, Michael thought, it normally took the vampire longer to be reborn than it had Abigail Lucia. In fact, usually long enough for said vampire to be buried. She was proving to be a vampiric anomaly on more than one front.

Abbie chewed the inside of her cheek for a moment, glanced at Jessie, and then stared back up at Michael again. “You’re telling me you’re immortal?” She cut her gaze to Wasim. “Both of you?”

“More or less,” Michael answered. “We can be killed, but it’s a bit more complicated than killing a mortal human.”

“I see,” she said. But she didn’t. Or she did, but she didn’t believe it.

“I did not believe either,” Wasim said suddenly. “Not at first. Not until I, too, died and returned to life.”

Abbie turned to him. “And how did you die?”

“Motorcycle accident in Delhi. I was on my way back from a particularly difficult exam.”

“And you’d been told before hand that you were immortal?”

“Yes. The Syndicate sends out adherents, aids and guides I suppose, who inform the vampire of their fate and-”

“Whoa!” Abbie jumped up from the bed and stared down at Wasim with wide eyes. “Vampire? Did you say *vampire*?” Her tone had risen significantly and Jessie stopped slurping ketchup.

“Not as such, Abbie. Please, sit down.” Michael gazed steadily at her, willing her to return to her seat, but she remained standing.

“Do you sprout fangs and drink blood?” Abbie’s gaze skirted from one of them to the other, nervously. She wasn’t an idiot and she wasn’t slow. This explanation of Michael’s led to only one conclusion – she was one of them, a member of this Syndicate thing, and whatever they truly were, she was too. She didn’t want to drink blood.

“No,” Michael said, his tone infinitely calm. “No blood drinking. No fangs. No turning into bats or caustic reaction to sunlight.”

Abbie’s brow furrowed and her gaze narrowed on the taller man. “Then why the hell do you call yourselves ‘vampires’?”

“Because, Abbie, we die and come back from the dead. And vampire sounds so much more pleasant than ‘zombie’, does it not?”

Abbie didn’t say anything, so he continued.

“The Syndicate has existed for a very long time. In the era that it formed, the term ‘vampire’ had a much different meaning than it does today, not to mention a different pronunciation. At the time, the description fit.” He smiled wryly, his sapphire eyes twinkling. “Believe me, most of us are bewildered by the term’s rather violent shift in connotation.”

Abbie sat back down, more slowly this time, and didn’t take her eyes off of Michael. Her expression hardened. “Okay,” she began, breathing deeply. “So I’m a vampire and I’m a member of this Syndicate. I know that’s where you’re leading. Now explain to me what this has to do with the face I saw in the mirror and the fact that some guy named Victor thinks Jessie’s evil and wants us dead.”

“I believe the face you saw in the mirror is symptomatic of your gift,” Michael began, leaning forward now and placing his elbows on his knees so that he could lace his

fingers together. “Every member of the Syndicate, every *vampire*, if you will, is reborn with a gift. Actually, some of our scholars believe that the gift is predetermined in their genetic makeup and only manifests once they’ve flat lined. However, that, too is unimportant. The fact is, we each have what mortal humans would consider supernatural abilities once we have died and reawakened. Your gift may have something to do with visions, and you may very well have glimpsed a fraction of one while you were in the bathroom.”

Abbie blinked at him. And then her face turned red. “Do you mean to tell me that I’m going to see faces in reflections scaring the bejesus out of me every time I go to brush my teeth or dry my hair or...” she cast around for the words, “or look in the rearview mirror?”

“No, in time you’ll learn to control it to some degree. Our Enforcement Director, Anna, has visions. It is something she has lived with quite peaceably for many years.”

“Great,” Abbie said, tearing her gaze away from him and staring blankly at the bluish carpet. “What a crappy gift, I gotta tell you. Why can’t I fly or something useful like that?”

Michael smiled. She was adjusting to the news quickly and much more easily than he’d hoped she would. “Anna’s gifts come in quite handy. It was one of her visions, in fact, that led Mr. Batul and I to your home when you were attacked. If not for Anna’s vision, Jessie may very well be dead.” He gestured to the child, who had resumed eating her fries, and then he inclined his head and studied her more carefully. “Which brings me to something I wish to discuss with you.”

Abbie glanced at Jessie and then back at Michael. “What?”

“Jessie is your birth child, however vampires are incapable of having children.”

Abbie’s brows rose. “Well, obviously that’s not true.” Then she frowned. “Or I’m not a vampire.”

“You are definitely a vampire,” Wasim stated, almost more to himself than out loud.

“Apparently it is possible after all, however it was unheard of until now. I am curious about Jessie’s father,” Michael continued.

Abbie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “So am I.”

“Mama, I need more ket-thup.”

Abbie shook her head. “No you don’t, little heart. More ketchup is the last thing you need. Eat the fries you dipped and then let’s wash you up again.” Jessie’s face was smeared with the sticky, vinegary concoction, as were her fingertips. Abbie couldn’t believe she hadn’t gotten any on her pajamas yet.

“Pwease more ket-thup?”

“No, Jessie. Eat the fries before I throw them away.” It was the second time in a day that deep-fried potatoes had constituted a meal for the child.

Jessie pouted, but slowly picked up the pinkened fries and began biting chunks off of them and chewing sulkily.

“What do you mean, Abbie?” Michael asked then, his tone still patient.

“I mean that I don’t know who the father is. I was artificially inseminated.” Few used the term ‘artificial’ any longer, but Abbie very much doubted that either of these two men would be familiar with the more recent alternative term.

Michael’s brows shot up in surprise. He hadn’t been expecting this. “I see. The donor is unknown?”

Abbie sighed and stood once more. She moved to the window and was going to pull back the curtain to gaze out into the night when Michael's fingers encircled her wrist and he pulled her gently away.

"It isn't safe."

She stared up at him a moment and then nodded. She moved away, stood against the wall, and hugged herself, suddenly cold. Any time she thought these particular thoughts, she would feel cold. She missed a certain pair of arms keeping her warm and a certain chest that she could lay her cheek against. She felt bereft. The cashmere sweater suddenly wasn't enough, even on a hot Lubbock summer night like this one.

"I was married for four years before my husband was killed in a car accident." When she spoke, her tone had taken on a far-away quality and her gaze focused on something in another space and time. "He left enough money in his insurance policy for me to buy a small home and go through counseling, which was good, because I lost my medical insurance."

"We had been planning on a family when he died. After a year, I was either strong enough or numb enough – I couldn't tell you which – to take off my wedding band and put away his photographs. But I couldn't forget. I wanted to be a mother. I felt the desire to share what he'd shared with me. I wanted a child." She'd felt an un-killable need to show someone else the kind of love that Simon had shown to her.

Neither man spoke. They watched Abigail and listened intently. She continued, now fully immersed in the past that played before her mind's eye. "I tried to adopt, but because I was widowed and my job was considered variable and because I'd gone through counseling for anxiety and depression, I was put on a back burner. And, finally,

my file was dropped altogether.” She sighed and ran a hand through her long, brown hair. Her fingers caught on the wet knots and she slowly began to work them out as she spoke, utterly unaware of what she was physically doing.

“So, I visited a fertility clinic. I told them what I was looking for. Intelligence, no criminal record, preferably a creative arts background. Simon played the cello. He had a PhD in music and taught at Texas Tech. I guess I was fishing...” Her voice trailed off and she straightened and cleared her throat.

“Anyway, they said they’d found a match but wouldn’t give me a name. When Jessie was born, I became increasingly curious.” She turned to look at her daughter. “She’s an amazing child. At fifteen months, she knew the alphabet and could count to twenty. In two languages.” She looked back at Michael. “But when I traveled back to Dallas to get the information I was looking for, it was to find that the clinic had burned to the ground and all of its records were lost in the fire.”

Michael watched her in silence for a long moment, slowly digesting everything she had just told him. It was a lot. An extraordinary chain of events, it seemed. “What caused the fire?”

“Arson. They think it had something to do with pro-life activists.” She sighed, suddenly weary to the core. “The clinic employed a doctor who sometimes performed abortions and apparently that same doctor had been shot at earlier that week.”

“But no one was apprehended.”

Abbie shook her head.

“Mama, I’n done.”

Jessie pushed away from the wall and picked her daughter up. “I don’t suppose you got drinks?”

“Coke and Diet Coke,” Wasim said, holding up two separate large containers with straws.

“Hand me the diet. She doesn’t need the extra sugar. And,” she continued as Jessie pursed her lips around the straw and began to drink, “I don’t know what you two are planning to do with us or, really, what’s going on, but I do know that I can’t raise a child on French fries and Coke for long. She’ll need real food soon.”

Michael nodded. “I understand.” He pulled the cell phone out of the inner pocket of his suit and began pressing buttons.

Abbie took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “What about my house? You broke down the door – not that I’m not grateful, mind you. But what’s going to happen to everything inside?” She thought of the drawings her daughter had made for her in the last two years, irreplaceable files filled with marker, crayon and finger paints. She thought of the photographs of her and Simon. And finally, she thought of her camera, her lenses and flashes, though she was certain she could easily replace those.

“A clean up crew has already been dispatched to your address,” Michael told her, re-pocketing the phone. “They are securing the area as we speak. Your possessions will be moved, catalogued, and placed into one of our storage facilities. You can pick them up later. In the meantime, I must tell you that I don’t believe our meeting to be coincidence. We were sent to stop Victor Anson. Apparently, he has sent his followers after *you*. I think you might hold a key to unlocking the mystery of what he wants and why.” He



paused and everyone remained quiet. Michael carefully considered his next words, and then asked, “Can you tell me anything about your vision? Any details?”

Abbie thought for a moment. She tried to picture the face again, tried to remember what it had looked like. Blonde hair, cut short. Maybe buzzed? Blue eyes? Maybe green – or hazel. Not brown.

“He was in his late twenties, I think. Short blond hair, bluish eyes...” There was something more to it. She couldn’t put her finger on it. She gently took the drink from Jessie and replaced it on the table. Then she moved back to the bathroom, still carrying her daughter, and stood in front of the mirror. The steam had dissipated and the glass was clear. She gazed at her own reflection. She’d always considered herself mildly attractive – good cheekbones, a strong chin, straight teeth and pretty eyes. But right now, she barely noticed any of these features and actually wished they would fade away and disappear.

And then they did. In their place, another image formed.

Abbie did her best to steady her nerves, to not retreat or scream or both. She’d wanted this to happen, and though she hadn’t completely expected it to actually *happen*, it did, and now she needed to make the most of it. She stared at the image, willing it to solidify, become clearer.

In her periphery vision, she saw Michael and Wasim come to stand in the doorway.

“What do you see?” Wasim asked.

“A man with buzz-cut blond hair. He’s wearing a gray t-shirt with the sleeves ripped off at the shoulders. He must be on the juice, because he’s big and his veins are bulging. He’s got tobacco stains on his teeth. He’s talking to someone...” Her voice trailed off for a moment as she listened.

Her eyes widened and the color drained from her face.

“Oh my God.”

“What?” Michael asked, his hand instinctively snaking toward the weapon beneath his suit coat.

“They know we’re here.”

At that moment, the front windows to the hotel room imploded as a blast of hot air, fire and smoke washed over Wasim and Michael, sending them flying into the back wall, where they impacted with deadly force.

## **Chapter Seven**

Jessie wailed in terror and clung to her mother as Abigail hunched down over her to protect her from the debris that was still bouncing off of walls and objects in the room. A few seconds after the blast, Abbie chanced a glance out the door of the bathroom and saw Michael and Wasim peeling themselves off of the back wall, their hair singed, their faces black with ash, their clothes ripped to near shreds. Abbie realized, in that instant, that she could have just as easily been out there, in the main room instead of in the bathroom. With Jessie. Who wasn't immortal.

The blast would have killed her daughter.

Anger welled up inside of Abbie, hot and roiling. She held Jessie as tightly as she could without crushing the child and felt the fury within her boiling over in an ultra protective rage the likes of which only nature can instill within a mother.

"Abbie! Move now!" Michael lunged forward, apparently already healed from whatever damage the blast had inflicted, and grasped Abbie by the upper arm. She spun, holding Jessie tight, and followed after him through the rubble of the room, toward what was left of the front door. Wasim followed behind them.

The gunshots began in the next instant, and this time they hadn't bothered with silencers. Abbie shrieked and found herself crouching low. Michael moved to shield her from the bullets as they pummeled the interior of the hotel room, shredding what was left of the beds and the pillows. The large screen television behind them exploded in a painful spray of thousands of sharp slivers of glass. Abbie felt several pieces pierce her arms and back, but ignored the pain.

A numbness set in, a determination to keep her child safe. She barely registered the impact as a bullet whizzed past Michael's right side and sliced through her right shoulder, entering through the collarbone and exiting through her back, shattering the clavicle as it went.

Her right arm suddenly went limp and Jessie would have tumbled to the floor if she hadn't been clamped tightly around her mother like a baby monkey. Abbie cried out in terror when the shots escalated and another stray bullet found her right calf, momentarily crippling her. Michael stood in front of her and Wasim was now moving to her right side to further shield her. However, bullets were still finding their way through. If they were finding her, she could not fathom how many were hitting Michael and would soon be striking Wasim.

They were going to take them all down, Abbie included. And if Abbie went down, so would Jessie.

"No!" Abbie screamed, tears streaming from her eyes, making tracks in the ash that had formed upon her cheeks. She willed her right leg to move, to walk, to keep going, but it wasn't listening. Even as she cursed it for betrayal, she could feel it beginning to heal. A bullet dinged the metal door jamb above her head and ricocheted across her left cheekbone, searing a red canal from her nose to her left ear. It had hit only an inch or two above Jessie's blonde head. Something inside of Abbie snapped.

"No!" She found herself bellowing in rage, wishing that those who were attacking her would know agony. She wished hell upon them, in all of its red glory. She hated them then, in that horrible instant, more than she'd ever thought herself capable of hating someone. They wanted to kill her baby.

She gritted her teeth, fury painting her vision red. In the murky, ash and dust-filled gloom, through bits and pieces of flying debris, and around Michael's crouched, protective body, she could make out figures moving through the parking lot. They were hiding behind cars, running between them, pointing their guns at her and her child, attempting, in vain, to get a clear shot.

A clear shot.

She could see them, even if they couldn't see her. She focused upon the closest one. A man with short blond hair and hazel eyes. The man from her vision, with a tattoo of a cross and crown of thorns across his bicep and an AR-15 in his hands. He was trying to kill her baby.

Trying to kill Jessie.

*Kill.*

*I hate you, Abbie thought. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you...*

Michael tensed in front of her and reared back slightly as a gunman in the parking lot below, a mere ten yards away, suddenly burst into a bright red and yellow ball of flame. The man bellowed in pain and dropped his weapon.

*What the hell...* Michael watched as another gunman, a few yards away, also erupted into an infernal blaze, screaming and wailing his arms, dropping his semi-automatic as he did so.

Michael recovered from the surprise quickly, reached back and took Abbie's arm, and guided her toward the stairs that led down to the parking lot. The shots ringing out around them were fewer now, but still continued. Michael ignored each impact upon his

body, but was conscious of the fact that he and Wasim were taking nearly more damage than even a vampire could heal, and Wasim was still young.

The tall vampire didn't even flinch this time as yet another shooter to his right burst into flame and began to scream in agony and surprise. They moved quickly down the stairs, taking two at a time. Abbie was silent beside Michael, as was Jessie, and fear arced through him as he wondered whether the child had perhaps taken a bullet.

When a fourth individual exploded into flames, the gunfire ceased and Michael was aware of a scrambling retreat. He did not pursue them. Instead, he lead Abbie and Wasim through the connecting walkway to the Eastern parking lot and the black Lincoln Continental that waited in between a large blue dumpster and a heavily-laden pecan tree. He pressed a button on the key fob in his hand and the doors unlocked.

Now that the gunfire had stopped and the night had returned to a more relative quiet, he could hear the toddler whimpering. She was alive. Frightened and confused, but alive. He stopped beside the back door, opened it, and ushered the mother and child into the back seat. Abbie didn't hesitate. She ducked her head and crawled in without waiting for help, despite her injured arm and dragging, uncooperative leg.

Instinctively, she placed Jessie on the floor of the back seat and covered the child with her own body. "Shh, it's okay, Jessie. Mama's okay and so are you. It's gonna be okay, baby girl. Everything's going to be okay. Mama's here..." She whispered to Jessie, kissing her on the head, pushing strands of hair behind the child's ears. Jessie's eyes were wide and her nose was running from crying. Abbie summoned up every shred of courage she could find within herself and smiled gently at her daughter. "Mama's here, okay, baby?"

Jessie waited a moment before answering. But Abbie's smile won out, instilling her two-year-old daughter with the reassurance she'd hoped it would. Jessie nodded and whispered, "Okay."

Michael and Wasim closed their front doors and ducked into the floorboards in front of their seats. Michael reached for the phone in his inner suit pocket, only to find that he'd lost it due to several large holes in his clothing. The suit was bullet proof, made of a special material by an innovative and expensive designer in Cuba. However, even this suit was only so strong and much of it had been weakened or destroyed in the initial blast in the hotel room.

He cursed softly and then found himself staring into the keypad of another cell phone. Wasim smiled wryly at him as he held out his own Nokia. Michael nodded at him in gratitude and took the instrument, immediately dialing a number that he'd memorized years ago.

"It's Michael. I need another car, a clean up crew, and supplies for myself, Batul, the woman and her child." He paused, listening to the voice on the other end. "Good." He closed the phone and handed it back to Wasim.

The four of them were quiet then, listening. Michael thought of the men who'd caught on fire. He thought of Abbie in the back seat, laying protectively over her daughter. He had a feeling the gunmen would draw back, regroup, and that for the time being, the four of them were most likely in the clear.

He waited a few more seconds and then rose in the seat, inserted the key, and started the car. When it started up like a dream, free of incident, he released the breath he'd been holding and realized that he'd half expected the vehicle to blow up.

He put the car in reverse, instructed everyone else to stay down, and drove the car out of the lot, leaving a scene of terror and destruction behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Antoinette Christiane Lambert, also known as “Anna”, paced the small room in tight lines, her hands before her, her fingers fidgeting nervously. Large flat-screen monitors on the walls depicted different news stations across the country and a large console against one wall was ripe with buttons, switches and levers of different colors and sizes.

Right now it was one monitor, in particular, that had Anna’s attention. She cut her gaze to it and then tore it away once more, spun around and continued pacing. The phone against one wall rang and she stopped pacing, moved quickly to the phone and picked it up.

“Give me their status.” Her tone was crisp and cool.

“Clean up crew’s left the area,” a voice told her on the other end of the line.

“Michael and Batul are underground. Everyone appears to be safe.”

“Have the supplies and transportation been delivered?”

“They’re on their way now.”

“Good. Keep me updated.” She hung up the phone and turned back toward the monitor. Fox 34 News was reporting on a massive explosion that had rocked half a block of property on 19<sup>th</sup> street in Lubbock, Texas. According to the newscast, the explosion had originated near the Ashmore Inn and Suites and was caused by a construction crew striking an un-marked gas line. Four men, construction workers, were delivered to UMC hospital with critical injuries, including extensive third-degree burns.



Anna moved to the console and pressed a few buttons. The television screen switched channels and stopped at a scene depicting the same destroyed, smoking building and flashing lights, fire trucks and hovering helicopters. A badge in the bottom right hand corner read “KLBK 13”. A reporter relayed the story of an exploding gas line and critical injuries to construction men, plus several tens of thousands of dollars worth of damage to the hotel and surrounding private property, including customers’ cars. No other civilians were hurt.

Anna changed the channel again. She checked channel 9, channel 11, and the Spanish station, Telemundo. The story varied very little and it appeared, for all intents and purposes, convincing. Memories had been erased, contrary evidence destroyed, and false information firmly implanted into pliable brains. For the moment, at least, it seemed as if the true manner of the incident was safely under Syndicate wraps.

She took a slow, deep breath and let it out through her nose. This situation was becoming more volatile by the hour. She wasn’t surprised by its escalation. She had lived long enough and through enough to understand the power and influence religiously affiliated figures wielded. Nothing in the history of man had caused more unnatural deaths than religion.

Anna left the observation room and walked down a long tiled corridor to an office three doors down. Once inside, she closed the door behind her and moved to the shelves that housed what appeared to be several hundred texts. She didn’t hesitate as she approached them; she knew exactly which one she was looking for.

She pulled the leather-bound tome from the shelf and placed it on the nearby mahogany desk. Throughout her life, Anna had experienced more than two-hundred

thousand visions. Each one, she wrote down, careful to include every remembered detail, and catalogued, alphabetically, within the covers of the books on the shelves behind her.

The tome she now flipped through was labeled “J-L”. She wasn’t sure what she was looking for. She only had an inkling of where to start searching. But everything else she could do, as enforcement director, had been done.

She sat down and began to read.

## **Chapter Eight**

*(Approximately 2,000 years B.P.)*

Michael adjusted the string of the bow over his shoulder and peered into the distance. The area was heavily wooded and rocky, the uneven ground calling for careful evaluation before each step. Every now and then a jagged rock would slice through his foot, unimpeded by the flimsy leather sandals he wore. He assumed the others suffered the same sort of misfortune, but it was imperative that they travel across the land in this manner, far from roads and trails.

It had been two months since Michael had come to join Bar-abba and his men, and he had yet to witness, first hand, any of the “miracles” the vampire elders had spoken of. He’d spent the time moving through the wilderness, sometimes in utter seclusion from the rest of civilization. In their camp, he sat among the others, listening to Yeshua explain, in gentle tones, the principles of what he believed to be God’s will. No one had yet come to suspect that Michael was anything other than what he claimed to be – Judas, a single man yearning to become a trusted disciple of Yeshua Bar-abba, the Nasi.

He had already taken the opportunity, several times, to brush his hand against Yeshua’s exposed skin in order to learn about the man’s past. He did so very surreptitiously and, thus far, had not been called for curious behavior.

He had found the man very easy to read, on the surface. His past, however, was very shrouded and his mind was strong. On the surface, his thoughts were of Israel, God’s will for his people and concern for the Temple in Jerusalem. He held that he had been born

Yeshua bar Josef, son of Josef, and had been raised in the small town of Nazareth. His memories became hazy after that.

Michael felt that there was something the man was hiding, but he had to admit to himself that he never felt or read anything negative during those minute brushes of their minds.

Thus far, he really had nothing to report to his elders. So, he waited, biding his time, and relaxed into his role of Yeshua's apostle. He'd been entrusted with weapons of his own and now took up guard duty on a rotating schedule with the others every night. As far as he'd been able to observe, there appeared to be roughly a dozen men that Yeshua kept close to him, both physically and emotionally, and perhaps three or four dozen others that were not as close. The chosen ones moved around their teacher like clouds around the sun, following him wherever he went, on his heels or at his side, questions almost always posed upon their tongues.

These questions, Bar-abba always answered, though Michael noticed that, sometimes, his replies were either too cryptic to immediately understand or seemed to contradict answers he'd given in the past.

At one point, Michael had called him on such a reply. Yeshua had been speaking of God's commandments, reiterating the importance of following God's written law.

"You know the commandments," he said. "Do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, defraud not, honor your father and mother."

Michael's brow had furrowed. He had raised his hand slightly, drawing Yeshua's attention, as was customary. "I do not recall a commandment that speaks of defrauding,

Bar-abba. I agree that it is important, but unless I am mistaken, such a law was never given, specifically, to Moses.”

To the surprise of everyone in the camp, Yeshua’s response was not in his usual manner. He stood from where he’d been seated upon a low-lying stone and faced Michael, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Michael’s attention was instinctively drawn to those hands. He noticed, peripherally, that the red line that normally marked Yeshua’s right hand was missing.

“Do you reject the word of God, Judas? For it is not I who speaks to you, but God who speaks through me. If it be your Father’s will that this law be evoked, do you possess the privilege to deny him?”

Michael had said nothing. He’d remained silent, peering deeply into Bar-abba’s eyes. And then he’d turned away and looked at the ground. The other disciples around him had also remained quiet. Though they were most likely wondering at Michael’s contradiction and Yeshua’s strange reprimand, Michael’s thoughts were elsewhere. There was something not quite right about the way Yeshua appeared at that very moment. Something was different.

Now his apostles followed him, each covered from head to foot in concealing robes, each surrounded in their own kicked-up clouds of dust. They moved across the desert, rocky hills toward the sea-port city of Caesarea. They’d been traveling a week and were nearly at their destination.

“Hold!” Michael glanced up, pulled from his thoughts as Mattai drew the procession to a halt. Michael had learned to recognize each of the apostles by their height and voices alone, for their faces were nearly always hidden. Up ahead, about two miles in the

distance and framed by the glittering, distant water of the sea, was the white-walled city of Caesarea. However, it was not the city, itself, which had given Mattai pause. It was the boy who ran away from the city, in their direction.

The scout. He'd been sent ahead. Now he was only a hundred yards away.

Far behind him, Michael could see a small crowd of people gathering at the gates. The city yet lay more than a mile out, but the crowd was slowly headed toward them, closing the distance.

Yeshua waited as the boy approached. "My Lord, the people know you are coming. They wish to meet you so that you may heal them." The boy spoke quickly, a little out of breath.

Michael had heard rumor of such a thing happening before. Apparently word had spread of Yeshua's "gifts" and those sick or injured for whom prayer and traditional remedies had no effect were scrambling to receive the healing powers of the one they called the Messiah.

Michael turned his attention to Yeshua, who stood silently and in stillness, watching the mob of people slowly make their way toward him. On impulse, Michael glanced down at his right hand. The red line was back.

Yeshua turned and walked slowly toward a copse of Cypress trees ten yards away. There were several men standing beside them, all dressed the same. Michael could not see any of their faces. As he walked, Yeshua pulled his cloth up over his face as well.

As if they took this as a sign that their teacher felt there was danger, the apostles, both the chosen and those who were not as close, began to gather around the teacher,

forming a mob-like crowd of white robes and dark eyes. After a few moments, Michael could not tell the difference between any of them.

As the crowd from the city drew nearer, Yeshua and his men waited. Michael decided to join them, in a fashion, standing at the outskirts of the group, watching the sick and injured arrive. After a cursory skim over the crowd, Michael could see that they were not accompanied by any of Antipas's soldiers.

Yeshua was safe for the moment.

The group of people stopped, watching the apostles in silence. After a few seconds, a man pushed through the crowd of disciples, moving slowly to the forefront of the procession. Michael recognized his eyes.

He pulled the cloth down from his face, revealing himself to the mob.

Instantly, a man at the front of the group rushed forward. His robes were dirty and his hands were worn. He was a laborer, very dark from the sun. Behind him stood a young boy, perhaps ten years of age, his eyes downcast as if he was embarrassed.

"Lord, you must help me. Please have pity on my son," he began and fell on his knees before Yeshua, who peered down at him in stony silence. "My son is possessed by a terrible dumb spirit. It takes him over and he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth!" The man sobbed, once, as if the recollection of such behavior was too much for him to relay. He wound his fingers together in desperate pleading. "Please help him. He is always falling into the fire or into the water. I am afraid for his life." He gazed up at Yeshua and then cut his gaze, for a second, to the disciples around him. "I did bring him to your disciples but they could not cure him. He needs you, my lord. I need you." He

then lowered his head in supplication and remained silent, though Michael could see his body quivering with pent-up emotion.

Yeshua stood, unmoving, for several long seconds, and then he sighed. "You really are an unbelieving and difficult people," he said softly.

Michael's brow furrowed. What could he mean by that?

"How long must I be with you, and how long must I put up with you?"

The man glanced up then, confusion clear in his worn and sun-mapped features.

Yeshua shook his head and closed his eyes. "Bring him here to me!"

The man's eyes widened and he stood on wobbly legs. He turned to the ten-year-old boy who waited several paces away.

"Come, boy!" he told his son, and the boy hesitantly made his way forward.

However, half way there, the child froze. His body went rigid, his eyes bulging. His father rushed to his side, as if knowing what was coming next. The boy began to jerk back and forth and would have thrown himself to the ground if not for his father's arms held tightly around him.

His father lowered him gently to the sand as the boy began to convulse violently, saliva bubbling and gathering at his mouth, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Instinctively, Michael rushed forward. It was not the first time in his long life that he had come across such behavior. Though he was not certain what caused it, he was familiar enough with the illness to know that the most important thing to do in this immediate situation was to prevent the child from choking on his own tongue.

But before he could reach the father and his son, Yeshua was kneeling at the boy's side. He gently placed his right hand on the boy's forehead, and closed his eyes. At first,



it seemed he was having difficulty keeping contact with the child, as the boy's head jerked back and forth and from side to side. However, he somehow managed and, after a few tense moments, the boy's movements slowed and then stopped altogether.

His eyes closed and he lay silently. He appeared, for all the world, to be sleeping.

Or dead.

Michael was instantly apprehensive. He took another step forward, but stopped again as the boy suddenly moved. His hands fidgeted at his sides and his eyes slowly blinked open. Yeshua smiled down at him and stood. He then leaned down and offered the child his hand.

The boy stared up at him in wonder as murmurs of awe and admiration went up through the crowd around them. He remained laying on his back, stunned, for several heartbeats. Then he blinked and slowly reached up to take Yeshua's offered hand.

Bar-abba's hand closed around his and he was helped to his feet. He stood, assisted and shaky, for a moment, and then he was released to stand on his own.

The boy's father, still on his knees, at once shuffled over to Yeshua and prostrated at his feet. "My lord, you have healed my son! Thank you," he said as he looked up into Yeshua's eyes. His own eyes were tear-filled and his dark features were pulled into an expression of deep gratitude and veneration.

Yeshua did not smile. He merely nodded, once. The man stood, taking his son by the arm, and moved away, allowing the elderly couple behind him to move forward for their turn.

Michael watched and listened, his enhanced vampire senses picking up Yeshua's words as he turned to the disciple beside him and asked, softly, "You attempted to heal the boy?"

"Yes, Bar-abba," the disciple replied quietly. "When you were on the mountain. They came to us, expecting to see you, but you were praying and asked not to be disturbed, so we did not allow them passage."

"But we tried to heal him before we sent him away," another disciple spoke up, leaning in so that others could not hear his words. "You told us that he who believes in you, the works that you do, he shall do also, and greater works than those. You can heal the sick. Why were we not able to do so?"

Yeshua gazed at the men in turn and then shook his head, as if in disgust. "Because you have so little faith," he replied.

Michael watched, then, as Yeshua moved forward, away from the two apostles, and met the crippled woman who was hobbling forward. The apostles stood in silence, watching their master work. Michael did not know what to think of the situation.

He also did not know what to make of the fact that the red line on Yeshua's right hand, which Michael had come to believe was a birth mark, had been there earlier that day. And now it was gone.

## Chapter Nine

*(Present day)*

“What is your name, brother?”

“Samuel, my Lord.” Samuel Beckett tried to keep the waver of fear and pain from his voice as he addressed his leader. However, the blood that had threatened his eye several times in the last half hour had finally flooded his vision and nearly all the man knew, at this point, was pain.

Automotive glass was embedded in his scalp. One of the car windows beside a comrade who had somehow caught fire had heated impossibly fast and exploded. Before he could retreat, shards of the glass had found their way into his skull, taking one eye completely out and slashing a permanent gash into what had once been his left nostril and sinus cavity. The entire left side of his face was little more than a mutilated river of blood. He was choking on it. It was very difficult to keep the anguish from his otherwise reverent tone.

But he knew who he was talking to. So he stifled his terror and attempted to reign in the distress he was experiencing. If he could not be useful to this one man before him, he was worthless indeed.

“Samuel, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Hell.”

Samuel swallowed as his leader raised his hand and gently placed his fingertips to Samuel’s right, un-marred cheek.

“Take heart, brother; your faith has made you well.”

A murmur went up through the small crowd around them. Samuel could feel the wounds in his face closing up, tingling and itching, even as he also felt himself drowning in the Lord's deep brown eyes. The glass that had been embedded in his skull chinked to the ground, collecting at their feet in a small pile of window and rearview mirror shards. Samuel's headache receded and subsided. And then, as the murmur around them erupted into gasps of intense surprise and wonder, the vision in what had once been Samuel's left eye slowly began to return.

Samuel's breath caught as his sight cleared into crisp perfection. All of the pain was gone. He swayed on his feet and the man before him steadied him gently. Samuel gently, carefully ran his fingers over his face, feeling the smoothness of his cheek and nose, and finally, the eyelid of his left eye, which was closed over a whole, complete eye ball that had been nothing more than optical shreds only moments before.

"My Lord, you have healed me." He found himself prostrating then, lowering himself humbly to the floor so that he could kneel before the man who had given him back his face. His life. "Whatever you ask of me, I will do. Only let me somehow repay you, my Lord." His voice came out in ragged whispers of desperation. He was choking, but no longer on blood, instead, on *desperation* to show his loyalty and gratitude. Never before had he known such solid conviction, such a certainty of who he was and what he had to do. It was peaceful, this ultimate giving over of himself, his fate and his future, into another's clearly capable hands.

His head bowed, his eyes closed, he heard his master's voice, soft as it was, cascade down upon him and over everyone else in the room.

“And the Lord did so; and there came a grievous swarm of flies into the house of Pharaoh, and into his servants' houses, and into all the land of Egypt.”

\* \* \* \* \*

For the second time that night, Abbie pulled back her hair, arched her back, and let the hot, stinging spray of a shower engulf her. She closed her eyes and rivulets ran over her face. She thought about what had transpired since the attack at the Ashmore.

She and Jessie had been chauffeured half way across town, where they'd gotten out of the Lincoln and left it, empty and locked, beneath the sweeping branches of a willow tree. They'd then very quickly climbed into a much less conspicuous Toyota Avalon XLS, where Michael took the driver's seat. He'd given instructions to Wasim, who had opened the glove compartment and extracted a small folding notebook with inside pockets. Within the notebook had been a folded sheet of paper with writing in some sort of code, a key ring with two keys, a platinum VISA, a twenty-four hour access card to a gym that Abbie had once been a member of, and a list of phone numbers.

Once Michael had looked over the contents of the notebook and, apparently, deciphered and digested the information on the coded sheet, he'd started the car and pulled them out of the lot. Twenty minutes later, they'd pulled into the loading space at the back of the afore mentioned gym and Michael had walked them to the front door. He inserted one of the two keys on the ring, turned it, and opened the door. Almost immediately, a keypad inside began to beep in warning.

Michael had moved to the keypad, run the twenty-four access card through the slot on its side, and the machine had ceased its beeping.

Abbie quickly brought her daughter inside, who had, by that time, fallen asleep in the car, and she made her way through the familiar interior of the building to the women's locker rooms. She laid Jessie down beneath one of the benches and covered her with several of the freshly washed towels that the gym left on its countertops for clients' use.

When she returned to the main entryway, it was to find that Michael and Wasim had just finished bringing in supplies and groceries from the trunk of the car, and shut and locked the door behind them.

Abbie wasted no time rummaging through the grocery sacks. She'd found several glass jars of baby food, a carton of soy milk, cold plastic bottles of soft drinks, and Tofurky lunchmeat and whole grain bread. She placed some of the analogue lunch meat on a slice of bread, folded the bread over, and stuffed half of it into her mouth. She washed the bites down with soy milk straight from the carton, utterly uncaring that both Wasim and Michael were watching her make a pig of herself.

After devouring her make-shift meal, she'd picked up a duffel bag and made her way back to the women's locker room, leaving the two male vampires to talk amongst themselves.

Now she stood beneath the warm, massaging cascade of water, her breathing slow and even, as scenes of fire and destruction played in her weary mind. She knew, without having to be told, that she had caused those men to burst into flame. Neither Michael nor Wasim had commented on the incident, though she could sense that both of them had wanted to. There was an uneasy tension between the three of them now, an unspoken agreement that there was more to Abbie than met the eye, and that what had shown itself so far was, perhaps, only the beginning.

All of her wounds had since healed and she felt as physically strong as she did mentally tired. She sighed and shut off the water, stepped out of the shower, and toweled off, eyeing her sleeping daughter as she did so. Jessie hadn't had a chance to eat any of the more healthy choices for dinner that they'd since procured, and when the child woke up, she would be ravenous.

Abbie unzipped the duffel bag and pulled out the clothes and toiletries stuffed neatly inside. The toiletries included Abbie's own leave-in conditioner, from her bathroom, and her large bottle of unscented body lotion. Obviously, her house had already been cleaned out by the Syndicate and their contacts had somehow managed to include her personal items in this particular drop off.

Abbie was beyond grateful for the vague sense of normalcy the familiar items instilled within her. She smoothed on the lotion, ran the conditioner through the ends of her hair, and turned back to the bag.

The clothes had been folded into two piles, and all of them were familiar as well. The first consisted of two complete toddler outfits, a size 3-T toddler sweater, a Strawberry Shortcake baby blanket, five Huggies pull-up diapers, two pairs of size 6 toddler socks and a worn pair of size 6 tennis shoes. In the second pile were Abbie's clothes. They consisted of a pair of Buckle jeans, white cotton socks, a brand new pair of sneakers, a bra, a plain white t-shirt and a sky blue fleece cardigan. Abbie's brows rose at the sight of the cardigan. She recalled that it had been in the dirty laundry pile when she'd left the house that morning. She picked it up and smelled it. It was clean and soft. Someone had gone to the trouble of washing it. She shook her head in wonder, but welcomed the cardigan with open arms.

After dressing quickly, she folded her discarded clothes into a similar-sized pile and stuffed them into the bag in the space left by the clothes she'd pulled on.

Then she bent low, kissed her daughter on the forehead, replaced the towels keeping her warm with the thick pink baby blanket, and headed out into the main area of the gym.

At first, she thought it was deserted. But as she made her way from the free weights area to the indoor basketball court, she heard the sound of chinking glass and followed it. She rounded the corner to find Wasim sitting on the floor of the court, his back resting against the base of the basketball net. To his right was a six-pack of bottled beer, one bottle missing. The open bottle was in his hand.

As she entered, he looked up and smiled. Then he stood, bowed slightly in her direction, reached down, and pulled a second bottle from the pack, holding it out for her.

Abbie stared at him a moment and then eyed the beer. She realized, suddenly, that in that very instant, there was nothing in the world she wanted more than an ice cold beer.

"Is it cold?" she asked as she sat down beside him.

"It is." He handed the bottle to her and she took it and held it as he twisted off the top. They both sat.

"Thanks," she said. She watched him down the rest of his first bottle and reach for a second. For some reason, she had an idea that Muslims weren't supposed to do the whole alcohol thing. Especially in non-Muslim countries. But, then again, he'd told her he was "neither" Muslim nor Hindu.

He twisted off the top of his second bottle and took a long swig. Abbie mentally shrugged. "So, I guess vampires can still get drunk?"



Wasim nodded. “Yes, but no hangover.” He winked at her and took another long pull off of his drink. Abbie followed suit. The beer went down smooth and easy, despite the initial burning sensation it caused on her raw tongue. She swallowed the brew and then sighed.

“Where’s Michael?”

“He went hunting.”

Abbie raised a brow. Wasim smiled. “He left to look into an address that might be Victor Anson’s nerve center.”

“Alone?”

“He wanted me to look after you,” Wasim stated, taking another swig. “Besides, he prefers to work alone, I believe.” He turned to regard her, then. “I am supposing you are wondering about your gifts.”

Abbie’s brows rose. “Well, now that you mention it, yes. I’m wondering about a lot of things, actually.”

Wasim shrugged. Under normal circumstances, an adherent would have been assigned to Abbie to help her through this transition and answer questions, but there was nothing about these circumstances that could be considered even remotely normal. He was relatively new within the Syndicate, but he was a fast learner. He’d explain what he could.

“Very well. Give to me your questions.”

“Well, first of all, I think something happened to my tongue.” She rubbed it against the roof of her mouth. “It hurts like a bugger-”

“It is from the salt.”

“Salt?”

“Vampires are given salt when they change,” he began, pronouncing the word “vampire” as “wampire”. “It aids in the transition between dead mortal and re-awakened spirit. At least, that is how I have come to understand. Consequently, drowning is one of the very few ways in which a vampire can die. Not due to a lack of air, but because the salt is leached from the body. Salt is a vampire’s best friend.”

Abbie took a few seconds to process and store the information and then inclined her head in interest. “What do you mean by ‘spirit’?”

He shook his head, his brow furrowing. “Nothing, I mean,” he sighed, obviously having a hard time finding the right words. “What I mean is that ‘spirit’ is simply how I think of vampires. In India, that is what vampires are. They are called something else, but the idea is similar. A person dies with unfinished business and re-awakens to walk the Earth until he or she completes their task.”

“That sounds more like a ghost to me.”

“Yes, well each culture has its own such creatures. It is close enough.” He paused for a moment, seemed to be content with his reply, and then took another swallow of his beer.

Abbie watched him for a few seconds and then ventured ahead with another question. “I want to know about the Syndicate, itself. I mean, how many vampires *are* there?”

“At this point, there are a couple of million of us spread across the planet.”

“Several *million*?” Abbie stared at him incredulously. “And they all work for this Syndicate thing?”

“No. The Syndicate can be likened to a nation’s government. It governs over the vampire populace, and those vampires with gifts that can be of use to the Syndicate normally will end up working for it.”

“I see.” Abbie processed the information, took another drink of her beer, and then chewed on her tongue for a moment. “What gift do you have that the Syndicate finds useful, Wasim?”

“I am what Syndicate members refer to as a ‘head hunter’. I can literally sense the location or presence of a mortal human who will soon become a vampire. Sometimes a head hunter can locate an unturned vampire with plenty of time to contact and dispatch an adherent to help them through the transition. Unfortunately, head hunters are rare in the Syndicate. In fact, there are only twenty-three of us around the world.” He paused and studied Abbie’s profile. “I am sorry that I did not find you in time to do such a thing. I have only found one other before finding you, so I am fairly new at this and I know how difficult this process can be.”

Abbie stared down at the lines of hard polished wood in the floor and took a deep breath. “Well, luckily, I’ve always had a fairly open mind about things. ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio’ and so forth. I’ve always known that I didn’t know anything as far as life and existence were concerned. So, I can take surprises in stride.” She turned to him and grinned. “I’m empty. Another brewskie, *por favor*.”

The alcohol was hitting her then, a warmth that spread through her mid-section and made her fingers and toes tingle pleasantly. She felt relaxed, calm. After a few seconds of initial confusion as to what she was referring to, Wasim handed her another open bottle and she tipped her head in thanks.

He continued his explanation. “About your gifts, now. You are what the Syndicate calls an ‘adept’. Vampires who have more than one gift. They are more rare, but still occur. However, normally it takes many years for an adept’s gifts to surface. You appear to be an exception to the rule. The Syndicate highly values adepts. You will almost definitely be employed by them. And you are lucky, because you know an adept personally. Michael is one.”

“Really? What are his abilities?”

“Though I have heard stories of a few of them, I have honestly witnessed only one first hand. He can touch a person and read information about them through that touch.”

Abbie blinked at him and then stared down at her hands. She wondered if he’d read anything off of her. It wasn’t a comforting thought. “I see. How do you know for sure that he’s an ‘adept’?”

“Everyone knows. He is a very old vampire. He has had many years to gain his gifts. There are many legends about Michael.”

Abbie cut her gaze to him and then took a swig of her drink. The man in the charcoal suit was becoming more and more interesting to her. “Does he have a last name?”

“If he does, I do not know it.” Wasim shrugged and took a drink. “So, I am curious,” he began then. “Are you a Christian?”

“I used to be.” She paused to chew on her cheek. Then she shook her head. “But I’m not anymore.”

At his expectant expression, she sighed and went on. “Okay. I’m a tad pissed off at God right now, so I don’t *feel* like being a Christian. If not for *God*, my daughter would be safe. My husband would be alive. My mother would still call me on my birthday.”

Wasim said nothing, but looked away to stare at the lip of his bottle of beer. He turned the bottle in his hands a few times and then looked back up. “So, do you believe in *any* religion?” Like Michael, he had noticed the ring on her finger and wondered whether it bore a religious significance.

“I don’t know, honestly,” Abbie answered, smiling again. “Maybe... I’m agnostic?” She shrugged. “Maybe just atheist... Though, I have to say that I do share a lot of basic ethical beliefs with a lot of religions. For instance, if Christians actually believe that you should do unto others as you would want them to do unto you, I’d have to admit that’s a pretty good idea.”

“And, the ‘Harm None’?” Wasim motioned to her right middle finger.

She looked down and shrugged again. She was doing that a lot. “I got it off of The Pyramid Collection, online. It’s a Wiccan creed. I agree with the sentiment.”

Wasim nodded. “I see.”

They fell into a companionable silence for several long moments, and then Wasim asked, “How does your mother feel about you not being Christian?”

“My mother hasn’t spoken to me since my father’s funeral, eight months after Jessie was born. He died of a heart attack. She blamed me for his death. At that point, my father and I had already had it out several times over religion. He was very right-wing, very religious. I wasn’t. It didn’t help things that my older brother was killed in Iraq in 2003.”

After a lengthy silence, very softly, he said, “I’m sorry.”

Abbie swirled the beer in her bottle, staring at something that she could no longer see. After several long minutes, she shrugged. “Thanks.” Then she turned to him again. “What about you, Wasim? What do you believe?”

He looked back up at her, carefully choosing his next words. When he spoke again, his tone had softened, become slightly distant. "I was raised in the ways of Islam, in the city of Dispur in Assam. I believed everything my father taught me." He paused, swallowed, and looked down at the beer once more. "I was six years old during the Sindhi riots of 1980, when Muslims in Gujarat burnt Hindus alive. I was there. I witnessed it."

Abbie studied him carefully. Some of the color had drained from his face and he stared at nothing, his gaze unseeing. He absently turned his bottle in his hands as he obviously fought to continue talking. Abbie waited quietly.

"After that, I began to question. Secretly, of course. I believe I started to see things through eyes that were not mine. I saw fighting. Always, fighting. By people who could not even agree upon what they were fighting about."

After Wasim had fallen silent for several minutes, Abbie sighed. "Disenchanted, huh?"

Wasim laughed and looked back up at her. "I suppose you could say that. As soon as I could manage it, I left my father's home and moved to Delhi. My parents refused to acknowledge my existence any longer, especially after I refused to get married when they wanted me to. I haven't spoken to them in more than ten years."

"Well, we have that in common, I guess. Neither of us gets along with our parents."

Wasim sighed, still smiling. "I always thought that I would at least know the truth about God in death. It would seem, however, that I do not even get to die." He raised his bottle, as if in toast, and finished off his third beer.

Abbie was impressed at the man's ability to put back alcohol. "Yeah, I guess I'd be pissed too if I was cheated out of my seventy-two virgins."

Wasim chuckled and she began to peel the label off of her beer.

"What are you doing?"

"When I was younger, my friends swore to me that if you could peel the label off of a beer without it ripping, it meant you were a virgin." She finished peeling it off, all in one piece, and held it up triumphantly. "Well look at that. One down, seventy-one to go."

Wasim grinned, shaking his head.

Abbie dropped her beer and gasped as her vision suddenly went black.

## Chapter Ten

Michael crouched low in the bushes a block south of the warehouse that his information had led him to. There were two men on the roof of the building, both dressed in black and laying on their stomachs, out of view of any possible passers-by. Michael's enhanced vision could make out enough metal to know that both were heavily armed.

The first level of the two-story building was window-free and sported a double-door entrance composed of sheet metal. There were two windows that Michael could see on the second level. He watched as a shadow passed in front of one of them, a sliver of black on black, there and then gone like a puff of smoke. A few feet up from the window, the first level of the roof slanted upward and then was lost in darkness as a second level laid flat across it.

Michael listened carefully. Along with enhanced vision came a cat-like hearing to all vampires who knew how to use it. He closed his eyes and focused on the men on the roof. They'd either been instructed not to talk, or they didn't like each other, because neither of them said a word as Michael listened.

So, he adjusted his hearing and focused on the inside of the building. Sheet rock and metal muffled the sounds coming from beyond the door on the first floor, but after a few concentrated seconds, he could make out a several voices. One woman, two men.

"...isn't plausible, Samuel. Are you certain that's what he wants?"

"What else could it mean, Liz? It makes perfect sense, don't it?"

"...really. How many children must there be in Lubbock? Thousands?"

"We'll have to narrow it down."



At that point, the voices faded and as much as Michael tried, he could not get them to clarify again. When the silence inside stretched into long minutes, Michael realized that the men and woman hadn't simply stopped speaking. They'd gone elsewhere. But where?

A basement.

Michael took a slow, deep breath and prepared to make his move on the building. He would most likely have to take out the men on the roof. Then he would simply have to take the rest of the warehouse by fast force.

But as he began to stand up, headlights of an approaching car sent him back into his hidden crouch and he watched as a news station van slowly came around the corner a block away. They were still out of sight of Anson's warehouse. Michael studied the van carefully. It was moving too slowly.

Michael cursed inwardly when he realized that the news crew had been called by Victor Anson and was attempting to locate the exact warehouse that Michael had been staking out for the last few minutes.

*The bastard wants to go public*, he thought. Michael ticked a few restless seconds away staring at the van and then he came to a conclusion. He rose once more from the dark confines of the bushes he'd been hiding in and stepped back into the shadows.

The driver of the vehicle was absently peering through the darkness past the street lamps, trying to make out addresses that were faded by too many years of heat and wind. His window was down. Perhaps the van's air conditioning didn't work. "I think it's just around the corner. If these numbers are correct--"

Michael moved up beside him. "They are." Wide-eyed and blanch-faced, the driver turned his head to regard Michael's sudden presence, braking the van at the same time.

And in the next instant, Michael was throwing open the door and reaching a hand toward his throat. It happened far too quickly. The driver barely had time to register that he'd been attacked, much less do anything but gasp for air beneath the tight band Michael's hand formed around his neck.

The woman in the driver's seat instinctively leaned forward, trying to pry Michael's hand away. Michael took the opportunity to ensnare her throat as well.

And he had them both.

In truth, Michael applied very little physical pressure. He did not wish to leave them injured. Instead, he entered their minds, quickly extracting what information he needed and leaving, in its wake, false but believable information that he knew they would rely upon later.

They went still and stared up at him through wide, unseeing eyes.

"Put the van in park."

The man slid the gear shift up and the car idled quietly.

Michael released them both, but neither of them moved. The vampire reached out and gently unclasped the name tag and news station pass that were pinned to the man's shirt. He pinned them to his own suit lapel, arranging them in the same exact fashion.

He then checked to make certain that the man had a cell phone in his jacket pocket.

"Get out and sit down against that wall. Wait one hour and then call for a ride."

The man said nothing but slid down off of his seat and walked past Michael, across the street to the indicated spot. Michael climbed into the van and reached across the woman's lap to open the passenger-side door. "Go with him, sit down, and do nothing until your ride comes for you."

She got out of the car and he shut the door behind her. Then he pulled the clipboard down off of the dashboard. He gave the pages a quick once-over, put the clipboard back, and then shifted into drive and took the van around the corner toward Anson's warehouse.

## Chapter Eleven

*(Approximately 2,000 years B.P.)*

He'd been told that Yeshua chose twelve apostles because twelve was a sacred number in Israel. There were twelve male singers in the Jewish temple. And twelve instruments were played. There were twelve tribes of Israel. There were twelve months in the Hebrew calendar, though it seemed certain every year that the blistering heat of *Elul* would surely last forever.

Michael understood all of this. What he did not understand was why Yeshua had chosen *him* as one of his twelve elite apostles. Michael was an outsider, a newcomer. He was the first to challenge Yeshua in his teachings, and the last to be convinced with his responses. So, why did Yeshua draw him as close as he did the others?

*Closer, even?*

"You are troubled, Judas."

Michael spun around, yanked from his thoughts as the teacher had approached from behind, unheard even by Michael's preternaturally enhanced senses. As usual, Yeshua wore the full head-to-toe garb of robes in white and blue and had his face partially concealed. Michael reached for the fold where his own face cloth was tucked and, for some reason, released it, revealing himself to Bar-abba.

He felt strangely guilty for the path his thoughts had been taking. "Yes," he said softly. "I am."

Yeshua gazed at him steadily and Michael unconsciously let his gaze slip to Yeshua's right hand. The red mark was there. He looked back up to find that the calm

expression in Yeshua's eyes had not changed. Michael felt himself peacefully drawn into the pull of those dark brown, almost black eyes.

As if in exchange for the symbol of trust that Michael had relayed by exposing his face, Yeshua did the same with his own.

"I know, brother. You are concerned, not for me, but about me. You are wondering at our confrontation yesterday."

Michael studied the man's face carefully. It was identical to, yet for all the world, not at all the same face that he'd looked upon the day before. That face had been shadowed in secret and masked in scorn.

Yesterday, their group had settled outside of Tyre. Yeshua and three of his chosen disciples ventured into the city under cover of moonlight in order to appropriate food and drink. Michael had been one of those chosen, as had Mattai.

They'd gone un-veiled, considering the cloak of night to be enough concealment. While they'd moved silently through the streets, they were spotted by a woman who sat, despondently hunched over, on the step of her small hut. When she saw Yeshua she immediately recognized him for who he was so she stood and approached him.

"My lord, you must help me. My daughter is possessed by an evil spirit. Can you make her well?"

At this, the third of Yeshua's apostles there that night came forward. His name was Mark, and Michael had disliked the man from the start.

"My lord, send her away. She will make trouble for us. She will follow us, call after us, and draw attention to us."

Michael's gaze narrowed. Mark irritated him to no end. His suggestions were always just shy of cruel. The man possessed an utter lack of empathy.

Michael stepped forward, in between Yeshua and Mark. He turned to the teacher. "No, Bar-abba. Did you not say that those who came to you and put their faith in you would be healed?"

Yeshua gazed at Michael. And then that dark-eyed gaze narrowed. He did not break eye contact with Michael as he moved past him to stand directly before the woman who had approached them. At the last second, he turned to her and pinned her with his stare.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." He raised his hands in a questioning gesture as he spoke and Michael noticed that the red line on his right hand was missing. "Why should I take food from the mouths of the children and give it to the dogs?"

The woman fell on her knees and reached forward to place her hands on Yeshua's sandaled feet. "My lord, even the dogs are treated well enough to be given the scraps from the table after the children eat. Please help me. Please help us."

Mark's face twisted in undisguised distaste. "She is unclean, my lord. She is not of our people. Send her away; she does not deserve your help."

Yeshua stepped back away from the woman and took a slow, deep breath. Then his face hardened into an expressionless mask. "Go home, woman. Go home to your daughter. See that she is well."

Michael watched as the woman slowly rose, her own expression a mixture of uncertainty and barely contained desperation. She gradually stepped back away from their group and, finally, turned around to make her way back to her hut. When she'd

reached her doorway, she paused and looked back over her shoulder. Then she slipped into the dark room beyond and closed the door.

Michael stared after her, utterly baffled at what had just transpired. What had Yeshua meant by ‘see that she is well’? Did he mean that she was cured? Had he somehow healed her, even from this distance? Michael was not so young as to believe that such a thing was impossible. Anything was possible. He had learned that long ago.

Or did Yeshua simply mean for the woman to care for her daughter, as any mother would do for a sick child?

He had time to ponder this, in silence, as the four of them then continued through the deserted streets of the city and eventually met up their contacts, who supplied them with bags of corn, dried meat and skins of water and wine. Their group was heavily laden, their arms full of heavy sacks by the time they made their way back through the side streets of Tyre and toward the gates of the city.

Later that night, as Michael had been on guard duty, he saw a robed figure emerge from Yeshua’s tent and make his way toward the city gates. Sensing something odd, Michael followed the figure, nodding a signal to Mattai that he would be back shortly.

He followed the robed man into Tyre and watched him approach the house of the woman who had confronted them earlier that night. He knocked on the door.

The woman opened the door and the worried expression on her face immediately melted into one of gratitude. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Michael tuned his hearing into their conversation and listened.

“... will heal your daughter, sister.”

“My Lord, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” She backed up, allowing him entrance.

He nodded once and then slowly entered the hut. The door closed behind him. A few minutes later, the door opened once more and he emerged again. Without another word, he slipped out into the night and made his way back to the camp. No one stopped him or confronted him as he stole into his tent.

Michael took up his usual post, but his mind was not on the vast expanse of land that stretched out before him around the camp. Instead, he concentrated on the tent and what was happening behind its flaps. He once more listened carefully, and with concerted effort, could just make out a conversation of sorts, spoken in hushed tones.

“... you do what I asked?”

“Yes. Do I not always? You ask a lot.”

“I ask only that you do God’s will.”

“God’s will or *yours*?”

After that, there had been no further sound from within the tent. None of the disciples were allowed to disturb Bar-abba after sun down, as he allegedly spent the time praying, in solitude. It was forbidden to interrupt him or to invade his privacy.

So, who was the second person in his tent?

Michael thought of that now, the following morning, as he stared at Yeshua Bar-abba, wondering what to ask the man. How did he broach the subject of Michael’s concerns? Why did Yeshua sometimes speak words of kindness and peace and, at other times, speak harshly and with prejudice? Why did his manner reflect calm and serenity



most days but on other days manifest anger and even a flying rage? And then there was the red birth mark on Yeshua's hand; sometimes there, other times not.

"Judas, your questions are written on your face. I sense that it is time to tell you the truth."

Michael gazed at the man before him. He felt strange, suddenly; as if he were about to be privileged to something that no one else in the world would ever know or could ever know. As had happened many times before, Michael, a very old, very un-mortal man, felt inexplicably humbled in this mortal man's presence.

"Come with me." Yeshua smiled his gentle smile and motioned for Michael to walk beside him. Michael did so and they strolled across the sands, out of the camp, toward a small hill in the distance. Yeshua's disciples let them go without question. It was not customary for Bar-abba to take aside an apostle and speak with him privately. However, though many of the apostles, especially Mark, looked after the pair with an air of suspicion, none possessed the daring to speak on it.

Michael turned away once they were out of sight and focused on the uneven ground before him. He wondered where he was being taken but knew he would find out soon enough.

Before long, they topped a second hill and came down the other side. There, Michael saw a robed figure outlined against the relatively flat horizon beyond. He was dressed in the same blue and white robes as Yeshua. Immediately, the hair on Michael's neck stood on end.

As they approached the figure, Michael's gaze tried desperately to delve into the recessed shadows that hid the man's face beneath the cowl of his robes. However, the

white-washed sand in the background and the beating sun made it difficult for his vision to adjust. And, just as he was sure he could make out a few features, the figure pulled back the robe to reveal himself.

Michael stopped in his tracks and stared, open-mouthed at the man before him.

“Judas, this is my twin brother, Thomas.”

## Chapter Twelve

*(Present day)*

Abbie watched the scene from above, as if she were floating over it in a dream. Any second now, she was sure that one of them would notice her, obvious as she must have been, hovering only a few feet away, well within eye and ear-shot. But no one looked up and Abbie felt herself entering a trance-like state, watching and listening, weightless and nonexistent in someone else's universe.

They were in a large rectangular room with old wooden floors and windows against only one wall. Opposite the windows, a staircase led downstairs, but the level was lost in fuzziness and Abbie could not make out anything beyond a certain point. She could tell, however, that one side of the room led to an indoor balcony which overlooked an area that appeared much, much larger.

The details of the room melted, however, as Abbie focused on the group of people below her. A part of her simply could not believe what she was watching. Had she gone back in time? Was she simply dreaming some elaborate, uncharacteristic reverie? Whatever she was witnessing, it went against every fiber of her conscious conviction and when the man below her actually spoke, Abbie's mouth dropped open in bewilderment. She had an excellent memory. She'd read the Bible. She would recognize those words anywhere.

"Samuel, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Hell."

He had long wavy brown hair and brown eyes, a beard and a mustache. He was dressed in robes of varying shades of white and on his barely exposed feet were a pair of thick strapped leather sandals. Abbie tried to shake her head to wake herself up, but found that her body would not respond to her wishes. She could do nothing but watch.

Samuel, the man that the Jesus figure spoke to, had little more than half a face left, the other half having been damaged in some sort of accident. Glass pieces of different sizes and shapes were embedded in what appeared to be exposed skull and his left eye was gone altogether.

Samuel swallowed loudly. Abbie could hear him from where she floated above the scene. Then the Jesus figure raised his right hand and placed it against the injured man's undamaged cheek.

"Take heart, brother; your faith has made you well."

The first shard of glass to hit the ground would have made Abbie jump in surprise, had she been able to move. It hit the wooden floor with a strange muted sound and was soon accompanied by several others as the pieces that had been stuck in the man's head began to eject themselves from his skull and flesh and gather at his feet in a bloody and macabre pile of no-metal shrapnel.

Within a few short seconds, Samuel's eye had completely rebuilt itself and he was moving it in its socket even as the eyelid formed perfectly around it. He blinked and ever so slowly raised his left hand to the side of his head.

Abbie stared as he ran shaking fingers over perfectly healed flesh. He then dropped to his knees before the Jesus figure and Abbie's vision began to fade.

She felt heavier, colder. Instead of sinking downward, however, toward the hard and old wooden floor below, she rose upward, further away from the robed figures and their healer.

“My Lord, you have healed me.” Samuel was speaking to the Jesus figure, but his voice was drifting, becoming indistinct, more difficult to understand. “... you ask of me, I will do. Only ... repay you...”

Abbie fought the pull on her body and mind. She tried, with every ounce of will power she possessed, to remain within the room, above the robed figures, somehow feeling that what was about to happen was more important than what she’d witnessed thus far.

But the light in the room grew brighter, until it had fairly blocked out every other color, every other figure. She almost screamed out with frustration as she heard what sounded like the Jesus man’s voice once more but could not make out the words.

Suddenly, she was opening her eyes to find Wasim kneeling over her, a very worried expression on his face. She was lying on the cool wooden floor of the basketball court at the gym, and a nondescript sentence swam elusively behind her mind’s eye, just out of reach. Like a dream, it faded further out of reach as she took in the real world around her.

Abbie tried to sit up and Wasim helped her.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his accent particularly pronounced.

Abbie didn’t answer right away. The truth was, she didn’t know. But she had a feeling the answer was no. She wasn’t all right. None of them were, and it had something to do with what Jesus had said...

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael pulled the van to a stop when he reached the curb at the side of the large warehouse, and a man dressed in black came around the vehicle, a gun-shaped bulge beneath his black wind-breaker. Michael nodded at the man as he rolled down his window and introduced himself.

“I’m Craig Schaiffer with Fox 34 News. I spoke with a Samuel Beckett earlier. He told me to come alone.”

The man looked Michael over and then leaned in and peered into the news van. He must have been satisfied with what he saw, because he nodded back.

“Very well. Get out and get your equipment. I’ll take you inside.”

Michael opened the door and slid out of the seat. He moved to the side of the van, slid the door open, and retrieved the camera. He placed the camera over his shoulder and nodded at the guard who waited for him.

“Follow me.”

Michael followed the guard to the door and waited as the man rapped on the sheet metal three times. The door opened and the guard motioned for Michael to step into the darkness.

Michael hesitated, as the man would be expecting him to, and then he moved slowly through the door and into the shadows that waited beyond. Once he was inside, his vampire eyes adjusted immediately to the darkness, shifting colors and light so that it appeared to him no different than it would have at dusk or dawn.

The warehouse had been divided into three different sections. Each section was outfitted with a table, several chairs, and cubicle-like screens that more or less blocked it off from the other sections. On the table nearest to Michael were several weapons of

different make, including what appeared to be grenades. There was also a half-eaten Whopper next to a manila folder much like the ones the Syndicate used. A hand-written name on the folder read “Abigail Maria Lucia”, and a paperclip pinned a wallet-sized photo of Abbie to the front of the folder.

The picture had been taken from a distance, and she’d been carrying Jessie at the time. They were both laughing. Michael’s jaw clenched tightly, but he forced his gaze to slide past the image and concentrated on detailing the room. A nineteen-inch television screen sat on the edge of the table, plugged into the wall a few feet away. The cord was too small for the stretch and was pulled taut.

The screen was off at the moment, most likely to prevent more light from being shed into a room that Michael probably wasn’t supposed to be able to get a good look at. That thought made him feel smug and he hid a smile.

“This way.” The guard beside him took hold of Michael’s elbow as if to lead him through the room. Michael allowed him to do so and even pretended that he couldn’t see where he was going, at one point tripping over a rise in the cement that he could very clearly make out in the darkness.

As he faked the trip, the man rushed to catch Michael’s camera and Michael took the opportunity to brush his hand across the man’s neck in a mock effort to grab hold of the large black device before it plummeted to the ground.

In that instant, Michael learned the man’s name was Bob Wynn. He was a life-time member of the NRA and an avid hunter, so he was good with a gun. His wife was in real estate and he owned a feedlot outside of town. The lack of any kind of cloying smell of

manure or feed made Michael realize that the man had not been home in quite some time, and that the clothes and boots he now wore had been supplied for him.

“Sorry,” Michael mumbled. He stared blindly past Wynn’s shoulder and held out his hand as if to feel for anything further he might run into or trip over.

“No problem. Just don’t drop the camera, okay? Step carefully. The floor’s uneven.” As an afterthought, Wynn lifted a flashlight from a nearby table top and flipped the switch. He first pointed the beam at the floor, but then swung it up to highlight Michael’s face.

Michael immediately adjusted his vision to the invading beam of light. He squinted, smiling awkwardly. “Right.”

Wynn nodded, returned the light to the floor, and continued to make his way through the large warehouse to the set of metal stairs against one wall. He was careful to only highlight small spaces of floor at once, obviously not wanting Michael to view much of anything else.

Michael followed quietly, taking in as much as possible before they climbed the stairs and entered the second level of the warehouse. There was an office on the second floor, with windows that overlooked the open, vast darkened space of the first floor below.

In the office was a desk, a fan, filing cabinets and a coat rack. Sitting at the desk was a middle-aged man with hazel eyes and salted brown hair. He stood when Michael entered and then came around the desk. He wore black dress slacks and a white dress shirt with a blue and gray tie. In his right hand was a walky-talky. His finger rested gently



over the button, as if he was about to call someone or had just gotten finished doing so.

He leaned up against the desk and looked Michael over.

“Mr. Schaiffer, my name is Samuel Beckett. We spoke on the phone.”

Michael nodded at him silently, using a nervous glance toward the guard as an excuse to not speak. He wasn’t sure whether Beckett would notice the difference between Schaiffer’s voice and his own.

“Bob, you can go. Thank you.”

Bob Wynn nodded once, left the small office, and closed the door behind him.

Michael waited until his footsteps receded down the stairs before he took the camera off of his shoulder and pretended to fiddle with its settings.

“I’m sure you’re wondering what this miracle is that I told you about over the phone.”

Again, Michael nodded.

“Mr. Schaiffer, the world is about to receive a gift it is not worthy of.” Beckett smiled slightly and lifted away from the desk to move toward the dark windows along one wall. Michael knew that guards below could make out his form clearly in the light of the office. They could see him; he couldn’t see them.

Michael replaced the camera on his shoulder and aimed it at Beckett. Beckett turned and gave him a nod.

“We’re all set then?”

“Yes.” Michael expertly took the British accent out of his voice. He’d lived in Yorkshire for a very long time, and he’d always been bad about taking on geographical

enunciations. However, Schaiffer hadn't been British. Michael introduced a mild southern drawl to his tone and hoped it would fool Beckett, at least for a little while.

Beckett reached inside his shirt pocket and pulled out a Polaroid photograph. He held the photo up next to his face. Michael zoomed the camera in on the image. It was an image of Beckett, one side of his face utterly destroyed. Lacerations mutilated his nose and eye, slicing deep across his cheek bone and into his scalp. Pieces of what looked like glittering glass were stuck into his skull at odd angles.

"This was me several hours ago."

Michael said nothing.

"I was healed by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer."

At this, Michael lowered the camera and stared Beckett in the face.

"He has returned and chosen his disciples. I am one of them."

Michael knew that the real Schaiffer, the reporter, would have a slew of questions for Samuel Beckett. However, Michael had none. He could tell that the man was telling the truth, but he was shocked, nonetheless. What Michael had already witnessed, via video tape, of Anson's powers had not prepared him for the possibility that he could heal, not only himself, but others as well. If so, he was a powerful vampire, indeed. Michael had only known one other vampire in all of history with such ability.

"I know it's hard to believe. But, look at the picture. That's not fake blood." Beckett moved forward, holding the photograph closer for inspection. "I promise, it's really mine."

Michael stared at the picture and then cut his gaze to Beckett. The man's expression was earnest; his hazel eyes wide with bewildering faith.

Michael's own gaze narrowed.

"How did you get hurt?" he asked.

Beckett blinked. He froze in place, with his photograph held aloft. He blinked again. Then he slowly pulled away and walked back to lean against the desk once more. "Car accident."

Michael studied him carefully. His reaction was puzzling. He wasn't telling the truth. "Was anyone else hurt?"

"No."

Now Michael knew he was lying. He'd been around long enough to recognize the body language of a liar. And Beckett wasn't very good at it.

Michael kept his doubts to himself, however, and simply raised the camera once again. He aimed it at Beckett and clicked the "record" button. "Go ahead. Tell me more."

Beckett uncrossed his arms and slid the photograph back into his front pocket. "The Redeemer has a plan for the world, but we must believe in him and support him for it to work."

"What does he want us to do?"

"There is another being who-" Beckett cut off suddenly, his expression at once perplexed. "You know, I could have sworn you sounded a lot different on the phone."

"My cell phone does that to my voice. Everyone's always bugging me about it."

Michael shrugged, pulling his cell phone from his pocket with one hand while he balanced the camera on his shoulder with the other. He turned the phone in the light, giving it a look of disappointment and frustration and then sighed. "It needs to be tossed. It runs through the battery in twenty-four hours anyway."

Beckett glanced down at the phone and then back up at Michael. He nodded slowly but didn't say anything. Michael took the initiative then.

"So, where is this miracle worker right now? Will I get to meet him? See him heal someone?"

Beckett shook his head. "No, he isn't here. He'll reveal himself when the time comes and he feels we're ready. For now, he's... safe."

Michael's gut clenched. He was so close. Things would be so much easier if Beckett would simply come forward with the information he needed. Pulling intel from a stubborn, unwilling mind could be like pulling teeth and Beckett's blind devotion to Anson would make him a particularly difficult target. Michael didn't want to expend that much energy. He was old and powerful, but he had been using a lot of his power lately and he had no idea what he might be in for with the Victor Anson case. Lately, he seemed to be utilizing every ounce of his strength protecting Abigail Lucia and her two-year-old daughter. Healing a hundred bullet wounds was not effortless.

"Okay... Is there anything else you want to show the viewers?" Michael asked, using what he hoped was a fairly reporter-like tactic.

"Yes." Beckett moved around the desk and opened a drawer. He pulled out a large eight-by-ten photograph and turned it over so that the camera could see it. It was Abigail. "This woman is the mother of the anti-Christ. She has brought an evil into the world that must be eradicated." He placed the photograph on the desk and Michael found his muscles tightening with tension. "That is why the Redeemer has called an army of his servants to fall upon her and her devil child tonight!" Beckett's voice rose, his cheeks reddening, his forehead wrinkling as his eyes grew wider in uncompromising resolution.

Michael's skin began to crawl. "You heard it here and you will soon know it as truth!"

Beckett took a step toward the camera, raising his right finger toward the heavens. "Jesus Christ has summoned a swarm to blot out the infidels! Soon you will all know the extent of the Lord's power!"

Michael dropped the camera and swore softly as he simultaneously swung his right fist, connecting it solidly with the point of Beckett's jaw. Samuel went down, knocked instantly into unconsciousness.

Michael knew that anyone watching below would have seen the unexpected and violent exchange, especially since Beckett had basically been yelling only moments before. So, he worked fast. He knelt beside Beckett's prone body and placed his hand to the man's forehead.

He needed to know where Anson was hiding out. Was he truly not in the warehouse? He closed his eyes and concentrated. Picking through the man's thoughts was somewhat easier when he didn't have to deal with conscious resistance, but the information he sought was still very well hidden.

It was taking longer than he wanted it to.

Footsteps sounded on the metal stairs outside. Michael cursed again and dove deeper. Images of machine guns and parking lots and a hotel flashed before his mind's eye. Michael recognized the scene instantly and anger heated his blood. Beckett had been one of the men attacking them at the Ashmore.

The footsteps reached the landing outside and Michael cut his gaze to the door. His blue eyes glowed eerily, his teeth gritted in concentration. He was almost there.

Then they were throwing open the door and Michael barely had time to throw his body over Beckett's as machine guns emptied themselves into him for the third time that night. He growled in pain and wrapped himself around Beckett.

In the next instant, he made up his mind. He had no choice.

When he sensed a brief lull in the gunfire, Michael pulled himself to his feet and then looked up. In the next instant, he was leaping toward the ceiling, Beckett still held fast in his strong arms.

The men in the office stopped reloading and shooting as the tall man jumped toward the ceiling with speed so fast he almost actually blurred. They covered their faces, reflexively, as plaster and sheet metal rained down on them from above.

Michael had gone completely through the roof, and he'd taken Beckett with him.

A shocked silence filled the space of the destroyed office as three men dressed in black fatigues stood still beneath a gaping hole in the top of the old warehouse. Now more than ever, they believed what they had been told. The Redeemer had not lied when he had warned them that the forces of evil were upon them.

They were positive that the very devil, himself, had just stared at them with blue glowing eyes and then flown away.

## Chapter Thirteen

“What happened? What did you see?”

Abbie sat up with Wasim’s help and put her hands over her eyes. It was incredibly disorienting to be hovering, nonexistantly over an entire room filled with oblivious people one minute and then to be waking up on the cold wooden floor of a gymnasium basketball court the next. She felt nauseated. And frustrated.

“I saw a man who looked like the Christian representation of Jesus.” She looked up into Wasim’s worried eyes. “Wasim, he really looked like the real deal. He was healing someone.”

“Healing?”

“Yeah. Some guy’s face was all messed up. And Jesus put his hand on the guy’s cheek and... well, *healed* him.” She sighed and rubbed her eyes. “And there was something else. Either I can’t remember or I didn’t hear it in the first place. But Jesus said something... Something that gives me the willies.”

“The willies?” Wasim’s brow was furrowed.

Abbie glanced up. “Oh. Just, the ‘creeps’. You know. It makes me feel scared.”

“The man who appeared to be Jesus said something that frightened you.”

“Yes.”

“But you can not remember it.”

“Nope.”

Abbie looked away, closing her eyes once again. From the back rooms, a low and long wailing made its way onto the basketball court and Abbie jumped up.

“It’s Jessie. She’s up. She’ll be starving.”

Wasim rose as well and picked up what was left of the six-pack of beer. “I will accompany you.”

Abbie made her way quickly down the hall that led to the women’s locker room and then rushed through the swinging door. Jessie was just sitting up from beneath the blanket Abbie had tucked around her. Her face was red, her green-gray eyes wide and terrified, her cheeks stained with tears. She was obviously disoriented.

When she saw her mother, she held her arms out toward Abbie. “Mama!” she cried. Abbie moved to her and sat down, pulling her small form into her lap.

“Shh, little one. It’s okay. Mama’s here. I’ve got you.”

Jessie clung to Abbie with a desperate strength and Abbie cursed herself for not being there when the child woke up. It must have been terrifying to awaken, most likely from a nightmare about exploding cars, blood and guns, and find yourself alone in a strange place. It would be frightening for anyone to go through, but for a toddler, it must have been mind-numbing.

“I’m here, sweetie. Mama’s here. Did you have a bad dream?”

Jessie hiccupped and nodded into Abbie’s shoulder. “Yeah,” she answered softly, in between her waning sobs.

“I know, little heart. It wasn’t real, okay? Mama’s here and you’re safe.” Abbie rocked her daughter back and forth for several long minutes. Little by little, Jessie stopped crying. Wasim, who had come in behind Abbie and sat down on a bench a yard away, said nothing, allowing mother and child this necessary peace.



After a while, Jessie settled into a placated calm, just resting against her mother. Then she wiped the back of her hand across her nose and rubbed her eyes.

Abbie looked up at Wasim, who was smart enough to have already found a box of tissue. He held it out for her and she nodded her thanks. Abbie wiped Jessie's nose and then folded the tissue.

"Blow."

Jessie took a deep breath in through her nose, pulling snot deep into her sinuses and Abbie cringed. Then Jessie blew it back out again, into the tissue. Abbie threw the tissue toward the trash can against the wall, missing by two feet.

"Mama, cuwd you get me some food?" Jessie asked softly.

Abbie grinned and nodded, brushing a stray blonde lock from Jessie's cheek. "Of course, little one. I've got food right here." She was, for some reason, incredibly relieved to hear that her daughter was hungry. There was something about strong survival instincts kicking in and taking over that made a mother feel more confident in the welfare of her child.

She moved to the grocery sacks that sat on the edge of one of the benches and began rummaging through its contents. Eventually, she settled on a baby food jar of sweet potatoes and peas and a make-shift sandwich of Tofurky meat on whole wheat bread. She took out the carton of soy milk that she'd opened earlier and then moved to the sink, where the gym supplied small paper cups for women to rinse with after brushing their teeth.

She poured soy milk into one of the cups and came back to set it on the floor in front of Jessie. Jessie grinned. "Oh! Fank you!"

Abbie knew right away that she was going to get it all over her clothes, but she also didn't care. There were more clothes in the duffel bags and it was worth the mess just to give Jessie something that made her feel "bigger". Bigger was stronger, and stronger was less scared.

Surprisingly, she spilled very little soy milk and got most of it down in several long pulls. Abbie then handed her the sandwich she'd made for her, having removed the crusts and squished the bread down so the whole thing would stick safely together. Jessie thanked her for this as well and took a very big bite.

"Poor you. You're a starving baby, aren't you."

Jessie didn't answer. She was too busy chewing. Abbie opened the baby food jar and then realized that she had no spoon.

"Crud. What am I going to feed this to you with?"

"I will check the bags for you." Wasim stood and began going through the bags. Abbie stayed where she was, watching Jessie devour her sandwich. When Jessie was half-way done, Abbie poured more soy milk into the paper cup and handed it back to her daughter.

"Will this work?" Wasim handed her a close-pronged plastic fork and Abbie nodded.

"Thanks."

She dug the orange goop out of the small glass jar and held it out toward Jessie.

"No, I don't want dat." Jessie shook her head, happily biting into her sandwich instead.

"Just three bites, Jessie."

“No, fank you.” She put the remainder of her sandwich down on the floor before Abbie could stop her and then reached for her soy milk. Abbie placed the fork full of sweet potatoes back in the jar and decided not to go twelve rounds with her daughter over it tonight.

Jessie drank down her second small cup of soy milk, spilling considerably more this time, and Abbie rose to go search for a change of clothes for her.

“What will we do now, Wasim?” she asked as she passed by him on her way to the duffel bag that she recalled carried Jessie’s clothing.

“We will wait for Michael.”

Abbie glanced up. “That’s not what I meant. I meant, what happens to me and Jessie? Where do we go from here?”

“If Anson is taken care of or brought in, then you and Jessie should be safe. The Syndicate will provide housing and employment. And, though Jessie is the first child they have had to deal with, I imagine they would pay for private school.”

Abbie stopped unfolding clothes and stared at Wasim. “Are you serious? They would put Jessie into private school?”

“Yes,” Wasim’s eyes widened. “Unless, of course, that is not what you wish.”

“No, yes! That’s what I want! I just thought I was going to have to finance it myself. Though, I did mange to save some of the money Simon left me.” She looked at her daughter. “Jessie’s so smart. She deserves a good school. We had always planned on saving for our child’s college education – Simon and I – if and when we would have kids. But until I had Jessie, I never considered the possibility that I wouldn’t want my kid in

American public schools. I don't know why it didn't occur to me, but it didn't. It should have," she shrugged. "After all, I hated public school. Positively despised it."

Wasim watched her take a fresh shirt and sweater to where her daughter sat and gently pull the food out of Jessie's hands. She then helped the child change into the new shirt, pulled the pink sweater over her head, and once more tried to feed her the jarred baby food. Again, Jessie turned it down.

So, Abbie made her another sandwich and threw away the one that Jessie had laid on the floor no fewer than three times.

"You know, I could get used to this no hang-over thing. I used to get a headache after just one beer. I feel completely sober right now." She sat down in front of her daughter again and watched her eat.

Something in the corner of her vision caught her eye. She turned to look. A black spider was racing across the floor. It had a smooth black bulbous thorax and long spindly legs. Abbie recognized it at once. She jumped up, grabbing her daughter, and stood on top of the bench.

"What? What is it?" Wasim stood as well and looked around.

"Black Widow. Nine o'clock."

When Wasim's brow furrowed and he continued to look around, Abbie hurriedly pointed at the small black arachnid and Wasim's eyes followed. Then his eyes widened.

"Indeed, it is a Black Widow. I had not seen one before tonight." In Africa, they had brown Widow spiders, but in India he'd never encountered one. However, all over the world, people knew of the Black Widow spiders. TV and the Internet had seen to that.

He moved quickly to the sink and grabbed two of the small paper cups. Then he walked to the spider and bent down a few feet away.

“What are you doing?”

“I will take it outside.”

Abbie blinked. She was all for being kind to animals – heck, she couldn’t even swat flies during the summer. But, this was a very, very dangerous little bug. And it was taking an aggressive stance, its fore-legs up toward Wasim in warning.

“Um, maybe you should just leave it alone, Wasim.”

“No, it should be put outside. It might crawl beneath something and then bite someone later, when they do not know it is there.”

“Wasim, it’s pissed at you.” The spider hopped threateningly, and Wasim backpedaled in his crouched position. That was strange. He’d seen enough National Geographic to know that Widow spiders normally were not aggressive unless protecting their egg sacs. Wasim studied the creature carefully.

Abbie watched him and wondered what he was going to do next. Something small and black moved to her left. Instinctively now, and a little on edge, she turned to look. Three more spiders crawled steadily across the locker-room bulletin board. Two were black. One was brown. All were roughly the same shape, with long spindly legs and bulbous bodies.

Some space deep inside of Abbie grew cold and heavy with dread. This wasn’t right. There was something wrong with this picture. And... Were they all Widows?

Yes. They were.

“Um, Wasim, look.”

Wasim took a tentative step back from the spider on the floor and once again followed the line of Abbie's pointing finger. Even as he stared, two more spiders crawled up and out of the sink drains, their black shiny bodies in horrid contrast to the polished white of the porcelain.

"Oh my God," Abbie whispered.

"I thought you did not believe in God," Wasim replied, looking all around him now, watching with mounting horror as spiders began to appear at every lip and crack and crevice within the large locker room.

"I don't, and this is why."

"Mama, what's wrong? Are dere spiders?" Jessie asked. She still held the remainder of her second sandwich in her left hand, but she was no longer eating. Instead, her eyes skirted the room as her mother's did. She could tell that Abbie was upset and was trying to figure out why.

"Yes, there are, but it's okay, baby." Abbie looked at the floor between her and the doorway and counted four spiders. How high could they jump? Would they attack if she ran between them and out of the room? She wasn't worried about herself. She would live. She knew that now.

But Jessie was vulnerable. She was mortal. And she was a child. Black Widows were notorious for killing the very old and the very young.

"I'm making a break for it."

"I am right behind you."

Abbie jumped down and ran for the door. None of the spiders leapt at her and she made it through the door safely. But, the situation was no better in the hall. In fact, if

anything, there were more shiny black and brown bodies crawling along the ceiling and the walls. As Abbie ran, she felt something land on her head and she shrieked, hurriedly and carelessly brushing it off.

The spider went flying across the hall to hit the wall and Abbie kept running. Jessie had dropped her sandwich and now clung to her mother with all of her might. Abbie did not slow or pause. She headed straight for the glass front doors of the gym, and only skidded to a halt when Wasim grabbed her arm.

“No, we can not go out there! Listen!”

Abbie watched the floor as she tried to quiet her breathing and listen. A droning sound could be heard from somewhere beyond the gym walls. It was like a deep, vibrating buzz; the kind that makes your stomach turn if you’re around it for too long.

Abbie stepped on several spiders that neared her shoes and she chanced a glance up. So far, none had made their way across the vast ceiling of the basketball court. She headed out onto it and stopped at the center. Wasim followed.

“What is it?” Abbie asked, referring to the droning noise.

“I don’t know, but I think it’s-”

He cut off as something hit the glass with a sickening thunk. Abbie and Wasim both turned to look. It was dark outside and it was difficult to make anything out with the contrast between the black outside and the dim light inside.

There was another thunk and Jessie began to mewl in fear. Her eyes were wide, her fists clenched so tightly in her mother’s sweater that her knuckles were white.

“What the hell-”

Several more thunks in quick procession drew a stunned silence. The thumping became louder and more persistent and Abbie shook her head. “It’s some sort of insect, isn’t it?” Her voice was quieter than she’d planned. It was choked with fear.

“Yes.” Wasim’s was just as quiet.

The thumping became louder and more persistent and Abbie tried with all her might to focus on the darkness beyond the window. Just as she was beginning to make out the indistinct forms of what looked like great big dark-colored hornets, the glass cracked, splintering beneath their continuous assault.

“Shit.” Abbie glanced at the floor. The spiders were only a few yards away and gaining fast. She looked up. On the ceiling, they were now nothing short of a thick, shiny black ink stain spreading across the white tiles at a terrifying rate.

“We have to get out of here.” Abbie thought out loud, furiously trying to think her way past the fear that obliterated her ability to reason. “The front door is blocked. The hallway is blocked.” She spun around and gazed toward the back of the basketball court. “There’s a steam room in the back of the building. Through there. It’s air tight. The spiders won’t be able to get in.”

“We need a way to call for help.” Wasim scanned their surroundings. There had to be a phone somewhere. And preferably one not covered with bugs.

Then he spotted the portable phone that sat in its cradle at the front desk. “Phone!” He made a break for it, stepping on several spiders as he went, and brushing them out of his hair and off of his shoulders as they leapt from the ceiling to land on him. Abbie watched him grab the phone, shaking his hand and cursing when he mistakenly wrapped his fingers around several brown spiders that had been hiding on the other side.



Abbie was unspeakably grateful, at that moment, for the fact that both she and Wasim could heal from such things. Her heart only hammered hard against her rib cage because she knew that her daughter could not.

Wasim took the phone from the desk, angrily brushing it off as he spun around and ran full-out for the center of the basketball court. Abbie waited no longer. She spun on her heels, at the same time pulling her blue sweater over her daughter's body, hugging her close.

They ran together across the remaining wooden planks and, as if they knew this was their last chance, the spiders on the ceiling began dropping on them like thick black rain. Abbie screamed, moving as quickly as she could while still brushing them off in all directions. By sheer will and nothing short of a miracle, she managed to keep the arachnids off of Jessie by keeping the toddler's head and shoulders tightly hidden beneath the thick material of her fleece sweater. The spiders landed on the fabric and were immediately knocked away by Abbie's constantly moving hands. Luckily, Jessie was so tightly latched onto her, she didn't have to spend all of her strength holding her up.

Behind them, the glass cracked more and more, giving way beneath the continuous onslaught of the flying insects that so badly wanted in. Abbie couldn't help the second scream that escaped her when she heard the front windows shatter completely. The low droning noise that had sounded so distant before suddenly burst into the gym, filling the air with a maddening buzz.

An alarm went off around them, a shrieking siren that was barely louder than the sickening drone of the wasps. Jessie's whimpering grew louder, respectively, and Abbie

found herself attempting, in vain, to calm her daughter with half-hearted words of reassurance.

She reached the back door, after what seemed like a horrifying and morbid eternity, and yanked it open, plummeting into the hallway beyond. Wasim was hot on her tail.

He pulled the door shut behind them, having to heave with all of his strength against the resistance of the swinging hinges that normally would have insured the door closed slowly and quietly. Once it was shut, he held it there for a moment, knowing that the hinges would resist the pressure and pop back open as soon as he let go of it.

With wide eyes, he watched through the thick polished glass as a massive, undulating swarm of dark, buzzing insects flooded onto the basketball court and flew, like a shimmering dark cloud, toward the very door Wasim held shut. He cringed but did not let go when the cloud of insects slammed against the glass like a sheet of sickening red-brown hail. Up close, Wasim could now see that the insects were red wasps, a form of paper wasp commonly found in Texas.

But they seemed bigger somehow. Perhaps it was just that there were thousands of them... Perhaps millions...

After a few more seconds, Wasim felt the door settle into its jam and he released it and stepped back, still watching the dark cloud of wasps slam their bodies against the glass in a suicidal attempt to get through.

And then a spider fell on his head, and another on his shoulder and Wasim was jerked out of his reverie of horror and spun around to run down the hall. With shaking hands, he brushed the spiders off of his clothes, feeling several bites as he did so. Up

ahead, he spotted another set of glass doors and a sign above them that read “Steam Room and Sauna. Please refrain from pouring water on the rocks.”

Wasim ran full speed toward the double doors, flung them open, and dashed through. He just caught the sight of Abbie’s form spinning around the corner, her hair flying out behind her, fortunately devoid of spiders.

The ceiling here was relatively clear as it was so far into the building. Wasim ran around the corner and caught up with Abbie just as she was flinging open the final glass door that led to the large steam room.

## Chapter Fourteen

Beckett's mind had been tampered with. Whatever vampire had healed him, and Michael was guessing it was Victor Anson, had introduced so much of his own power into the man's system that it had fried several memory circuits and neural pathways that Michael would normally have used as paved roads to desired mental destinations. Now his thoughts were a jumbled, piled mess, interlaced with blind devotion and a zealous need to protect the strange sense of peace he'd found in exchanging his own thought processes for the peaceful ease of religious faith.

Even unconscious, he proved a difficult read.

But Michael was a very old, very powerful vampire. And he always felt more in his element, more relaxed and capable when up here in the air. Peripherally, he recalled how Abbie had joked about wanting the ability to fly instead of the visions she'd been granted. He'd laughed then. If only she'd known that Michael possessed that very gift. He had for hundreds of years.

As the wind buffeted his form and the night air cooled around his speeding body, he focused his intellectual strength, sending waves of his power through his arm, out the tips of his fingers, and into Beckett's mangled brain. Within a few short moments, he managed to dig his way through the mess and, once he had the information he needed, he turned his gaze to the ground several hundred feet below.

A duck-filled pond rested, placid, in the moonlight below. Michael landed beside the pond and laid Beckett's unconscious form on a nearby picnic table. He would wake up

before morning, or someone would find him. Either way, Michael did not have the time nor the desire to worry about him.

With one quick glance around to make sure that no one was watching, he lifted into the sky again and headed back to the gym where he'd left Abbie and Wasim. He knew now, without a doubt, that he was racing against time. And so were they.

\* \* \* \* \*

The steam room was relatively devoid of steam at this hour, but retained a warm, wet atmosphere and the smell of eucalyptus. Wasim made sure the door shut tightly behind them and then followed Abbie to the very back corner.

Abbie wedged herself into the corner and closed her eyes.

"Mama, Mama, Mama..." Jessie mumbled over and over again. Abbie said nothing but rocked her child back and forth, trying to calm the toddler's trembling – and her own.

"Anna, this is Wasim. We are trapped."

Abbie opened her eyes and gazed across the damp air to watch as Wasim paced back and forth, speaking into the portable phone.

"No. The new adept and I."

She realized, sinking, that they were extremely fortunate they could get any kind of reception in a room such as this one.

"No," Wasim answered someone on the other end. "I tried. He isn't picking up. We're alone. We are surrounded by a swarm of wasps and spiders. Millions. I believe Anson is behind it."

Abigail jumped when she heard the distant sound of glass shattering. Another door, another barrier between Jessie and a crawling, swarming death, was gone.

“Yes, quickly. I will try. Understood.”

Wasim pushed the “off” button and turned to face Abbie. “Abbie, you must try to light them on fire. The smoke will drive the others away, no matter what they’ve been instructed to do.”

Abbie stared at him, wide-eyed.

“I know you can do it. You were able to do it without thinking about it before. Now you must try to concentrate.” He came forward, kneeling before her. “Close your eyes.”

Abbie looked from him to the glass door of the steam room. No insects or spiders could be seen beyond it yet. But it wouldn’t be long. They were coming. She could hear and feel the droning of the wasps already, even over the relentless screeching of the burglar alarm.

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can, Abbie. You must. What were you thinking last time?”

“I don’t know, Wasim! They were shooting at us! At Jessie! They were trying to kill my daughter!”

“And that is what is happening again. Anson is trying to kill your daughter. He has sent these swarms after her, Abbie. Not for you, not for me. For Jessie.”

Abbie stared down at him in horror, in dumbfounded, abject dismay. She still could not comprehend, could not understand and could not fathom why any one in the world would want to kill her daughter. Why? How? *Why?!*

*Leave my daughter alone!*

The room began to grow misty. The moisture resting in puddles along the slight recesses in the tiled floor began to heat up and steam. The room was growing warmer.

Wasim glanced nervously at the heat rising around them. “Focus, Abbie. Take it out of here.”

Outside, the droning grew louder. Abbie stared at Wasim a moment more and then jumped at the sudden touch of her daughter’s hand upon her cheek. Abbie looked down. Jessie had pulled her head through the top of Abbie’s cardigan and was staring up at her mother. The palm of her right hand lay gently, coolly, upon Abbie’s cheek.

“Mama, you can do it.” She nodded as she spoke, her big eyes reflecting the light like glass. She smiled, pink lips and dimples, and Abbie found herself momentarily lost in the beauty of her daughter.

“Oh, baby girl.” She touched Jessie’s hand and leaned in, kissing her gently on the forehead. Then she leaned back again, her eyes closed.

In her mind, she pictured the swarms of wasps hovering outside the glass doors. She imagined them down to their minutest details, the brick red of their chitinous bodies, the thin black of their paper-like wings, their long forward-reaching antennae. She imagined them, then, beginning to smoke.

Behind her closed lids, she saw their papery wings catch fire, like the thin corners of an old, dry map or shaved kindling in a hearth. The fire spread from their wings to engulf their bodies, singing their antennae to ash almost upon contact.

As she pictured the fire spread, she thought of her anger. She let it fuel the blaze, sending her waves of rage upon the flames like lighter fluid.

She jumped when another alarm sounded, this time right outside the steam room door. A fire alarm. It jangled and clanged just as loudly as the burglar alarm screeched. She peered down at Wasim. He was smiling.

“You did it. Keep it up. Hopefully, they will all leave.”

Abbie listened for the buzzing of insects. But either they had dissipated, burned up, or turned back or the alarms were drowning them out, because she could no longer detect their droning.

Jessie laid her head down against her mother’s chest, her hands back to gripping the blue sweater tightly.

“Will they be sending help?”

“The theft alarm will notify the police. We have Syndicate members in every police department in the nation. Actually, internationally. They will figure something out or find a way to contact Michael.”

“And then what?”

Wasim shrugged. “I have no idea. But we will get out of here.”

Abbie was about to retort further when she noticed the big black blotches of burnt wall spreading beyond the glass door of the steam room. “Wasim, look.” She pointed at the wall beyond and Wasim turned. The black spot spread and then broke open, allowing the flames beyond to lick around its edges and climb into the adjoining room. Those flames then spread quickly across the wall and down to the carpet, where they ate up the wool threads of the rug like fuel.

“What have I done...” Abbie murmured. She’d taken care of one problem only to get them stuck in the middle of a worse one. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Literally.



The fire spread so quickly that all Abbie and Wasim could really do was stand there and watch as it approached the door of the steam room to become a roaring blaze, seven feet high, licking madly at the glass. They could retreat no further into the steam room. They were already huddled in the corner, as far from the gaining conflagration as they could get.

Suddenly, there was a loud grinding and tearing noise directly above them. It sounded like metal ripping, being torn to shreds.

“What the hell?” Wasim stood, instinctively sheltering Abbie and Jessie with his body. The ceiling above them in the steam room seemed to shake.

“Is it the wasps?” *Something bigger? What now?!*

Abbie once again shoved Jessie’s head down, covering her with the blue fleece cardigan.

The screaming sound of metal intensified and Abbie turned her body inward toward the corner, bracing herself against the wall, her body bowed low over her daughter’s. Any second now, she was positive that the roof was going to fall in and cover them with God knew what other kinds of atrocities.

But the roof never caved. Instead, Wasim gave a cry of surprise and joy as the ceiling tiles were pulled up and away to reveal a gaping hole in the roof of the building and Michael framed within it.

“Need a lift out?” Michael asked from where he stood on the gym’s rafters and support beams.

Abbie spun around and looked up. Aside from the fact that she was utterly flabbergasted as to how he’d managed to get up on the roof, to say nothing of tearing his

way through the rafters and plaster walls, she had to admit that she'd never been so glad to see anyone in her whole life.

Smoke billowed out into the night sky behind him. The air was filled with it. Heat roiled in past Michael and Abbie realized that the gym's roof was also on fire.

"Give Jessie to me!" Michael knelt on the widest of the overhead rafters and reached down as Abbie uncovered Jessie and extended her out at arm's reach.

"Mama, howd me!" Jessie clung to her mother, her little face contorted into a look of uncertain terror.

"Jessie, I'm right behind you, okay? Mama's coming. Go with Michael now. We have to get out of here!"

Jessie looked into Abbie's eyes as if searching her face for a sign of reassurance. Abbie smiled at her and nodded. "I promise, little one. I'm right here. I'm coming."

Michael gently took hold of Jessie's waist and Jessie let go of Abbie's sweater sleeves. The toddler went still in Michael's grasp and he hauled her up through the hole and set her down beside him. "Don't move, okay Jessie? Hold very still so that you don't fall."

Jessie nodded. Abbie peered over their shoulders at the thickening night sky. More big, black clouds of billowing smoke poured out of the gym's broken windows and from cracks that had formed in the roof. The steam room was growing uncomfortably hot. Crackling sounds and the roar of a building blaze could now be heard above the sounds of the alarm sirens, along with the chinking of breaking glass as windows across the gym exploded in the heat. Abbie was sure the steam room door would go in the same manner, any second now.

“Grab hold!” Michael laid down on one of the rafters and extended his arm down toward Abbie. Wasim interlaced his fingers, holding them out to give her a boost up. She took Michael’s arm in her right hand, stepped onto Wasim’s hands, and used her left hand to heft herself up through the hole in the ceiling.

Once up, she knelt down beside Jessie and hugged her daughter.

Wasim was next. In a show of impressive agility, he jumped up and grabbed Michael’s outstretched hand with one hand and one of the metal rafters with his other hand. Using the leverage of a strong upper body and Michael’s help, he pulled himself up through the hole and stood next to Michael.

“Now what?” Abbie couldn’t help but ask.

“Now this.” Michael leaned down and yanked Abbie up by her arm. She was still holding Jessie and she pulled the toddler up and into her arms as Michael lifted her.

“Hold on,” he said and Abbie instinctively held on to Jessie with all of her might. With that, he pulled her into a tight embrace and then leapt into the night sky.

Wasim watched him disappear behind the smoldering blanket and then he looked down. Heat waves distorted his vision and the steam room below him appeared, for all the world, to be filled with rising and falling water. Smoke stung his eyes. He closed them and turned his face up to the sky. He heard the steam room door explode below him. Angry heat rose around him, singeing his fingertips and rising through the thin soles of his shoes. He wondered whether he was going to die. Fire and water... Burning and drowning. Those were the sure ways to kill a vampire.

\* \* \* \* \*

Abbie suddenly found herself surrounded by smoke on all sides. She no longer felt the steel of the rafter beam beneath her feet.

Her first thought was that she was flying. In any rational situation, she would have been thrown on this realization, but at the moment, she found it inexplicably rational.

She remained silent; not that she'd have been able to give her thoughts voice had she tried, anyway. She glanced down at Jessie and found that the child was staring up at Michael with big eyes.

The smoke thinned and then cleared around them and Abbie chanced a look down.

"Oh *crap*..." The ground loomed up toward her and Abbie was being set down on unsteady legs in a patch of grass about thirty yards away from the East side of the gym building. Even as she held onto Jessie for dear life, she gazed, wide-eyed, up at Michael and then turned that gaze to the roiling, boiling inferno behind him.

The gym was entirely engulfed in flames. Abbie's heart hammered hard against her rib cage. *Wasim*...

Michael did not wait. He once again took to flight and rushed head-long into the billowing clouds of choking black smoke.

He heard a man coughing and zeroed in on the sound, following Wasim's voice to his location and landing beside him. Already, the man's face and clothes were covered in ash and soot. Michael could feel the heated metal of the rafter rising up through his shoes.

Wasim's eyes were closed. He'd turned his face up toward the sky above, most likely in the vain attempt at getting fresh air into his lungs.

"Take hold, Wasim."

Wasim opened his eyes to find Michael before him. He blinked. The scorching heat and smoke were affecting his vision more than he thought because he could have sworn that he saw wings at Michael's back. Not the ridiculous white wings of cherubs and Christian angels. Black wings, raven and shimmering, stretching long into the warping, distorting blackness around them as if they were a part of the smoke, itself.

Wasim blinked again and the wings shimmered in and out of his altered perception. Numbly, however, he stretched out his arms. Michael's fingers wrapped around his biceps, his touch cool on Wasim's heated skin. Disoriented in the extreme, Wasim closed his eyes for good and fell into another coughing fit, his lungs simply overcome by too much smoke. He choked, gagged and doubled over as he felt Michael lift him up out of the heart of the invading inferno. They left the metal rafter just as it buckled beneath the onslaught of the heat and caved inward.

## Chapter Fifteen

*(Approximately 2,000 B.P.)*

Michael sat in stillness and silence, listening to the crackling fire before him as it sent dancing flames toward the heavens. He thought of all that had transpired in the last few days.

He thought of Thomas and Yeshua and the ruse they had pulled on everyone around them since they were very young.

Thomas was a vampire. This, now, Michael knew. He also looked positively identical to his brother, in nearly every minute detail. Michael understood, at present, why Yeshua insisted that his disciples and followers continuously hide their faces. Not only was it safer, as no one could identify them if they could not see them. But, it was practical for the purpose of hiding Thomas. And to switch places with him, free of incident or suspicion, when the situation called for it.

Upon being formally introduced to Thomas, something inside of Michael had slid into place. On impulse that struck him like lightning, Michael had jumped forward and grabbed Thomas's hand in order to read all that he could from the man. When he did so, he realized that it had been sheer dumb luck that every time he'd touched Yeshua before that, he'd actually managed to read the real Yeshua and not his twin brother.

However, this time was different and, as Michael skimmed the man's mind with his own, he came up against real and true power. Resistance. Thomas was the most potent vampire Michael had ever met. An adept of great skill, with many gifts and the ability to block Michael from learning most of them.

Thomas had pulled away from the contact, his gaze narrowing. Michael had stared at him, the pieces to the puzzle finally falling into place. It all made sense now. Michael's gaze slid from Thomas to Yeshua and back again.

"You perform the 'miracles', and your brother teaches the masses."

Yeshua placed his hand gently on Michael's shoulder. "Judas, you must understand. Thomas does the will of the Lord. I am God's tongue, and he is God's hands."

Michael looked at the hand on his shoulder. The red mark between Yeshua's thumb and forefinger seemed particularly stark at the moment. He looked at Thomas's hand. No mark. Now he understood. How could he have missed coming to such an obvious conclusion before?

"And what are you in the eyes of God, Judas? What do you have to offer the masses?" Thomas addressed Michael, and for the first time in the many months that Michael had been among them, he realized that Thomas's voice was just a hair lower than his brother's. And it was missing the gentle inflection that must have made Yeshua's teachings so influential and popular.

"What do you mean?" Michael asked carefully.

Thomas stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and Michael. "Why are you here, Judas?"

"To learn," Michael answered, simply. It was the truth. He'd come to learn about Yeshua, after all. There was no need to go into further detail.

Thomas peered deeply into Michael's eyes and Michael could feel the influence of the power that swirled within the man. It was swimming just beneath the surface, begging to be released. He wondered if he could harm a being as easily as he could heal one.

“Yeshua, do you know all there is to know about your brother?” Michael asked then, drawing the attention away from himself and refocusing it. Thomas cut his gaze to Yeshua and pinned him with a black stare.

Yeshua looked from one of them to the other and then shook his head. “Thomas fell from the roof when we were but children. I thought he was dead. But he rose again and we found that his brief sleep had brought him closer to God. He’d been gifted. I saw how these gifts could be used to help our people and to do God’s will. That is all I need to know.”

Thomas turned on him then. “How long will I do your bidding before we no longer walk through the desert, but sit at the center of the Temple and drink the wine of kings?”

Yeshua’s expression did not falter. He seemed to be serenity, itself. “When God’s will is done, all of his children will drink with him. Your time has not yet come, Thomas.” Then he looked away from his brother and stared at a spot on the ground, not really seeing it. His gaze grew distant. “But, for me, it draws nearer.”

Michael had fallen silent then, his thoughts spinning, a thousand questions forming upon his tongue. But something in Bar-abba’s demeanor quieted them all. As Michael stared at the teacher, Thomas stepped forward and leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“I know what you are, Judas. You blame me. But you betray him even now.”

Then Thomas had left them alone in the desert.

That afternoon, Yeshua and Michael, alone, had spoken to one another until the sun went down. Every so often, an apostle would top the second rise and look down upon where they sat facing each other. But then the disciple would turn back around and return the way he’d come.



Now Michael watched the flames leap and flicker and tried, desperately, to make sense out of all that the Nasi had shared with him.

Since their discussion, Michael had sent word to his elders. They now knew what Thomas was. However, their only order for Michael had been to watch him. To guide him as he should have been guided long ago, when he'd first made the change to immortality. So, he'd decided to remain among the disciples, at least for now.

"Bar-abba, I have a message for you."

Michael was pulled from his thoughts by the arrival of a messenger. A young boy in white had been allowed into the camp and he now moved toward Yeshua, who had just emerged from his tent. The boy held a scroll, tied with string.

Yeshua took the scroll and unrolled it, reading silently.

Michael stood and made his way toward them. Already, they were being joined by several others, including Mattai, Mark and a fair-haired apostle named Simeon Ben Jonah who seemed to be most comfortable in the world when he had a sword at the ready.

Michael stopped a few feet away from Yeshua and cocked his head to one side.

"What does it say?"

"Our friend, Eleazar, is very ill in Bethany."

"Lazarus?" Mattai asked, coming forward and gazing down at the note in Yeshua's hands.

"Yes. But this illness was not meant to end in death. We must return to Jude."

"Bar-abba, is that wise?" Mattai looked up from the note, concern etched into his features.

“We will go to him in two days’ time.” Yeshua left the note with Mattai and turned back toward his tent. Michael followed him, reaching his side before he could disappear behind the leather flaps. He gently stayed him with a hand on his arm and then leaned in close.

“Where is Thomas?” he whispered.

Yeshua was silent for a long while. Then, with a disappointed shrug and a small shake of his head, he sighed. “I do not know.” He turned away from Michael and stepped into the tent. Michael let him go.

Two days later, the large group made their way back across the Jordan and into the town of Bethany. Yeshua was more quiet than usual during the long trek and Michael longed to brush past him in order to read what thoughts were on his mind. He walked beside Yeshua, to his right and back a pace, watching the teacher carefully.

“Judas, if you have a question, why do you not simply ask?”

Michael’s brow rose and he stepped faster in order to fall into stride with Yeshua. The teacher turned to gaze upon him and Michael saw in his eyes a depth of sadness that had not been there before.

“He is dead, isn’t he?” Michael asked.

“Yes.”

Michael wasn’t sure how Yeshua would know this. Perhaps it was nothing more than the telltale sinking feeling one was possessed with when a loved one fell into eternal sleep. Mothers felt it for their children. Husbands for their wives. Lazarus had been Yeshua’s oldest and closest friend. If the man was dead, Bar-abba would know.

“Then why do we make the trip to Bethany?”

“Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will wake him.”

Michael’s brow furrowed. “If he sleeps, then he is fine, is he not?” He was confused. Yeshua had just told him that Lazarus was dead. But if he was only sleeping, then he would wake up on his own. What did he need Yeshua for?

“No, Judas,” Yeshua blinked and shook his head, a very slight smile playing across his lips. “He is dead. I am glad I was not there when he died.” He turned away and looked ahead, toward the city that approached in the distance. “For your sake, so that you may come to believe.”

Michael wasn’t sure what Yeshua meant by this. *So that you may believe*. Did he mean Michael personally? Or, did Yeshua refer to *all* of the disciples? All of the people of Israel? And, believe in *what*, exactly?

But when the teacher fell into another deep silence, he decided not to disturb it. He allowed himself to fall back a pace once more and simply followed quietly.

They reached the gates of Bethany to find a crowd of mourners filtering into the city, their clothes torn, their hair unwashed, no sandals on their feet. Michael immediately knew that they were there because of Lazarus.

The disciples and their teacher moved through the gates and entered the city, but not before the mourners noticed Yeshua, who did not bother to hide his face. Like a ripple in a pond, a murmur of surprise and alarm moved through the crowd. The disciples halted in their progress and gathered closely around Bar-abba, watching the crowd uneasily.

Simeon’s hand was on the hilt of his sword. Michael watched as Mark pulled a dagger from its sheath in the belt around his robes.

Finally, the murmur quieted and the crowd parted. A woman stood in a doorway across from them. She gazed at Yeshua and then stepped out into the street.

“Martha.” Yeshua stepped forward and the woman left the hut and ran into his arms. He embraced her warmly and the crowd seemed to open further, giving them room. Mark and Simon relaxed, Mark replacing his dagger.

“My Lord, you are too late. He has been dead for four days.” Martha’s eyes were red from crying and her hair was disheveled. It was readily apparent that she had not bathed or slept.

Yeshua held her gently by the arms and then cupped her face with his hand. “Where is Mary?” he asked softly.

“She is inside. I will tell her you are here.”

He released her and she turned away and went back into the small hut. In a few moments, she came back out again, followed by another woman.

The second woman was very beautiful. Though she had followed the traditional custom of not bathing or tending to one’s hair or attire while mourning, her loveliness was plain, nonetheless. Her hair was thick and wavy and shone in the desert sun. The color was a rich, dark brown. The waves cascaded over her shoulders like a waterfall. Her eyes were also brown, large and dark in her attractive face. At the moment, they were reddened from crying and her cheeks were stained with dusty tracks.

She emerged from the hut and peered up at Yeshua Bar-abba. He gazed back at her and then stepped toward her. At once, she rushed from the doorway and fell into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably. “Would that you had come sooner! You could have saved him!”

Michael wondered at their closeness. He knew this to be Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha, but he had not realized that the three and their brother, Eleazar, had been such close friends. Seeing the tears that now ran down his teacher's cheeks, he was struck by the normalcy of it all. For some reason, during the last several months, he had come to think of Yeshua as something other than normal. Something other than a man.

The show of emotion rocked Michael. He stood, dumbfounded, watching the exchange in a detached manner.

"Mary," Yeshua said softly, as he held her tight and she cried against his chest. "Your brother will rise again."

Martha joined them once more, and, as she cried aloud, she shook her head. "I know, my Lord, that he will rise in the last day, as will we all." It was obvious that the promise of the foretold resurrection of God's chosen was not good enough for her at just that moment.

"No," Yeshua replied, gently pulling away from Mary and pinning Martha with his dark gaze. "Have I not told you that if you will only believe, you will witness the wonder of what God can do?"

Mary looked up at him and then over her shoulder at her sister. She said nothing, but her eyes questioned him. He looked from Martha to Mary and then took a long, deep breath.

"Take me to him."

Mary stepped back and turned around. She nodded at Martha and the two of them brushed past Yeshua and his disciples and headed toward the city gates. Michael and the others followed, along with the other mourners who had gathered to pay their respects.

They left the city and followed along a trail for a short distance, until they came to a cave in the side of a cliff face. The cave entrance was blocked by a large round stone.

“Remove the stone,” Yeshua ordered. Martha turned a worried expression upon him.

“But, my Lord, he has been dead for several days, he will be-”

“You must trust in me.” Yeshua turned a gentle but insistent gaze upon her and, eventually, she nodded toward three men who moved to the stone and proceeded to roll it away. The entrance to the cave yawned open behind it, dark and quiet. Michael felt apprehensive. His skin was crawling.

He looked around for Thomas. There were too many people, however, many of them in disheveled states, wiry hair obscuring their features, robes over their heads like funeral wrappings. They moved about, shoving forward, all attempting to gain a better view of whatever it was they thought was about to happen.

He hadn’t seen Thomas in more than two days. The hair on the back of Michael’s neck stood up. What was the vampire up to?

“Father, hear me now, for the sake of the people standing here!” Yeshua turned his face to the sky and called out toward the heavens. The crowd fell utterly silent. “Hear me so that they may know I am sent to do your will!” He lowered his head and looked toward the entrance to the tomb. “Lazarus, come out!”

At these words, a stillness unlike any Michael had ever experienced stole over the crowd of onlookers. Not a body stirred. No one dared to breathe. The sun beat down steady and a falcon cried overhead. Several long heart beats passed and nothing happened.

And then a faint scratching noise sounded from within the tomb. The crowd collectively gasped. Another scratching sound. Then a thump. And a shuffle. Michael's hands clenched into fists at his sides. He watched the cave entrance with wide eyes, as did everyone else.

And then there it was. A figure in funeral dress, his hands and feet bound with linen, his face covered in a swath of cloth, emerged from the dark recesses of the cave and shambled out into the light of the mid-day sun.

A roar of awe-struck surprise went up through the gathering of mourners. Some cried out in joy, but Michael noticed that others backpedaled, clearly horrified. He watched as a mother took her child by the hand and fled the mass of people, followed by several others, who sobbed in terror as they made their way quickly from the scene. Their cries of fear were overshadowed by the general choir of gasps and shrieks of elation and devotion. Many people dropped to their knees, overcome by emotion. They prostrated in front of the teacher and his disciples and began to chant "*Messiah!*"

To all witnesses, Yeshua Bar-abba had just raised a dead man from the grave. A man who had been dead four days. Michael's heart slammed hard against his rib cage. This was bad. People were well and truly scared now. While Yeshua Bar-abba may have been a mere nuisance to the Roman government before now, word would surely spread of this act. And with the news would spread panic. Trepidation. Alarm. What would Antipas and his leader, Pilate, do with Yeshua now? Such an act would be viewed as nothing short of sorcery. It would put a price on Yeshua Bar-abba's head.

Michael turned his gaze back to the figure standing at the entrance to the tomb. Martha hesitantly made her way forward, breaking away from the crowd to stand before him.

With a badly shaking hand, she pulled the cloth from his face and then fell to her knees, grasping his legs as she wept with gratitude. Michael looked at the man's face. It was whole and well. Lazarus was a handsome man, which stood to reason, given the beauty of his sister.

Lazarus looked down at his older sister and knelt in front of her. She released his legs and quieted her crying. Then he offered her his hand and he helped her stand. At that moment, Mary came forward to embrace him, and it seemed to be a signal to the rest of the crowd to do the same.

Michael watched this surge of welcome and elation for several more long seconds and then cut his gaze to Yeshua, who still stood on the outskirts, watching from a distance.

Only, Yeshua was not watching Lazarus. He was watching Michael. There was something in his expression, then, at that very moment, that Michael would remember for the rest of his many days. He would remember it, because, at that same moment, he could not understand it. It was unreadable. Fathoms deep, and utterly incomprehensible. It was as if Yeshua were looking straight through him, into his soul, reading his deepest thoughts.

Michael blinked and spun around, suddenly torn from Yeshua's gaze by an awareness of great power. It came from what remained of the crowd behind him and



almost buzzed with potency. Michael's eyes scanned the faces of the mourners until he located the one he absolutely knew he would find there.

A robed man, his face obscured by his cowl, was hastily making his way past the others, toward the dusty trail that led back into the city of Bethany. Michael cut through the gathering and advanced upon the retreating figure.

He followed him a distance down the trail, until they were out of sight of the crowd. Then, when he was right behind him, Michael reached out and grasped him by the shoulder, spinning him around on the spot. Thomas's robe fell, exposing his face.

He was smiling.

"What have you done?" Michael growled, his teeth clenched with rage.

"I know not of what you speak," Thomas answered, the grin on his lips spreading.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Michael released his robes with a shove and stepped toward him, the fists at his sides itching to strike. "*You* have committed this atrocity! You have raised that man from the dead and endangered your brother's life!"

At that, Thomas laughed. It was low and nasty and the sound sent Michael's skin crawling. His eyes glittered in the sunlight, like dark gems. He gazed at Michael for several long heart beats and then leaned in close. Michael did not retreat.

Thomas brought his lips to Michael's ear.

"Oh, you of little faith."

Then Thomas stepped away from Michael, still smiling broadly. He bowed slightly, pulled the robe back up over his head, and turned around to continue down the trail.

A blue-eyed tower of stunned and angry silence, Michael wordlessly watched him go.

## Chapter Sixteen

*(Present day)*

Abbie gently rocked her daughter on her lap in the back of the black sedan. The events after their escape from the bug-infested, burning gym had transpired very quickly, blending into a blurred series of quick phone calls and short drives where they exchanged one car for another and picked up fresh clothing, blankets and water.

They were now on their way to a private landing strip north of town and Jessie was once again asleep. Abbie was anything but sleepy.

“So, you can fly.”

Michael glanced up into the rearview mirror and caught her gaze. “Yes.”

“Nice. I’m the fricking *Fire Starter*, and you get to fly.” She tore her gaze away from the mirror and turned it out the window. “And Jesus freak gets to heal people.”

Michael’s brow furrowed. “What?”

Wasim turned to him in the passenger seat. “She had a vision while you were out. She saw Anson healing someone.”

Michael cut his gaze to him. “You should have told me this sooner.”

Abbie ran a hand through her long hair. “I recognize the building now. I did a wedding shoot there a few years ago. I think he’s in the Watson Building downtown.”

Michael suddenly braked the car and pulled it over to the side of the road. Abbie’s eyes widened. He put the car in park and turned to face her in the backseat.

“You’re telling me that you saw where Anson was hiding out and you failed to mention it until now?”

Abbie’s gaze narrowed on him. “Don’t get huffy with me, English. In case you failed to notice, a lot has been happening in the last few hours. And, besides,” she shrugged. “I didn’t recognize it until now. I’ve had time to think about it on this drive.”

Michael stared at her for several long seconds. And then he took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “I read the mind of the one that Anson healed. All I was able to get from him was an address.”

“Was it eleven-o-nine, thirteenth street?”

Michael’s brow shot up. “Yes, it was.”

“That’s the Watson Building. I have a good memory for words and figures.”

“Photographic,” Wasim added from the front seat. Abbie smiled.

Michael studied her face. He wondered how old she was. He had yet to read her, and for some reason, would not feel right doing so. With Abbie, the idea felt somewhat... invasive. But her face was barely lined, and what lines she did possess were from laughing. He wondered how many of her smiles her late husband had produced, and how many were the product of her daughter.

There was something about the depth of character that shone in her chocolate brown eyes that Michael found intriguing. She didn’t pull her punches or censor her words, and though Michael had always thought he would find such qualities in a woman brash, with Abbie it actually felt refreshing.

Her brow furrowed and she cocked her head to one side. “What?” She was growing uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

He smiled, flashing perfect white teeth. “Nothing. Sorry.”

He turned back around in his seat and pulled the car out of park. “Let’s go over the plan once more,” he started as he checked the mirrors and eased the sedan back onto the road. “We will meet up with the pilot and co-pilot at the airstrip. Wasim will be carrying a bundle of blankets. He will get onto the plane with the bundle and Abbie, you will once more insist on going with him.”

“Which I will not allow. I hurry onto the plane and take off.” Wasim spoke in a low monotone, staring blankly out the window. He was tired too.

“Yes. Jessie will actually be in the trunk of the car.”

“I still don’t like it,” Abbie said, shaking her head. There was nothing about placing her baby in the trunk of a car that sat well with her. What if Jessie woke up in there? What if she couldn’t breathe?

“She will be fine. The trunk is outfitted for such transport.”

Abbie caught his gaze in the rearview again. “And why is that, I wonder,” she mumbled to herself, knowing the vampire would hear her.

Michael found himself smiling.

Ten minutes later, they pulled onto the black-top of a private landing strip. Yellow lights lined the runway on either side and lamp posts sat cemented into the ground, shedding light several yards out on either side.

Idling at one end of the thousand-foot-long runway was a small passenger jet, gleaming white and black in the moon and lamp-light. It was an older model, but Abbie had always had a fond appreciation for planes, and this one had been kept up, obviously cared for by someone who loved it.

“A Gulfstream,” Abbie stated calmly, studying the lines of the aircraft. “A model from the seventies. Seventy-five? Seventy-seven?”

Michael turned the car off and once more twisted in his seat to stare at her. “Seventy-seven.” He blinked. Abbie hadn’t failed to surprise him yet. “She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” He asked, not completely certain he was referring to the plane.

“Yes.” Abbie hadn’t looked away from the plane.

“How did you know?” he asked then, overcome by curiosity.

“My father was a pilot.” She looked away and shrugged, her face suddenly clouded with painful memories. Again, Michael longed to read her mind, but refrained.

“She’s mine,” he said softly. “She was the first jet I ever purchased. I’ve bought and sold others over the years, but could never bear to get rid of this one.”

Abbie looked up at him. He was a very handsome man. Dashing, one might say. And his bloody delicious accent was the kind any James Bond wanna-be would kill for. It had a nearly uncomfortable effect on her.

And he was a pilot. Suddenly, a whole new window of illumination on who and what was Michael, the vampire, opened up to her. She knew pilots. She knew, well, what they were like. “So, what’s her name?”

This time, Wasim answered. “He calls her ‘Sophie’. And she is quite nice on the inside.” He turned toward them from the front passenger seat. “The Syndicate may not provide good hotels, but the plane is satisfactory.”

Abbie smiled and shook her head. “Wasim, you’re hopeless.”

Michael turned to him. “What is this fascination you have with luxury, anyway?” he asked the younger vampire, a look of incredulity on his face.

Wasim shrugged. "I had plans before I wrecked my bike. Now those plans are non-existent. I was going to own my own business, make a lot of money. I always wanted to travel the world and stay in nice hotels. Now I work for you and your vampires."

Michael bit his cheek to keep from smiling. "I see. Just remember, Mr. Batul, you would not even exist post-accident if it were not for 'me and my wampires'." He effected Wasim's accent expertly and Abbie bit back her laugh.

Wasim's gaze narrowed, but it was obvious he was trying not to smile as well.

"And trust me, Wasim," Michael continued, this time in a gentler, more personal tone. "You will one day have as much wealth as you had dreamed. After all, we live a very long time."

They gazed at one another for a few seconds and then, Wasim, still smiling, nodded respectfully.

Out on the strip, the plane's engine began to warm up. Abbie chanced a glance down at the bundle at her feet. Her heart slammed hard against her rib cage. It was show time.

Michael opened his door and stepped out of the car, as did Wasim. Abbie waited several seconds and then bent over to pick up the bundle. The outer layer of blankets was actually a long black Kevlar sheet, wrapped snugly around the form within. She pulled it close to her chest and then Michael opened her door for her. She climbed out of the car, Michael's hand under her elbow for support.

The West Texas wind blew free across the flat airway, tossing her hair wildly about her face. She peered up at Michael and then moved to join Wasim, who stood at the base of the stairs in the side of the plane.

“I want to come with you,” she said earnestly, the expression on her face one of extreme worry and doubt.

“You know you can not. You must stay behind so that they believe you and the child are still together. I will take Jessie to safety.”

Abbie stared up at him a good, long while, her fingers curling around the bundle until they turned white. Wasim reached out for it, and it appeared for all the world as if she would never let go. Then Michael was at her back, gently laying a hand on her shoulder.

“She will be fine, Abbie. There are trusted friends waiting for her arrival in Chicago. They will take her to a safe house where you can join her when this is all finished.”

Abbie leaned down and whispered something into the top end of the bundle. A tear rolled down her cheek. Michael gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

And then, teeth gritted against the pain of separation, she placed the bundle in Wasim’s outstretched arms. He slowly gave her a slight bow, and then he turned to the plane and climbed the stairs.

Abbie took a tentative step after him, but Michael held her back. Then, softly, she whispered, “I love you, baby.”

The door to the plane drew closed and Michael pulled her away, off of the strip. They stood several yards out, watching as the plane’s engines powered up and the Gulfstream jet began to roll forward. Lights blinked on the tips of its wings. The plane accelerated down the runway, eventually screaming in pre-take-off speed.

Then the front landing gear pulled up, the nose lifted into the air, and the plane eased into the night sky. Abbie placed her face in her hands and Michael steered her back to the car.

In reality, Abbie was terrified that the noise of the engines had awakened Jessie and that she was in the trunk right now screaming her little head off. The inside of the trunk had been sound-proofed and Abbie didn't even want to think about why that was. Noise could get in, but nothing could come out.

Was she okay?

Abbie's head was throbbing. There was nothing more in the world that she wanted to do, at that moment, than throw open the trunk and hold her daughter.

Instead, however, she slowly walked back to the car and, when Michael opened the front passenger side door for her she slipped inside, pulling the seatbelt across her chest. In a moment, he was in the driver's seat beside her. He checked his rearview mirror, started the car, and turned on the headlights. Then he pulled off of the black-top and across a gravel road to an exit that led to the highway.

"Do you think it worked?"

"It's hard to say. You did a commendable job, however." He glanced at her. "The tears were a nice touch."

She gave a short laugh. "They were real. My baby is in the trunk of a car. I'm scared out of my mind. Do you think she's awake?"

"I don't know." His hearing was excellent, but the trunk had been soundproofed against vampire senses as well as a human's. "We'll be there shortly. Try to relax. Even if she's awake, she's alive."



Abbie closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Pain pierced the right side of her head, and nausea began to roil in her belly. “I’ve got a migraine coming on.”

“Look in the glove compartment. There may be some aspirin.”

“It doesn’t work on me. I have to take Midrin and drink a ton of coffee.” She smiled a wry smile, though her eyes were glassy with pain. “Or get a deep tissue massage in my neck and shoulders.”

Michael’s brow rose. “I’ll see what I can do when we arrive at our destination.”

Abbie closed her eyes again and went over the air strip scene in her head. She wondered whether anyone had been there to witness her Oscar-winning performance. Several deliberately-placed, covert phone calls had been made by Michael and whoever had been on the other end of his line. Supposedly, hints had been dropped in places where they were most likely to be picked up by Anson’s posse.

The idea was to have Anson believe that the Syndicate had decided to smuggle the target of his aggression, i.e., Jessie, out of Lubbock. Using Michael’s private jet and an out-of-the-way air strip only added to the cloak-and-dagger air of the escape. However, the strip had been chosen specifically because it was owned by someone who had no guard dogs or alarms set up on their property. Getting on and off of the land would be a piece of cake for any one determined enough, and their hidden positions would never be given away.

Hence, the hope was that Anson’s men had been there, at the air strip, while Abbie had supposedly boarded her daughter on a plane bound for Chicago. Wasim was the decoy, for the time being, and Abbie wished him luck.

“Crazy ass religious freaks,” she mumbled under her breath.

Michael glanced over at her and then back at the road in front of them.

“Not all religion is bad, surely?” he asked softly, a hint of humor in his tone.

Abbie looked over at him, the movement causing a stab of pain to shoot through her eye socket. She made a derisive sound and shook her head. “Religion is the root of all evil.”

“Oh?” Michael’s brow rose, his interest clearly piqued.

“Name me one other thing that has caused as much murder and violence as religion. You can’t do it. Mass rape, war, and genocide, all in the name of God. Religion is the human excuse to exercise the old brain’s need for testosterone-induced domination.”

Michael considered her words for a moment. “So, you are not at all religious...”

“No way in hell. I’m not going to blame a non-existent god for not protecting me when I’m stupid and I’m not going to thank him for the good things that happen to me because I’ve worked hard.” She smiled then. “And I won’t blame the devil when I’m naughty. I have a brain, after all.”

“You picked a strange place to live for one of your beliefs.”

“Yes. I know.” She shook her head. “You wouldn’t believe how many Lubbockites would love to lynch J.K. Rowling. Forget Dan Brown and, God forbid you play role playing games. Because, apparently, the devil has nothing better to do than make up stupid ways for you to worship him. One day, he hopes to reach the masses through his wide-spread fictional books about sorcery and dragons and trick them into worshipping him. He’ll then send them out to start massacring people by the thousands in his name.” She cocked her head to one side. “Oh wait, my mistake. That was God.”

Michael watched her pinching the brow of her nose, rubbing her temples and then the base of her neck. Her pain appeared to have increased since they'd touched on the subject.

"Why does this upset you so badly?"

She shot him an incredulous look. "Are you kidding? I honestly don't see how anyone could worship someone who condones the killing of children, the rape of innocent women, the slaughter of millions for the sake of subjugation. God is an asshole."

Michael gazed at her a moment. He was quiet a long time.

Finally, he ventured a reply. "It's only that..." He paused, looking back to the road and choosing his words carefully. "You seem to harbor an awful lot of anger toward a god you're certain doesn't exist."

Abbie stared at him.

She blinked. After a few seconds of silence, she looked away, turning to gaze out the window in front of her.

The silence between them stretched then, until Michael noticed that she was once more rubbing her head and neck.

"By the way," she said softly, "why am I still getting headaches? Doesn't being a vampire come with some sort of super-health benefit?"

They had officially changed the subject.

"Actually, it *is* odd that you're suffering one. They're caused by inflammation of the meninges and inflammation is something that is usually counteracted by a vampire's metabolism." He paused, considering his next words. "Are you sure you're not imagining the pain?"

Abbie's mouth dropped open. *Imagining* it? Was he serious? Then, utterly without thinking, she reached out and grabbed his hand where it rested on the steering wheel.

"Does this feel like I'm bloody well imagining it to you?"

Without realizing what she was doing, she sent the pain through her arm and out through her fingertips, wanting, for all the world, to share it with him in that instant. It had always frustrated her that so many people lacked the empathy necessary to truly understand what another person was going through. She'd often longed for the ability to transfer painful emotions, experiences and even happiness from one mind and body to another. She had a theory that if this were possible, the world would be a much more pleasant, compassionate place.

Michael's eyes widened and his grip tightened on the steering wheel. His jaw clenched as a flood of sharp pain washed through his brain, shooting from the base of his skull to a pin-point of agony behind his right eye. He exhaled sharply and braked the car, remembering, at the last second, not to brake too sharply so that Jessie wouldn't go flying forward in the trunk.

He pulled to the side of the road and slid the gear shift into park.

Abbie let go of his hand and the pain immediately subsided. He turned toward her, utterly at a loss for words. She was staring at her hand, a bewildered expression on her lovely features.

"What did I just do?"

Michael shook his head slowly. He blinked. A part of him was in utter fascination at what she'd just accomplished. Another part of him was just happy to have the pain gone

from his head. He had never encountered a gift such as this one before. Abbie would be the first vampire in history to possess such an ability.

“I don’t know. But I am truly sorry for what I said,” he said softly.

Abbie looked up from her hands and caught his gaze. His blue eyes seemed particularly bright in the darkness around them. Almost as if they were lit from the inside.

“No, *I’m* sorry,” she said suddenly, feeling guilty for any pain she had caused him. “I swear I didn’t mean it.”

Michael watched her for a moment and then, before he could stop himself, he reached his right hand out and placed it against her cheek.

He hadn’t meant to read her. He’d only wanted to touch her face, to show her compassion, but the contact opened a window in his mind and the reading came naturally. He couldn’t even fight it.

Abbie was twenty-eight years old. Her favorite color was yellow. Her favorite movie was *The Labyrinth*, though her favorite actor was Sean Bean. She liked his accent. Michael’s head spun as he delved deeper into her thoughts, completely unable to stop himself. She liked cello music and spicy food and her favorite bands were Nickelback and some band out of California called Tenacious D. Her favorite book was *The Phantom Tollbooth*, but her favorite author was Terry Pratchett. She liked football, but not American football. She loved hockey. She loved poetry, especially Rudyard Kipling.

Deeper.

She hated what the human race had become. Global warming. Factory farming. Fur on the fashion runway. The rat race. War. She loved autumn, Halloween, pumpkins and hot cocoa by the fire place.

Deeper.

She missed her father. Badly. Too much left unsaid. She wondered about her mother, where she was, what she was doing. She wondered if she would ever speak to her again. An ache rode deep within her, originating from what seemed like a hole inside, a gash in her soul torn by the friends and family she had lost in the last several years of her life. Her brother, her father, her husband. Her mother.

And, of course, overriding it all, like a pulsing glow of combined hope and fear, was her intense love for her daughter.

Jessie.

Michael finally managed to pull his hand away. He dropped it to the seat and stared at the woman before him. She stared back.

“What did you do?” she asked, her voice no more than a whisper in the quiet interior of the black sedan.

“I...”

“My headache is gone.” She gently raised her fingers to her temple and brushed them along her cheekbone to her eye, as if her touch was searching for any leftover traces of pain. “How did you do that?”

Michael didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t certain he could have trusted himself to speak even if he did. He had no idea what had just happened. Abbie had been the easiest read he had ever had. The depth of her spirit had actually pulled him into her; she had no erected walls, had nothing to hide. She was an open book to him and he’d never read anything so beautiful in all his very long life. And his touch had taken away her pain.

He blinked and forced himself to turn around in his seat.

*What is happening?*

The silence in the car stretched into full minutes. Then he blinked. He cleared his throat and ran his hands through his thick hair. Though he hoped that they were on Wasim's trail and not his, Anson's men could still very well be watching them at that moment. They needed to keep moving.

He wordlessly shifted the car back into drive and was checking the rearview mirror when Abbie's head flew violently back against the seat rest and her eyes fluttered shut.

Abbie found herself spiraling downward, an ocean of blue climbing up to meet her unstoppable descent. The scream of a plane's engines roared in her ears. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. She looked at the hands that she had braced against the open door of the Gulfstream jet. They were dark brown, with short nails, and they were bleeding from deep claw marks in the flesh. They were Wasim's hands.

Panic welled up within her and she tried to scream.

"Abbie!"

Abbie opened her eyes to find Michael leaning over her. She didn't waste any time.

"Michael, Wasim's in trouble! The plane's going to go down!"

## Chapter Seventeen

Wasim settled the Kevlar-protected bundle on the bench seat across from him and then sat back and looked out the window. The plane accelerated, the engines roaring to life somewhere near by. The landing gear picked up and Wasim watched as the lights of Lubbock appeared below in the distance.

The plane's right wing tilted downward. G-forces pulled him slightly down into his seat as "Sophie" banked right and headed Northeast.

Overhead, the speakers crackled to life. The pilot's voice sounded through the intercom. "Mr. Batul, relax and enjoy the ride. We'll arrive at Michael's air strip outside of Midway in approximately two hours and twenty-three minutes."

Wasim nodded to himself and reached for the door of the cabinet that was sequestered beneath the low, polished cherry-wood table in front of him. Inside were several ice-cold soft drinks, bags of nuts, pretzels, chips and candy bars and a few small flasks of alcohol.

Wasim pulled one of the canned soft drinks out and pulled the tab. It popped and fizzled and he relaxed once again against the seat back.

The first part of the flight was uneventful, the pilots skilled enough to keep turbulence at a minimum, even in the summer heat. They reached thirty-seven thousand feet and coasted there, well above the southwest thunder storms so frequent during this time of year. Eventually, Wasim got up to stretch his legs and made his way to the back of the plane and the bathroom.



Every other plane Wasim had ever ridden on sported a tiny bathroom, half the size of a public restroom stall. He'd always had trouble bracing himself against the wall behind the toilet with one hand and making sure he didn't leave a mess on the seat with the other. However, Sophie's restroom was at least three times the size of those, and Wasim was grateful that he wouldn't have to perform acrobatic feats in order to relieve himself.

He pulled the latch open on the door and slid it to the side.

At once, two bodies poured out of the opening, tumbling to the ground to land in a grotesque, jumbled heap at Wasim's feet. His eyes grew wide, his heart stopping in his chest as he took in their clothing. A woman dressed in a pilot's uniform, a man dressed much the same way. Both had been shot in the chest.

Wasim felt the panic well up within himself, bubbling and unstoppable. Just as he opened his mouth to yell, at the same time stepping back away from the dead pilot and co-pilot, something metal and cold contacted solidly with the back of his head and darkness invaded his vision.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you mean they aren't responding?" Michael asked, incredulously.

"They've broken radio contact, sir."

Michael squeezed the cell phone in his hand, frustration riding him hard. He pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it. Then he put it back and resumed pacing.

"Do you have any idea what their current location is?"

"Last radio contact was made as they reached cruising altitude. That was about twenty-five minutes ago, approximately somewhere near Wichita Falls."

Michael closed his eyes and tried to think. Both he and Wasim had been outfitted with new phones after the gym incident. And he'd already tried to contact Wasim's phone. It sent him straight to voice mail. He either had it off on purpose so that it wouldn't interfere with the plane's controls, or the phone had been taken from him.

In which case, it was already too late.

He flipped the lid of the phone shut and turned on Abbie. "What did you see, exactly?"

"The plane was going down over water. The engines were roaring. I think Wasim was standing in the open hatchway, because there was no glass obstructing my view. It must have been dawn, or just before, because I could make out the blue of the water. I could see Wasim's hands. They were bleeding." She spoke quickly but softly. She held Jessie in her arms. The toddler had luckily slept during the entire trip in the trunk and now she calmly drank from a sippy cup filled with watered-down orange juice.

Michael paced the carpet in front of the desk where Abbie sat. They were in an office building, one of the few that the Syndicate owned in Lubbock. The office they currently inhabited was located underground, in the basement of a larger, two-story facility. At this hour of the early morning, the offices were deserted but for the three of them and five Syndicate members who currently took up stations at the main entrances to the building, and the door to the underground room.

Michael glanced at the two vampires by the door. One stood outside it and the other just inside, both armed. He closed his eyes and tried to pull his thoughts together. If the plane went down, Wasim might still live. He would just have to remain conscious. As

long as he did so, he had a good chance of healing whatever injuries he sustained in the impact and getting out of the water.

“Did you see anything else around the water, anything we can use as a landmark?”

Abbie’s brow furrowed. She tried to recall the exact scene that had played out in her mind’s eye. But all she could see was blue. Spinning toward her. Deep blue, churned by wind.

She shook her head. “No, but Chicago’s on the southern tip of Lake Michigan. I’m guessing that’s where the plane would go down. It’s the only water that big in between here and there.”

Michael nodded. The thought had crossed his mind. “There will be a crew standing by at the site. Assuming it’s within a certain mile radius, they should be able to reach him right after the plane goes down.” He paused and then continued. “You’re certain he was conscious in the vision.”

“Yes. He was standing up.”

Michael took a deep breath. “Then we can only hope that he remains so.” He pocketed his phone and retrieved a handgun from the top of a nearby desk. He took off his jacket, pulled on a shoulder holster, and slipped the gun into it, not bothering to close the leather clasp. Then he pulled back on his jacket and turned toward Abbie again.

“I’m going after Anson. Stay here.” He leaned in close then. Jessie stopped drinking from her sippy cup and looked up at him. He caught her bright-eyed gaze and the small “J” around her neck reflecting the light from the overhead lamps. She smiled at him.

“Abbie, these men will protect you...” He looked from Jessie to Abbie, trying to think of the right words. In the end, he gave up. He swallowed and nodded. “I will be back.”

Abbie said nothing. She nodded.

“Bye, Michow,” Jessie said softly, raising her fingers in a little wave.

“Bye, Jess.” He scruffed her hair and, with one last fleeting glance at Abbie, he turned away and strode out the door. The vampires on either side nodded as he left. Abbie stared at the space where he disappeared.

And then, suddenly, he was there again, striding back toward her through the open doorway. Her eyes widened.

He didn’t slow and didn’t hesitate, but came to stand right in front of her and then bent, one of his hands at the back of her neck, as he captured her lips in a deep, long kiss. She moaned low in her throat and her arms went slack around Jessie.

“Mama, is he kissing you?” Jessie asked, wide-eyed, as she watched the tall man kiss her mother.

After what seemed like a blissful eternity, Michael slowly pulled away. His hand moved to gently graze her cheek, his touch warm and tender. He gazed down at her. His eyes glowed strangely, beautifully, in the dim light of the office.

“Did you kiss her? Did he kiss you?” Jessie asked again, this time turning her questions from one of them to the other. Despite everything, Abbie truly couldn’t help the smile that spread across her lips. She somehow managed to pull her gaze away from the man towering over her and smiled at her daughter.

“Yes, baby. We kissed.”

Michael brushed a lock of hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. And then he pulled back, turned around, and walked out the door once again.

Abbie wondered if she would ever see him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Colors swam and melted before Wasim's closed eyelids. Noise filtered through to him as if he were under water or beneath a ton of heavy, thick blankets. A weakness had invaded his limbs and his heart beat sporadically, fleetingly, in his chest. He tried to open his eyes, but they were heavy and felt as if they'd been glued shut.

He tried to move, to roll over, and found that his arms and legs had been tied down. He pulled at the ropes, at the same time, forcing his eyelids open. His vision was blurry in the extreme, but from what he could tell, he was in the aisle of the plane and his arms and legs had been stretched, spread-eagle and tied to the posts of the chairs on either side.

He felt physically awful. What had they done to him? Nausea roiled in his belly and the base of his skull pounded. Even above the roar of the engines, he could hear a kind of static in his ear drums where his blood pumped sluggishly through his veins.

"Wakey, wakey, Islami-tard."

Wasim blinked to try to clear his vision, but it was slow going. He felt as if he was going to throw up, but knew, instinctively, that there was nothing in his gut to vomit. The plane dipped beneath him, hitting a patch of turbulence, and Wasim had to close his eyes again.

He moaned low in his throat and it came out as little more than a gasp. His throat and mouth were bone dry.

"Yeah, I'm betting you feel pretty much like crap right about now," the voice continued. Wasim re-opened his eyes and searched his blurry surroundings for the source of the voice. As he watched, a woman dressed in a co-pilot's uniform, but with a gun in her right hand, came into Wasim's view. He couldn't yet make out individual features,

but he could tell that she had short dark hair and was wearing sunglasses. Red lips. He could make out bright red lips.

They were sneering at him.

“See, we know all about you, vampire. We know what you are and what makes you weak. You feel like shit because I’ve drained most of the blood from your body. Out with the blood, out with the salt. I bet that fucking hurts, don’t it?” She smiled and Wasim could hear the smack of chewing gum.

He could smell the mint of it, along with the cloying stench of drying, spilt blood and that sickly sweet underscore of death that wafted low and long beneath the other scents in the plane.

She knelt down now, in between his legs, and casually laid her arm across her knee. The gun dangled carelessly between her fingers. “I sort of thought it’d kill you outright, but you hung in there and my nifty little machine kept pumping out your goo. Quite the little trooper, aren’t we.” She proceeded to test all of the knots on the ropes that held him to their posts and Wasim cringed beneath the touch of her fingers. They were hot against his chilled flesh. In fact, he was cold as death.

When she was satisfied that he wasn’t going anywhere, she settled back into her crouched relaxed position. “I’ll put it to you straight, Mr. Batul. This plane is going down and you’re going down with it. And, since I know you’re wondering how we think a little plane crash is going to do you in, I’ll go ahead and put your mind at ease. We’re sending it down in Lake Michigan.”

Wasim closed his eyes. Another dip of the plane and he found himself choking on bile. The dark-haired woman made a tsk-ing noise and roughly turned his head to the

side. Wasim gagged a few times, his chest heaving painfully, and then the reflex settled and he winced at the painful slamming of his heart against his rib cage.

He was certain he was going to die.

“You really don’t look well, sweetie,” she said, her tone filled with mock concern. “And now you don’t smell so good either.” She laughed again and Wasim’s teeth gritted when he once more heard the smacking of her chewing her gum. In that instant, he made up his mind. If he was going to die that day, then so was she.

In fact, preferably, it would be just her.

Somehow, he managed to find his voice and, though it was thin and raspy, his words were easy to make out. “You killed the pilots.”

“Nah, that was Max. I just watched.”

“Why?”

“Well, just to get to you, mostly,” she informed him casually. “See, we knew all along that you weren’t bringing the little bitch on the plane. We know she’s still with her whore of a mother. But divide and conquer is what I always say. So, divide, we did. One down, three to go.”

“Why even... bother with me?” Wasim asked, having to stop and catch his breath when pain shot through his chest and down his right arm.

“Oh, honey, we aren’t leaving you alive. No, that would be wrong. After all, you helped the Marked One. You gotta go. You all do.” She waved the gun to indicate everything. “And when the Redeemer is finished, that’s what’ll happen. You’ll all go and the world will be ours again.” She smiled sweetly, cocking her head to one side as if she were speaking to a child.

Wasim wished he could see the eyes behind her glasses. He wanted to look into them when he killed her.

Or when he died. Either way.

“You mean, ‘theirs’,” he told her.

The brow above her glasses wrinkled in confusion. “No, I mean ‘ours’.”

“You won’t be around at that time,” he continued, in as calm a tone as he could muster.

“Oh?” She laughed, the sound harsh and cold. “Do tell.”

Wasim opened his mouth as if to speak, but then closed it again and rolled his eyes back beneath his lids. He began to choke and gag for a second time and the woman cursed, roughly grabbing his chin and turning his head to the side.

At that, Wasim jerked out of her hand and bit her hard, taking her forefinger and middle finger between his teeth. He tasted blood; coppery, warm, *salty*. The woman screeched in pain and surprise.

“You mangy-assed *son of a bitch!*” She screamed as he then let go. She stood, clutching her injured fingers to her chest. Wasim had bitten down to the bone.

As the woman stood and turned in place, swearing profusely, Wasim’s hands worked quickly. He blindly manipulated the latches beneath the bases of the chairs he was tied to. The ropes around his wrists allowed him barely enough leverage to do so. He’d noticed the latches when he’d been on the plane with Michael earlier that night. *Was it still the same night?*

Michael had demonstrated how they worked by unlatching one of them and sliding it forward. Most planes did not have such a thing, as manufacturers didn’t want the seats



unlatching during in-flight turbulence. However, Michael had customized Sophie a little in the last thirty years.

Each seat would slide roughly a foot forward, much like the seat in a car. They did so for cleaning purposes and for the comfort of passengers of different heights. They could then latch securely in place wherever the passenger desired.

Wasim was counting on that extra foot of sliding space now, as it was all he had to go on to save his life. That, and he hoped he'd managed to make the woman mad enough to do what he thought she would do.

"What's going on back there?" the pilot called from the cockpit. The woman cursed several more times. "The rat bastard bit my fucking hand!" she called back to him.

"Just knock him out again!"

"Oh, I'm going to knock him out, all right." The woman stopped spinning and stomping in place and spun back around to face him. Wasim's vision had cleared enough now that he could see the fury in the woman's features. She'd taken off her glasses to reveal blue-green eyes, heavily made up with eye shadow and mascara.

She raised her gun to aim it at his face.

"Don't shoot that thing in the plane, Marla!" the pilot shouted, as if he could see what she was doing.

Marla either didn't hear him or chose not to listen, because in the next second, she was pulling the trigger and Wasim was simultaneously yanking himself downward and to the left, pulling both seats roughly forward at least a foot. In a desperate, split decision, he estimated where the bullet would land and tried his best to make sure it would go through the rope tying his right hand first.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

The bullet sliced through the rope and into the floor of the plane. At once, there was a popping sound and the air in the cabin began to swirl. Wasim didn't hesitate.

Immediately, he reached up with his now freed right hand and wrapped his fingers around her wrist. She shrieked and yanked back. As she did so, he let her go but raked the gun from her hand. Somehow, he managed to turn it around so that it was pointed at her.

"Untie me."

Her eyes were wide and furious. She shook her head and Wasim pulled the hammer back on the gun.

A string of expletives wafted back toward them from the cockpit. "We're losing pressure!" the pilot yelled over the increasing noise of the roaring engines. The air in the cabin was filling with an acrid fuel-like stench.

"Untie me!" Wasim commanded, raising his voice. The woman knelt in the aisle and began to clumsily untie the knots restraining his ankles. "Hurry!"

She untied his right ankle and he shook it free. When she moved to his left ankle, he waved the gun. "No, my hand."

She glanced up at him. The atmosphere was becoming hazy and the plane seemed to be diving nose-first. The engines screamed.

She shook her head. "What?"

"My hand! Untie my hand!" She literally hadn't heard him the first time. It was becoming difficult to hear anything but the angry roar of the air craft.

She stepped over him, leaning heavily on the seats because of the strange tilt to the plane. He kept the gun trained on her. His trigger finger itched. He wondered whether she would manage to release him before the plane hit the ground.

Then the engines quieted a little and she bent by his left hand, working the knots. “This would be a lot easier if you hadn’t bit my fingers, you mangy towel-head,” she hissed at him as she tried to pull the knot free. It was slick with her blood.

“Shut up and untie the knot,” he hissed back, his teeth gritted against the nausea that churned mercilessly in his gut.

As she worked, the plane decelerated and began leveling off. She finally finished with the knot and then stepped back up. He freed his left hand and shoved her down the aisle, where she tripped and then caught herself on one of the seats. She whirled and fixed him with a hateful glare.

He untied the final knot himself, his eyes skirting quickly between her and his work on the rope. She straightened as the plane seemed to settle into a steady, if foul-smelling, pattern of flight. Wasim stood, the gun still trained on her chest.

“Turn around and walk back to the cockpit.”

“Make me, *infidel*.” She glared at him, crossing her arms over her chest. She was calling his bluff.

It was a mistake.

He took a step forward and, before she had time to realize what he was going to do, he backhanded her across the face, sending her flying head-first against a nearby work station in between two bench seats. Even drained of blood, a vampire’s strength was

great. She hit the cherry-wood desk hard and slid half way down it before she regained her senses and started pulling herself back up.

Wasim had never struck a woman before. He'd always been disgusted by men who did. However, no part of him felt shameful for having done so now. He really hated this woman. And he felt like throwing up. That didn't endear him to her.

Wasim cocked his head to one side. He was pretty sure he was only one erratic heart beat away from his own weakened death, but there was no way on earth that he was going to let this woman see it in his face. "I can just break your neck," he told her in a surprisingly calm voice. "I do not have to shoot you."

Marla pulled herself back up to her full height and gazed at him with a look of sheer abhorrence. Her lip and nose were both bleeding and her makeup was smeared. She peered into his face for several long seconds and must have decided that he was serious because she then raised her chin defiantly, but turned around and slowly began walking down the center aisle toward the cockpit.

Wasim followed, but not too closely behind.

After three steps, she stopped, spun around, and rushed him.

With a grunt of pain, he took the force of her slamming body and concentrated on holding onto the weapon. However, as she bowled them both over backward, her hands wrapped around his hand on the gun, and she yanked viciously, trying to pry the weapon out of his grip.

Her nails raked rivets in his skin, but Wasim held on for dear life, knowing it was his ticket to survival. He lodged his left hand in between the two of them and shoved against her with all of his strength. She reared back, shrieking as she did so, but pulled at the gun

at the same time. This time, her finger got lodged against the trigger and her backwards momentum pulled it to engage.

The gun went off, and the spark ignited something in the air.

For the second time that night, Wasim was surrounded by flames. They danced in thin strips through the cabin like wispy snakes of fire, burning off fine traces of something flammable in the air. The plane lurched again and once more dipped into a nose dive. The sudden change in position threw Wasim forward, where he fell against Marla, knocking them both to the aisle.

Marla screamed and Wasim quickly scrambled to his hands and knees. He raised the gun and slammed the weapon against the side of Marla's head, knocking her out cold.

The engines roared in ear-splitting agony once again, and this time the sound was literally deafening. Wasim knew the plane was going down. He pulled himself up, using what little was left of his strength to gain his feet and stumble toward the front of the plane and the cockpit.

## Chapter Eighteen

*(Approximately 2,000 B.P.)*

“My Lord, you have not touched your food.” Mattai leaned close to Yeshua and spoke softly. The plate before him contained a hunk of bread, a pile of lentils and a piece of glistening honey comb. In a bowl a few inches away sat fresh grapes, and in another bowl, olives.

Yeshua looked at the food and then back up at Mattai. “It is my soul that is hungry, not my body. Man can not live on bread alone,” He tore off a piece of the bread and stared at it absently. “But by every word of God.”

Michael watched this behavior in silence. Yeshua had been growing more somber over the past few days, and hadn’t spoken but a few words to the lot of them since Lazarus had risen from his grave.

Yeshua no longer bothered to hide his face, as it was obvious who he was from his actions. And, because he refused to do so, many of his apostles uncovered their faces as well. Michael leaned forward to say something to him when Yeshua inhaled sharply and then spoke. “We will go into the City of David. We must visit the temple in Jerusalem with the rest of God’s people. It is time.”

The next day, Yeshua and his disciples headed out of Bethany and into Bethphage, then on to Jerusalem. As they drew closer to the city gates, the road grew more and more packed with throngs of Jews on their way to the Temple to sacrifice. It was a holy time of year and the scene was not unfamiliar to Michael.

There were so many people that Yeshua's group did not attract much attention. Most of the people on the road were covered from head to toe, protected from the harsh rays of the sun. Everywhere Michael looked, this protection extended to faces, as well, and Michael realized that they would have no trouble remaining concealed. Their identities would most likely remain secret while they were within Jerusalem over the next few days.

They followed the rest of the throng toward the temple mount, near the center of the bustling city. As they neared the rise, the smell of animal grew strong. The sound of metal clanking drew Michael's attention to several stalls that had been set up on the steps of the lowest level of the temple. Men in red robes exchanged foreign money and common coins for the Tyrian money that was allowed as offerings in the temple. Other stalls held cages containing all sorts of animals, from small doves to large livestock.

Michael's gaze narrowed, his blue eyes taking on an eerie cast in his darkening visage. Animals were bought and sold here, on the holy steps of the Temple, so that their lives could be taken inside, in the name of God. Their blood would be spilled, their bodies washed out, and then their lifeless corpses burned, useless and wasted, in the name of sacrifice.

"Judas, do you see and hear what I do?"

Yeshua was beside Michael then, speaking close to his ear. Michael turned to look over at the teacher. His brown eyes followed the market-like atmosphere of the temple. His expression was just as dark as Michael's.

"Yes, Yeshua. I do." Michael looked away then, back toward the scene before them. He watched as an old woman, dressed in the garb of a widow, climbed the steps of the

temple, jostled by people who rushed and bustled past her in order to chase after goats or screaming children or to hurriedly exchange money. She made her way slowly and steadily toward one of the booths that sold animals.

Michael listened, tuning out the cacophony of other noises in the temple.

“What will it cost me for a goat?”

“More than you have, old woman.”

“I have this,” She held out her hand, her palm filled with coins. Michael could see, from where he stood, how her hand trembled.

“You can buy a dove.”

The woman looked from the goat to the cage that held several gray doves. She stared at them for a moment, then closed her eyes, as if in prayer, and nodded. “A dove, then.”

The man behind the booth took her money and reached in for one of the birds. He took it roughly by the neck and yanked it out of the cage. Its wings caught on the sides of the cage and feathers went flying everywhere. The bird squawked in pain, but its sounds were cut off when the man tightened his grip around its neck.

The woman watched this with mounting trepidation. He held the bird out to her and she hesitated, obviously not knowing what to do.

Michael couldn’t have said what part of the exchange sickened him most. The fact that the man was taking advantage of an elderly woman’s poor state and, most likely, the last of her change? Or the fact that she was spending that money on an animal she would neither eat nor wear nor set free? Or was it the brutal fashion in which the man handled the animal in what would surely be its last moments of life?

“Enough of this,” Yeshua said.



Michael turned, surprised. But Yeshua had already moved forward, toward the man and his booth of animals. Michael watched as he strode to the booth, a storm of white and blue fury, and, in one swift, strong motion, bent over, grasped the table in front of the man, and overturned it, sending everything that was on it flying.

Boxes of money hit the ground and coins scattered everywhere. The cage of doves toppled to the steps, popped open, and the birds quickly scuttled out and took to flight in a cloud of feathers. The man cried out in anger and rushed Bar-abba, but Yeshua turned a hate-filled gaze on the man, and the peddler backed down.

Michael quickly moved to Yeshua's side, but the teacher pushed him back, clearly angered beyond reason. Yeshua strode to the next booth, a wooden table covered in richly woven textiles, and faced off on the two men behind it.

"This Temple is my Father's house," he hissed, his dark eyes flashing. "It is a house of prayer for *all* nations!" He dug his hands into the coins within one of the boxes and pulled out the foreign coins, from several other nations, that had been changed for the money of the temple. "*All* nations! But you – *you*," he leveled his gaze on the older of the men, pointing his finger at his chest. "You have made it into a den of thieves!" He then shoved the box roughly to the ground, where it, too, overturned and sent coins scattering across the stones of the temple. "You defile my Father's house!"

He spun around, pushing through the disciples that rushed forward to either stop him or calm him. It was as if he didn't even see them. He dashed from booth to booth, overturning table after table, and soon every peddler in the temple was gathering their belongings close to them and scattering out of his way.

Michael eyed the onlookers. Some whispered his name. Others asked who he was. A wave of softly-spoken gossip began to make its way through the crowd. People started nodding, some of them wide-eyed and in awe. Others dropped to their knees when confronted with the news that they were in the presence of Yeshua Bar-abba, the one so many called Messiah.

But there were some, such as the elder priests of the temple, who were anything but pleased at Bar-abba's appearance, to say nothing of his sudden tirade. Michael noticed two of them speaking quietly to one another. One nodded and disappeared into the depths of the temple.

Michael's skin began to crawl. The hairs on his neck rose.

Trouble.

Yeshua grabbed one of the whips that had been hung on a wall near a make-shift stall filled with goats and sheep and began thrashing the weapon at the money changers and livestock owners who yet remained at the entrance to the temple.

Michael rushed forward, this time grasping Yeshua's arm and yanking the whip out of the man's hand. Yeshua barely noticed.

"God sees you all. Do you not think he is watching?" He turned in a circle then, meeting the gaze of each of the onlookers, in turn. "You can not buy God's blessings!" He turned and pinned one of the cowering, but angry money-changers with a dark-eyed stare. "Not in any coin."

Michael gently grasped his teacher by the elbow and tried to pull him away, toward the entrance to the temple, but Yeshua held fast and shook his head. "No, Judas."

Behind them, a small commotion arose and Michael spun to see the priests of the temple and the temple elders coming out of the inner-most sanctum of the temple's recesses. They were furious.

"By what authority do you do this?" one of them asked, stepping in front of the others and coming to stand within a few feet of Yeshua.

Yeshua turned to face him. He studied the man for a few moments and then answered, calmly, "I will answer your question when you have answered one of mine. By what authority did Yahya baptize?"

Michael slowly released his elbow and thought about the question. In a moment, he had to keep from smiling, for he realized the cleverness of it. Yahya, the Baptist, had been considered a prophet by many. Michael had never met him, but knew, from tales the disciples shared, that he was a distant cousin of Yeshua. In fact, he had baptized Yeshua at the beginning of Yeshua's ministry.

He preached near Bethany and made a practice of baptizing his congregation in the river Jordan. He was loved and respected by many. But not by the high priests. To them, he represented an uprising, and uprisings were never good for those who already held power.

When Yahya made the mistake of publicly criticizing King Herod about his marriage to his late brother's wife, Herodias, the queen was outraged. She demanded he be arrested and, of course, none of the elders came forward to vouch for him. Shortly after his arrest, the queen tricked her husband into taking Yahya's head.

Yahya's death had been before Michael's joining of Yeshua's band of apostles. However, he knew that Yeshua had mourned for the loss of his cousin and friend. To

those who mourned with him, Yeshua's sole comfort seemed to be that Yahya had managed to reach so many people – people who believed he baptized on God's authority.

By asking the temple priests this question, Yeshua was tricking them into answering one of two ways. If they claimed that Yahya baptized on no one's authority, those onlookers in the crowd who believed the man had been a prophet would become angry and automatically side with Yeshua. However, if they claimed he baptized on God's authority, then he would most likely ask them why they did not support Yahya's teachings and why they allowed him to be killed.

There was no easy way for them to answer this question. Michael was proved right when, after a long pause, back-dropped by the other priests' whispers, the elder simply answered, "I do not know."

Yeshua nodded slowly. "Then I shall not tell you by whose authority I do these things."

"You have made a mockery of this place of God!" the elder then screamed, taking a step forward. "Do not listen to this man! He is nothing but a trouble-maker!" The elder turned to the crowd and then, in a move that chilled Michael to the core, he lifted one of the full boxes of money from a nearby table and held it above his head. "Who ever of you will shed this man's blood right now shall be rewarded!"

Michael again grabbed Yeshua's arm and, this time, pulled harder. Yeshua stumbled forward, and as Michael pulled him toward the entrance, the other disciples gathered around him protectively. Simeon pulled his sword, and a few others followed suit.

"Put away your weapons," Yeshua told them.

None of them moved.

“Put them away.” Yeshua pushed through the disciples. Uncertainly, they let him pass, slowly sliding their swords back through their belts. Yeshua again moved to stand at the center of the open ring formed by the temple’s worshippers. He slowly turned in a circle, his arms out, his palms up. He was clearly inviting someone – anyone – to do as the elder requested.

But no one moved.

“Are you Yeshua Bar-abba, the man who raised Eleazar from the dead?” a man asked timidly, from the steps, where he stood with a woman and two children.

Yeshua turned to him. “I am, brother.”

The man immediately fell to his knees, and the people around him followed his example, all of them prostrating on the temple steps and dais. Michael could only watch in wonder. He had been right. The news of Lazarus’s resurrection had spread throughout the land. And it had divided the people in exactly the manner he’d predicted. Those with little or nothing would worship Yeshua in awe. Those with much to lose would now find him a very real threat.

Hence, the elder’s demand for his life.

Yeshua then turned back to the elder, who still held the box of money above his head, his eyes wide in indignation and surprise.

“You wish blood to be spilled on these steps?” Yeshua asked.

The man said nothing; only stared.

“You will have it. For, truly, I say to you, not a stone of this monument will be left standing upon another.” He then turned away from the elder and moved back through the disciples, toward the steps.

A buzz of murmurs and whispering immediately arose behind him. Michael stepped to his side. He leaned in close as they walked, quickly, down the steps and away from the temple, followed closely by the other disciples. “What have you done, Yeshua?”

Yeshua did not answer.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

*(Present day)*

Wasim stumbled forward, his legs suddenly giving out. The scream of their descent became a strange buzz and momentarily faded from his ears. It was replaced by a deafening silence and the swoosh of a weakened heart trying desperately to pump a tiny amount of blood through his veins.

He closed his eyes, trying to push death away by sheer will power alone. His gun hand shook violently and he lowered the gun to the floor, knowing it was useless now. He couldn't fly a plane. He wasn't going to shoot the pilot. And they were all going to die when it hit bottom anyway.

Then he pushed himself back up and, using the back rests of the remaining seats between them, he half walked, half fell into the cockpit.

The pilot looked over at him. In a second, the man determined what had happened, and also managed to notice that Wasim's hands were empty. The bloody claw marks across the backs gave away his fight with Marla.

As if deciding that it didn't matter anyway, the pilot nodded. "We're going down, but we're over water!" He stood, unbuckling his seat belt. "There are parachutes in the back!"

Wasim allowed the man to brush past him and then, with much effort, he followed behind. The pilot had to literally pull himself up the aisle, his hands gripping the backs of the chairs. Each step forward was a miniature chin-up.

Wasim was too weak for this. He took two steps and collapsed in the aisle. The pilot reached the cupboard with the parachutes, popped open the latch, and pulled out two black bundles. He turned and glanced at Wasim.

Wasim pushed himself to his hands and knees and proceeded to crawl up the aisle, grasping hold of the backs of the bases of each seat, and then the legs of the work station, in order to slide up the steep slope a few horrible inches at a time.

The pilot held Wasim's parachute in his left hand. He watched him for another few seconds and then dropped the 'chute and proceeded to buckle on his own. He then moved to the hatchway, twisted a red lever several times, and yanked back on the door with all of his might.

With a popping sound and another mad rush of air through the cabin, the door came away from the side of the plane. The pilot threw it to the side, where it landed next to Wasim's parachute.

He glanced one last time at Wasim, and at Marla, who lay unconscious beside him. Then he rushed through the opening and jumped.

Wasim's head swam. He couldn't help it when he laid his head down on the carpeting in the aisle and closed his eyes. He needed salt. He knew this with every fiber of his being. It was a strange need, an unexpected and positively essential requirement. It was like it had been hardwired into his system, pushing all other thought from his brain.

*Salt.*

It would give him strength. With strength, he could withstand being in the water for a while. Otherwise, even conscious, he could only wade for so long before what little was left inside his body was leached away and he would die a second time. For good.



*Salt.*

He wondered, absently, how long he had. He opened his eyes. And stared into Marla's unconscious face.

In that instant, an idea occurred to him that was utterly repulsive.

Wasim's body moved, then, as if of its own accord. He watched, seemingly from far away, as his right arm snaked out and pulled her body closer to his. His fingers quickly pushed the hair from her neck, and his face descended.

He bit down hard.

He did not possess the fangs of the vampires of lore that would have made such an attack so much easier. He ripped into her flesh clumsily, ruthlessly, and began to swallow.

At once, he was disgusted with the taste. He had tasted a small amount when he'd bitten her hand, but this was a flooding wash of choking, thick, salty, red, iron-filled liquid. His mind recoiled at what he was doing. Yet, even as he despised himself for actually following through with such an insane design, the nausea in his belly receded. His vision became clearer and his heartbeat became less erratic, less painful. The buzzing in his head faded. In the back of his mind, he wondered whether situations such as this might have, at one time, spurned the belief that vampires drank peoples' blood.

He drank quickly, trying not to think of what it was he was doing. Then, after only a few long pulls and swallows, strength, blessed and renewed, washed through his limbs, chasing away the weakness that had been there seconds earlier.

*Good enough.*

Wasim opened his eyes and reeled away from Marla's body. Without thinking, he pushed himself to his feet, shoved himself forward, and rushed to the open hatchway.

He spared a glance down, his hands braced at either side of the opening. Blue water spiraled toward him. No time for a parachute.

He braced himself, knowing it wouldn't do any good. How many pieces would he be blown into upon impact?

He felt the blood in his system healing the gashes in his hands; multiplying to give him back his strength. He had absorbed it like lightning, the salt like a magical salve in his body. *Good enough.* It had to be.

He held his breath as the plane slammed down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael did not bother hiding. He opened the unlocked glass door of the old Watson Building and walked out onto the wooden floor boards. They creaked loudly beneath his feet, but he would not have bothered being quiet anyway. He knew the door had been left unlocked for him. He knew, at this point, that Anson was waiting for him.

Abbie's vision could only mean that Wasim had been found out on the plane. Anson's followers knew that Jessie and Abbie were both still in town. They'd known about the gym. They'd known about the Ashmore.

The only logical explanation was that Anson had visions, on top of everything else. Michael wondered what other nasties the vampire had up his sleeves.

Whatever they were, he was going to have to face them head-on. Apparently, there was nowhere to hide from this man who believed he was Jesus.

In Michael's life time, there had been hundreds of "second comings"; people who believed they were the children of God, the chosen messiahs, the returning champions of Christianity's cause. And Islam's. And Buddha's. And so forth.

However, unlike most humans, Michael actually *knew*.

He knew.

He knew that Anson, for instance, was most definitely not Jesus of Nazareth. If anyone had asked Michael how he knew this, he would have told them he had his reasons. In fact, that was what he'd told Wasim. It was true.

He had his reasons. They were good reasons.

Victor Anson was a vampire bent on world domination through the relentless infliction of fear and pain. He was a dictator in the making, a militant, a misguided zealot, and most frightening of all, he had the power to back up his dogma.

For some utterly unknown and extremely insane reason, he felt threatened by, and therefore wanted to kill, a two-year-old child. What next? Would he wake up in the middle of the night, covered in a paranoid sweat about little old ladies?

Victor Anson's mind was gone. Either he'd lost it upon digging himself out of the grave, or his power had literally taken him over. Either way, he was nothing more now than a vessel for miss-directed magic and chaotic revenge.

And he knew that Michael was there, in the building, at that very moment.

"Ah, the prodigal son has returned."

Michael stopped in the center of the first floor of the large building and held still. The voice had seemed to come from all around him. He waited.

"Have you truly not figured it out, brother?"

The voice echoed against the walls. Michael turned in place, his blue-eyed gaze piercing the shadowed recesses of the building's interior. As far as he could *see*, he was alone.

But his vampire senses were telling him something else entirely. There was so much latent, unused power in the atmosphere that the air almost hummed with it. There was something familiar about its particular feel.

And if he could feel him and hear him, but not see him, then Anson was far more dangerous than Michael had even previously thought.

"Turn around, brother," the voice instructed.

Michael whirled and peered into the darkness.

"And face me."

A few feet in front of Michael, the shadows swirled, ebbing and receding, and then coming together into a relatively recognizable shape somewhere between five and six feet tall. The shape stretched a little more, grew a little darker, and then stilled. And solidified.

Invisibility. That was a bugger of a power.

Michael's gaze narrowed as his opponent stepped out of the darkness and was illuminated by a shaft of moonlight from overhead. In every physical sense, the man standing before him was the long-accepted white Christian representation of Jesus of Nazareth. He was dressed from head to toe in robes of blue and white. Long chestnut brown hair fell in soft, shining waves to his shoulders, and he sported a brown beard that looked effortlessly not-trimmed, yet was somehow the perfect length.

Michael had to admit that, for a man who appeared as he did, Victor Anson had certainly picked the perfect town, in the perfect country, in which to make an appearance.

Anson walked forward slowly and stopped about three feet away from him. He gazed at Michael through soft brown eyes that reminded him too much of Abbie's. And then Anson smiled. There was something so obscene in that simple smile, it made the hairs on the back of Michael's neck stand on end.

He did not smile back. And he did not speak. Michael had learned long ago not to be the first to talk. There was something about waiting, remaining quiet and letting the other move before you, that managed to waylay weakness and stupidity most of the time. So, he held his ground and simply stared back as the air around them fairly crackled with untapped power.

"I know who you are," Anson said softly, managing to make the statement sound like both a gentle proclamation of awareness and an accusation.

Michael waited.

Anson laughed. It was not a harsh sound. Only amused. "I see." He turned then and began to pace around Michael in a slow, wide circle, his attention seemingly turned to the ground in front of him. "Have you come to crucify me, then?"

Michael smiled at this. "If only I had a hammer."

Anson laughed again, this time stopping to shake his head, a wide grin on his face. He turned back to Michael and regarded him a moment. "You haven't changed."

Michael's brow furrowed of its own accord. Some ancient beast, sleeping deep within him, slowly opened one glowing eye. "You'll have to elaborate," he said. "I've never met you before this night." He wondered at the words immediately after he said them. There was an uncertainty burgeoning in the pit of his stomach. It was like staring at a puzzle that is missing one piece and not being able to figure out what the picture was.

His body and mind hummed with the latent energy in the air, and it felt all too familiar for his comfort. He watched Anson carefully as the man cocked his head to one side, still smiling. In fact, he appeared, for all the world, as if he were fighting the urge to giggle. This was all just too much fun for him.

“No?” He took a step toward Michael. “Are you so certain?”

Michael’s body prepared to fight. He had many gifts. Most of them, he never used. But they raced to the forefront of his consciousness now, lining up like an internal armory role call, as he watched and waited for Anson to make the first offensive move.

But even as he primed himself, he gazed into Anson’s eyes, and the man drew nearer still. Alarm bells sounded in Michael’s brain. Something in that very time and space was so fundamentally wrong that its identity escaped him. He couldn’t put his finger on it. But that beast inside of him was fully awake now, sniffing the air cautiously, extending claws it hadn’t used in eons.

Anson took a final step that closed the distance between them. Michael held stock still as the man then leaned in, bringing his face a mere few inches from his own.

“It’s been a while, but come now. We changed the course of history together,” Anson whispered, his breath caressing Michael’s lips. “How could you ever forget?”

At that, Anson drew back a little and his eyes began to change. Michael watched as they went from light brown to dark brown to nearly black.

Michael stared into those eyes and his heart stopped beating.

Was it possible? He blinked, feeling dizzy. He took a step back.

The man now standing before Michael was no longer draped in robes. Instead, he was dressed in solid black, from black dress pants and shiny black dress shoes to a black

belt and a black dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up at the wrists. He had short black hair, no beard, and his skin had darkened ten shades.

Now he looked like Jesus of Nazareth.

“Yeshua?”

“No, Judas.” The man smiled. His eyes were a glittery, gem-like darkness that twinkled with gleeful, malicious intent.

Michael’s blood ran cold. His ears began to ring.

*No.*

It was impossible. There was no way.

*I watched you die...*

“What’s the matter, Judas? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“You’re dead,” Michael whispered. His voice held no more strength than that. “I killed you myself.”

The man shook his head, chuckling softly. “That wasn’t me up on that cross, Judas.”

The ground fell out from beneath Michael’s feet. His world rocked to the side. Dark comprehension flooded his body and soul, drowning his mind.

*“Thomas...”*

## Chapter Twenty

*(Approximately 2,000 years B.P.)*

Michael paced restlessly back and forth before the fire. Mattai sat to his left, on a low stone, and Simeon sat across from him, the two playing a game that involved wooden pegs in a small painted board of wood. It appeared Simeon was winning, because Mattai's face became more and more troubled as the night wore on.

Michael didn't pay them much heed, however. His mind was on other matters. He stopped pacing for a moment and glanced around. Most of the apostles were huddled around the separate camp fires, some playing musical instruments, some debating politics or the semantics of Yeshua's teachings. Others were involved in games such as the one Mattai and Simeon were playing. Still others were busy eating berries, nuts and olives that they'd picked earlier that afternoon.

Michael seemed to be the only one not involved in some sort of pass time.

Michael, that is – and Yeshua.

Earlier that evening, Yeshua had pulled Michael aside.

“Come and walk with me, Judas. I have much to teach you,” he said softly, “and not much time.”

They'd moved away from the rest of the clan, once more earning the wary glances of a few of Yeshua's apostles. Yeshua had taken Michael over the hills that topped the Mountain of Olives which overlooked the City of David. They'd entered a small garden there, through a wooden gate, and taken seats on a low stone wall.



“I believe you have placed the straw that will break the camel’s back, Yeshua.”

Michael finally said, after they’d spared a moment of silence.

“Judas,” Yeshua began, his tone as soft as Michael had ever heard it. “I must tell you something truly.” He turned to Michael and very gently placed the palm of his hand against Michael’s cheek. Michael blinked.

“You are not of this realm, are you?” he asked slowly.

Michael blinked again. He opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it once more. “What do you mean?”

“You are of Barbelo, as the others say of me. And because I can see this, I have set you apart. And because I have set you apart, you will be cursed by the generations.” He leaned in then, as if to confide something secret. “And even as they curse you, Judas, you will rule over them all.”

Michael had no idea what to say. Could Yeshua possibly know? Could he really mean what it seemed he meant?

Yeshua dropped his hand then and smiled warmly. “You are right, Judas. They will come for me now. It is time.”

“Then we must depart. Why do we wait for them to come?” Michael was ready to stand and leave then and there, but Yeshua’s hand on his shoulder stayed his restless spirit.

“Let them come.”

Michael’s gaze narrowed. “What can you mean by that?”

“They will come, Judas, and you will lead them to me.”

Michael’s gaze narrowed further. “I will not-”

“Yes, you will.” Yeshua stood then and moved away several paces. Michael watched him in stunned silence. “Judas, you should know better than any of them that the temple which houses the spirit can exist...” He paused and turned to face Michael. “For too long. I am tired, Judas. I have walked great distances. I have spoken many truths.” He strode back toward Michael, stopping to stand before him.

“You are willing to die for these truths?”

“I would not be the first. And I will not be the last to die for truth. In generations to come, many will die for invoking my name in truth. And many will sin. People of pollution and lawlessness and error, they will slay children, and then kneel before God, offering up sacrifices at the hands of a priest, and they will invoke my name. In my name, they will kill and in my name, they will die.” Yeshua fell silent, then, and after a long moment, a mild smile played across his lips. “I should go first, should I not?”

Michael stood. “How do you know this?”

Yeshua waited a very long time to answer. For what must have been a hundred heart beats, the two stared at one another, Michael’s expression puzzled, Yeshua’s placid but gently pleading. At last, Yeshua reached out, taking Michael’s face between both of his hands. “Judas, lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star that leads the way is your star.”

Yeshua softly released him then and turned away, moving to the opposite end of the small garden and dropping to his knees. Michael watched as he prostrated himself, bending at the hips and pressing his palms to the dirt.

Though he had no idea what Yeshua had meant by those final words, he would not disturb the man while he was praying. He took a slow, deep breath and left the small garden.

Now he stood by the fire and peered in the direction of the plot of land over the adjacent hills from which Yeshua had still not made his return. He'd asked that he not be disturbed. Michael knew he wanted to make peace with his God. Michael knew, as no one else in the camp seemed to sense, that Yeshua's ministry was coming to a close. There was something different in the wind tonight. It blew from a new direction. It seemed colder.

Michael was restless. His senses were on alert. His supernatural eyes scanned the darkened area outside the perimeter of their camp. His ears pricked to the slightest scurry of a fox or mongoose or the beat of a desert owl's wings. He wondered how much time they had.

Finally, he couldn't take any more. He moved away from the fire, feigning irritated indifference so that any watching would assume he left to relieve himself. He also strode in the opposite direction of where he knew Yeshua to be. When he had made his way beyond the halo of light from the camp's fires, well out of the line of sight of any who might be watching from within, Michael took to the skies.

There was enough wind that night to disguise what little his passage kicked up as he flew silently around the mountain, his eyes trained on the terrain below. Within a few minutes, he spotted the white and blue of Yeshua's robes. Bar-abba had gone beyond the garden, moved down the opposite side of the mountain, and now stood at the center of a small clearing. He was not alone.

Michael's countenance darkened as he hovered above the scene. Thomas's white robes highlighted the dark length of his black hair. Michael listened. The voice of Yeshua's twin was unmistakable.

"Thomas, I beg of you –"

"Do not speak to me of begging, brother." Thomas cut his brother off, pacing around him like a caged lion. "Enough is enough."

Michael very slowly drew back and landed behind a copse of trees several yards away. The trees were dense enough here that without the light of camp fires, the moon could not illuminate many of the shadows. Michael took full advantage of the concealment, crouching low and peering through the low-hanging tangles as the twin brothers spoke in hushed but emotive tones.

Thomas's fists were clenched at his sides. Michael could not see the mark on Yeshua's hand at this distance, but it did not matter. He needed nothing but the sound of Thomas's voice and the expression of his body to know which brother was which. They were night and day. He'd come to realize by now that each was everything the other was not. Thomas was harsh; Yeshua was yielding. Yeshua cared little for material or wealth; Thomas yearned for royalty.

Even now, Yeshua was the one who was standing still. Peace and calm. His brother was the one whose foot steps pawed at the earth in agitation.

"For twenty shana – twenty *years*, I have followed you through the desert, a shadow behind you, a mask of magic that hides your true face. Why?" Thomas stopped pacing and strode to stand before his brother. Yeshua gazed at him levelly.

“I have done so because you swore to me that these –” He raised his hands and stared at his palms as if able to see the vampiric powers that rested beneath their surface. “These *gifts* were given by God.” He lowered his hands and leaned in close. “You swore to me, brother, that your word would reach the masses, that my hands would turn their cheeks. If what you spoke was true, then why have they, in fact, turned away?”

Yeshua said nothing. He looked away from his brother to stare at the ground.

“You do not answer. I know why. They turn away because you let them. You were wrong, Yeshua. It takes more than kindness and the word of God to win a nation.”

Thomas’s tone became adamant. “It takes *power*.”

Yeshua’s head snapped back and, for only the second time in the many months that Michael had come to know the man, Yeshua’s gaze hardened, angry and resolved. “No, Thomas. Power can only take away what a person will not willingly offer. A nation is only truly won when its people freely give.” His voice had not risen, but though he spoke softly, his tone was firm.

“Perhaps I am not interested in truly winning, then brother. Perhaps it will be enough for me to take what they do not willingly offer.” Thomas smiled then; a smile that sent a coil of apprehension twisting in Michael’s gut.

Michael watched as Thomas turned away from his brother and walked out of the clearing.

“Thomas!” Yeshua called after him in a raised whisper, but he didn’t dare call out any louder. Michael kept his gaze trained on the receding outline of Thomas’s robes until the man had topped a neighboring rise and disappeared over the other side.

And then Michael rose and moved toward the teacher. Yeshua turned to regard him as he parted a cluster of branches and stepped into the clearing.

“What will he do?” Michael asked, without preamble. He needed to know. Thomas was his responsibility. The vampire elders had placed him in charge of the rogue immortal. And if anyone knew what Thomas might decide to do at that moment, it was his twin brother.

Yeshua’s expression was deeply saddened. “I know not,” he said as he shook his head slowly. “But it will not be good.” He closed his eyes and sank to his knees on the ground. “Last night, I dreamt of slaughter. I saw blood and fire. I felt Thomas’s presence in the vision.”

“He is going to kill.” Michael had moved to his side. Suddenly, in that instant, he was no longer Yeshua’s pupil. He had grown to respect the man greatly over the many moons that they had been together. He held the man’s teachings in deference and believed that, inside, Yeshua Bar-Josef, also known as Yeshua Bar-abba, was a genuinely good and kind man. In any day and age, such a thing was hard to find.

And there was something about Yeshua’s countenance, his wellspring of patience and his gentle wisdom that touched Michael in a way that no other mortal ever had. So, they had become friends. Confidants.

However, right then and right there, in that clearing, beneath that night sky, Michael was a vampire enforcer. His days as Yeshua Bar-abba’s pupil were over.

“I pray not.”

“Praying is not always enough, Yeshua.”

Yeshua looked up at him. “No. It is not. God only helps those who help themselves.”

“Then tell me where Thomas has gone.”

Yeshua fell silent for several long moments. Then he slowly rose and held his hands out at his sides, palms up. “Do not break God’s commandment, Judas. Thomas has done nothing but God’s will. He is angry now, and speaks harshly. But he has been gifted by our Father. Only Thomas can do what he does. Many people are in need of his aid.”

“Yeshua, your brother is no longer interested in giving aid to those in need –”

“Judas, be silent.” Yeshua put up his hand, cutting off what Michael had been about to say. “I will tell you something.” He turned and pointed toward the rise that led to the campsite beyond. “Over that hill rest more than forty men. Of them, many have actually *done* what it is you fear Thomas will do.” He paused, letting the information sink in. “It is not only for my own protection, or for that of my brother’s, that we conceal our faces, Judas.” He lowered his hand and faced Michael fully. “They came to me, because they wished to know God. They begged forgiveness. They were cleansed.”

His tone softened then and he cocked his head to one side. “If a murderer can be redeemed, Judas, then one who has not yet shed blood can surely be saved.”

Michael gazed down at him for a long, silent while. A lot of things went through his head in that time. First, he realized that there was nothing he could say that would change Yeshua’s mind about his brother’s feasible redemption. They were brothers. Twins. They had worked together in the capacity of teacher and secret assistant for more than two decades. Blood was thicker than water.

And if Yeshua believed that the blood had been blessed, it was thicker still.

Second, he realized that Yeshua was about to ask him, or tell him, once again, to let the authorities come for him. He knew it because Yeshua’s face took on the resigned look

and, this time around, the peaceful acceptance in that resignation made Michael's blood boil. He knew what Yeshua was going to say before he said it.

"Judas, you will betray me before the night is out."

Michael was about to open his mouth to argue, when an idea struck him. It was all suddenly so clear. A stone to kill two birds; a way out. Trying his best to hide the designs that sketched themselves out in his mind's eye, Michael closed his mouth, gazed at Yeshua a long time, and then, very slowly, he nodded.

Yeshua did not say anything for a while. He studied Michael carefully. Then he stepped back. "I will be holding an olive branch so that they will know me. You must bring them directly to me, Judas."

Again, Michael nodded.

Yeshua returned the gesture. His expression remained serene. Michael turned and walked away, back the way he'd come, through the low copse of trees and into the darkness beyond. When he was well out of the range of sight of the clearing, he leapt into the air and made his way, wind-bound, to the shadowy regions outside the gates of the City of David.

He had much to do and not much time. The first order of business was to speak with his elders.

Later that night, when the moon had moved a good distance through the blanket of black above, Michael made his way toward the temple. When he reached its steps, it was to find that a congregation of priests had formed on the first platform and were speaking in hurried, hushed tones. Michael studied them as he neared and several turned to regard



him. They were the temple Sanhedrin, a group of priests who acted as judges in the City of David.

One of them stepped forward, toward Michael, and Michael saw that two of the men behind him carried rope and several others carried weapons.

“Halt,” the priest ordered. His robes marked him as the trial inquisitor. “Who are you and what business have you at this hour?”

Michael strode forward until he was standing directly in front of the man, and then he reached up and un-tucked the length of cloth that had been concealing his face. “I am Judas, apostle to Yeshua Bar-abba.”

A murmur of surprise and a restless wave of movement went up through the small crowd of officials around him. He didn’t wait for them to speak or to question him further.

“I have come to make you an offer.” He regarded the man before him, looking him up and then down. “Are you the man who can command Pilate’s militia?”

“I am Caiaphas, high priest who answers to Antipas, and to Pilate in turn,” the man answered, somewhat haughtily. “What have you, a subversive of our law, to offer that I would wish to accept?”

“I have come to give you Yeshua Bar-abba.”

A stunned silence went through the crowd then. Michael ticked the heart beats off, counting the passage of time as a slice of eternity in which everything seemed to slow. Even to come to a stop. He would never forget that moment. Never.

Finally, Caiaphas spoke. “What do you want in exchange for betraying your teacher?”

“Thirty didrachma.” Michael’s answer was quick. He’d anticipated such a question.

Caiaphas regarded him silently. Then he nodded. “Done.” The man turned to his constituents and ordered that one of them take the silver coins from the coffer within the temple. Michael bristled at the command, knowing that many poor but pious people had given that money, freely, as a sacrifice to their God. They’d had no clue it was to become blood money of the worst kind.

Michael had the very strong feeling this was not the first time the temple high priests had used that money for something other than its donors had intended.

Within seconds, a small bag of coins was being held out to him. Michael hesitated in taking it. The act felt momentous. The moment, historical.

Then, with a hand that had gone partially numb, he took the bag and held it at his side.

“Take us to him.”

“He is in Gethsemane. Follow me.”

Michael led the large group from the temple, through the streets of the City of David, and out onto the road that led from the city to the Mountain of Olives and the small garden on its opposite slopes. He knew that, following the road, they would reach the encampment long before making their way to Gethsemane, the garden. And in the encampment, they would meet up with Yeshua’s disciples, who would most likely find a way to interfere with what Michael was doing.

He would see to them in the only way he knew how, without the shedding of innocent blood.

The priests and their accompanying temple guards said little to nothing as they made their way through the darkness. When they reached the lower steppes of the Mountain, Michael was certain they'd been spotted by those in the camp, because he saw several figures in light colored robes making their way down toward him. He was able to spot the figures long before the priests behind him could.

As the disciples neared, he recognized Mark, Nathanael, Didymus and Cephus. Judas waved the priests to a halt and stepped forward alone to meet the four.

"What are you at, Judas?" Mark asked. Into his question, he released all of the distrust, envy and resentment he'd been building toward Judas for the past many months.

Michael had expected nothing less. He stepped toward Mark as if to explain something in private, and in doing so, he gently grasped the man's hand in both of his. Into that touch, he released a wash of his power; enough to flood Mark's mind, taking a few memories and thoughts and exchanging them for suggestions of his own. They were strong suggestions; Michael was not fooling around.

In a few seconds, he released Mark, and the disciple gently pulled away. His expression had gone blank, his gaze glassy-eyed.

Michael said nothing to him, but turned and motioned for the priests and guards to follow him once more.

"Hold! Mark, what does he do-"

"Let them go," Mark said softly, his tone as distant as his gaze.

Michael did not wait to determine whether Caiaphas and his men were behind him or not. He moved up the side of the hill, following the trail that led to the mountain's top some three hundred feet above the temple mount.

When he reached the top, he found a cluster of Yeshua's followers waiting for him. They all wore cloth over their faces, but by this point, Michael had come to recognize them by their eyes alone. The other seven that, along with himself, Mark, Nathanael, Didymus and Cephus, would constitute Yeshua's twelve favored disciples, were not among the group now waiting at the top of the rise. They were most likely with Yeshua.

Michael moved slowly, but confidently, past the gathered men, knowing that any sign of weakness from him would give them the nerve they needed to step in front of him and the priests, impeding their progress.

He made it through the camp without incident and could hear the priests and their guards muttering quietly behind him, so he knew that they had managed to do so as well. Over the rise and down the other side, they moved, until Michael could make out the clearing of the garden beyond a set of gates, and the men in robes that waited there.

Some wore cloth to conceal their features. Others did not. There were nine men in the garden. Yeshua stood at their center, his face uncovered, an olive branch in his hand. Michael completely ignored him, counting on his own lack of regard to deter the priests behind him from paying Yeshua any heed either.

As it turned out, none of the men behind him had ever seen Yeshua in the flesh. The men who had been present at the temple during Yeshua's tirade were not among the men who followed Michael now. Those other priests had been lesser clerics, ministers of a low rank who tended to the menial tasks of the temple. Caiaphas, however, and the other priests present there tonight were part of the Sanhedrin, the council of priest-judges who held authority to arrest, try, and, ultimately, execute those who were a threat to the temple.

and its business. It was the reason they possessed the leave to surround themselves with temple guards, who were, after all, Antipas's men.

The Sanhedrin had most likely been summoned by those who had witnessed Yeshua's acts. As a result, not one among them could visually identify Bar-abba and distinguish him from the rest of the men in the garden.

Michael was exceedingly grateful for that bit of luck.

He moved without hesitation to stand before the tallest of the robed figures. He looked the man in the eyes, peering deeply into their dark brown depths. He would recognize those eyes anywhere.

"This is him," he said softly. The figure before him did not move. He said nothing.

"This is Yeshua Bar-Josef, the man who calls himself Bar-abba, Nasi of the Jews."

Michael finished and then stepped back, waiting for one of any number of things to happen. He fully expected Yeshua to rush forward, declaring his identity in order to spare his brother, whom Michael had just now identified as Yeshua.

However, Yeshua either remained where he was, or the chaos that then ensued in the garden was enough to put off any action on his part. As Caiaphas stepped forward and pulled the cloth away from Thomas's face, several disciples stepped forward also, pulling their swords.

Simeon was the first to have his in his hand, and because the blades were suddenly surrounding him in every direction, Michael did not react quickly enough to stop what happened next. Simeon came forward, to Michael's left, and the blade of his sword sliced through the air, catching the moonlight as it descended toward one of the Sanhedrin

priests' guards. The guard backpedalled as the cutting edge swiped downward, but not quickly enough, and the blade's sharp side sliced through the man's ear.

Michael's eyes widened as the piece of flesh that had been cut away fell to the sandy earth below and was quickly caked in dirt as several other guards came forward to scuffle with the disciples.

"Stop!" Thomas yelled, raising his hands and moving his body in between those of the apostles and the priests and their guards. "That will do!" He turned to Simeon and pinned him with a reproachful gaze. "That will do, Simeon," he repeated. "Put your weapons away." He glanced at the other disciples. "He who lives by the sword will die by the sword."

Simeon stared at him, his eyes wide, his sword hand gripped tightly around the hilt of his weapon. The man whose ear he had severed held a hand to the side of his face, trying to impede the flow of blood. Michael looked from the injured man to Thomas and then to the disciples.

He was admittedly confused. Such words were not the kind normally spoken by Thomas Bar-Josef. He was not the wise one between he and his brother, and they had been, unarguably, wise words.

He waited to see what Thomas would do. But he did nothing further. Michael's gaze narrowed. If Thomas truly believed that what Simeon had just done was wrong, why did he not heal the injured man?

Thomas simply turned and faced Caiaphas. "I will go without a fight."

Caiaphas nodded to one of the men beside him who held rope. The guard came forward and proceeded to tie Thomas's hands together.

To be certain, Michael glanced at Thomas's right hand. The red birth mark was indeed missing. This was truly Thomas.

What was his plan? Perhaps he believed he was powerful enough to escape. And, he might be right. However, Michael and the vampire council would see to it that the rogue vampire would find such a prospect impossible. It was one of the facets of Michael's plan that had needed to be elucidated before he could continue with his arrangements.

Thomas had not yet shown Michael that he possessed the ability to take on several men at once in order to escape captivity. His sole power lay in the fact that his wounds would heal quickly and that, short of drowning him in the river Jordan or burning him in a pit, there was little chance that a decree of execution by the Sanhedrin and Antipas, or even Pilate, would result in Thomas's death. This was particularly true since the traditional form of execution for those guilty of sedition against the state was crucifixion.

That was where Michael came in. He was to make certain that the vampire died on the cross. He had an idea of how he would go about making it happen.

At present, Michael led the way back down the mountain as Caiaphas and his men followed along the trail, a captive Thomas in tow.

Cephus, a disciple who had always been unfailingly loyal and protective of Yeshua, followed them down the trail, keeping a distance of several yards behind the others. When Mattai saw this, he, too, followed the procession.

The other disciples remained where they were.

## Chapter Twenty-one

*(Present day)*

“A bit of mud,” Thomas said softly, still grinning broadly.

“What – ”

“The mark on his hand, Judas. I covered it with a bit of mud. It was easy. You were never the wiser.” He chuckled then. Michael was still too numb for the sound to have much more of an effect upon him. “But Yeshua certainly was.”

Michael watched through blurred vision as Thomas turned to resume his earlier pacing, moving like a giant cat in a circle around Michael’s still but quaking form.

“Oh, he figured you out, brother. He knew what you were going to do before *you* even knew what you were going to do.” Thomas shook his head, smiling to himself. His voice was un-accented. It was the kind of inflection that a person earned when they moved from place to place, never staying in one country for very long.

He had been in hiding for two-thousand years.

“He gave me that god-forsaken olive branch and then covered his face,” Thomas continued, lifting his head to peer up at the ceiling as if he were lost in memory. “He told me not to interfere.” He stopped and turned to Michael. “As if I would have.”

Michael’s heart had somehow resumed beating, but now it slammed against his rib cage with a vengeance, and stars swam before his eyes. He felt as if he were dreaming, caught in a nightmare that seemed real. But it couldn’t be.

And yet, he knew it was.

“What have I done...”



“Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself, Judas. You did what he wanted you to do, after all. Even though you tried desperately not to.” Thomas stopped his pacing and casually strode toward him. “*I* certainly appreciate you.”

Michael slowly turned to meet his gaze. He pulled his hands into tight fists at his sides, pushing his fingernails into his palms, trying with all of his might to quiet the rush of excruciating knowledge that ripped through his body and mind at that moment. He felt the nails pierce his flesh and squeezed harder. His fingers were well wet before the wounds began to heal, and he re-opened them, all the while staring into the eyes of the devil, himself.

“I killed you. I felt you there.” Michael finally said, his mind racing back to that moment in time, two-thousand years ago, when he had stood beneath a man on the cross and killed him with his own two hands. “It was you.”

Thomas shook his head, slowly. “No, Judas. But I was near by. I had to be, didn’t I? Or you would have known it wasn’t me up there. I know you can sense my power. I didn’t understand what you were, at the time, but I knew enough to recognize that you were different. So, I made sure I was there the morning you knocked out the Roman guard and took his uniform.” Thomas closed the distance between them and they were eye to eye. Michael could feel Thomas’s breath on his lips as the man leaned in and whispered, “I watched you slide your sword between Yeshua’s ribs.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ms. Lucia?”

Abbie glanced up. She'd been staring off into space, rocking her daughter back and forth where they sat on the top of the filing cabinet against the wall. The vampire who stood guard at the doorway to the office was turned toward her. Beside him was one of the guards who'd taken up watch outside the building. They'd obviously been conversing and she'd been so distracted, she hadn't even noticed him come in.

"Yes?" She addressed the first vampire, whose name she'd learned was Campbell. Whether it was his first name or his last, she hadn't asked, and she hadn't been told.

"There is a woman outside who claims that she's your mother. She wants to come in and speak with you." Campbell left the doorway and moved through the office to a television screen they'd set up earlier that evening. He pressed a button on a keypad and the images on the screen flickered, showing several different shots of the outside of the building, from different angles. Finally, it settled on a wide-angled view of the back door on the first floor, and Abbie's heart skipped.

"Is that her?" he asked.

"That's her. She's telling the truth."

"Is she trustworthy?"

Abbie couldn't answer right away on that one. The question honestly gave her pause. Ten years ago, she'd have laughed, given the man a dirty look, and then popped him one for talking bad about her mother. Now, however, she had to admit that Eva-Marie Lucia was little more than a stranger to her. They hadn't spoken in so long. How well could she claim to know her?

How could she promise that Eva-Marie did not, in fact, mean Jessie harm? After all, Jessie was wanted dead by religious zealots. But, would Jessie's abuela – *could* Jessie's abuela – ever turn against her own granddaughter?

Abbie just didn't think so.

"I think so," she stated softly, staring at the woman on the screen who stood with her hands shoved into the pockets of a wind breaker, her gray-streaked black hair pulled back into a pony tail, her face devoid of makeup. A gold cross around her neck reflected the overhead parking lot lights.

Campbell turned to regard Abbie. "I need you to be sure. I can't let her in if there is even the most remote possibility that she poses you a threat. Michael would have me drained and then burned at the stake if I did."

Abbie fought the urge to smile, and it wasn't too hard once she realized that there was truly nothing about her current situation that was, in the least bit, funny. "She's safe. She's my mother."

Campbell watched her for another few seconds, and then he nodded. He turned to the sentry waiting at the door. "Make sure she's clean and then let her in."

Abbie turned her attention back to the screen and watched as the back door opened and a vampire guard quickly and efficiently patted down her mother. When it was clear that Eva-Marie was carrying nothing dangerous, the vampire held the door open and instructed her to step inside.

She disappeared from the screen and Abbie automatically looked up toward the door to the office. She waited, ticking off the seconds in her mind.

Her mother was coming. What would she say to her? Why was she here?

Abbie's brow furrowed. Actually, never mind the why – *how* was she here? How did she know that Abbie could be found, during the wee hours of dawn, in the underground office in a building owned by the Vampire Syndicate?

Abbie mentally kicked herself. She'd been so surprised by her mother's appearance after so long that her brain had slipped into overdrive. The obvious questions hadn't occurred to her. And Campbell hadn't thought to ask them because he had no idea that there had been any kind of falling out between Abbie and her mother.

Now, though it simultaneously filled her with guilt, Abbie again wondered whether Eva-Maria might actually mean Jessie harm.

After all, as far as Abbie knew, only two groups of people could possibly know her current location: The Syndicate and those who followed Victor Anson.

Suddenly, something became clear to Abbie. She gently laid Jessie down on the floor beneath a nearby desk and moved around it to face the door. Campbell noticed her abrupt behavior and came to stand beside her.

"What's going on?"

"She works for Anson," Abbie said quickly. "I just realized it. You frisked her, so she can't come in here shooting... I think. But –"

"But just in case?" Campbell asked, nodding toward the desk where Jessie was hidden. Abbie nodded and turned back toward the front door.

In the next instant, her mother came around the corner and stepped into the hallway beyond the floor-to-ceiling glass windows at the front of the office. Abbie had been told the windows were bullet-proof. She didn't doubt it.

Abbie watched her make her way to the door. She was escorted by the same guard from outside. When they reached the office door, the guard turned around and left, presumably to make his way back outside.

Campbell strode to the door. The vampire guard on the other side of the glass double-checked that Eva-Marie was unarmed, and un-wired, and then he slid a key card through a reader on the door. The door made a sucking sound and popped open.

“Ms. Lucia, please come with me.” Campbell took Eva-Marie by the elbow and guided her through the office. She moved slowly and appeared to gaze about as if her eyes had not yet adjusted to the contrast of the darkness of the office’s interior after the early dawn light and the harsh lighting of the parking lot outside. When she half tripped over a stray cord that stretched across the carpet, Abbie realized that her mother was having far more difficulty seeing in the dim light of the room than Abbie was. Or any of the other vampires.

And it was then that Abbie fully grasped the idea that there were likely many aspects of vampirism that she was not yet totally familiar with. Such as enhanced vision.

Abbie moved forward and Eva-Marie’s eyes caught her movement. The woman stopped, watching the shadowy form draw near.

“Mom?”

Eva-Marie’s eyes widened and she reached out, her expression suddenly overcome by a raw mixture of emotions.

Abbie didn’t hesitate. There was something so very basic and instinctive about your mother’s hug that you just didn’t speculate about such a thing. You simply hugged her back.

She rushed forward, embracing her mother, and Eva-Marie began to cry.

“Can you ever forgive me, mija?” She sobbed into Abbie’s shoulder, as Abbie was a good four inches taller than the older woman. Abbie brushed her hand over her mother’s hair and then gently pulled away.

“Mami, I forgive you.” She looked into her mother’s eyes and held her mother’s hands. “What are you doing here? How did you find me?” Even as she asked these questions, she noticed that Campbell had pulled a cell phone from his pocket and was punching a text message into its number pad. He was worried about this new development, and Abbie didn’t blame him. Not with what Anson’s men had managed to pull off thus far.

“Abbie, I will be damned by God.” She began shaking her head, closing her eyes as if she could not stop seeing something. “They are so evil. I was so wrong.”

“Who, Mami? Who is evil? Who were you wrong about?”

She stopped shaking her head and looked up at Abbie in earnest. “The Redeemer, mija.” She squeezed Abbie’s hands almost painfully. “I saw him heal. I thought he was our Lord’s son, returned to save us from this...” she looked around her as if to reference everything. “This... *hell* that life has become.”

She closed her eyes again and Abbie watched fresh tears track down her cheeks. In that moment, in that dim darkness, Abbie noticed the new lines on her mother’s forehead and the dark circles beneath her eyes. She looked older. Eva-Maria had lost her son, her husband, her son-in-law, and in a way, her daughter. In the past few years, she’d aged a decade. Or more.

At least Abbie had Jessie.

She realized, then, that in her own pain, she'd failed to ponder her mother's. Who did Eva-Maria have? Her house was empty. Abbie could remember walking the rooms after her father's funeral. Three bedrooms. Two of them now permanently vacant.

There were echoes where laughter used to be.

Abbie allowed her own tears to fall and didn't bother to wipe them away. Instead, she gently guided her mother to a nearby office chair and sat her down. Then Abbie pulled up another chair and sat across from her. She took a deep breath, cleared her mind, and forced herself to focus on the here and now and the extremely important matters she and her mother needed to discuss.

"Mami, how did you know I was here?"

Eva-Maria sniffed twice, grabbed a tissue from a box on the desk, and blew her nose. Then she wiped it, sat up straight, and, grasping her daughter's hand once more, she began to talk. "The Redeemer – whoever he really is – has visions." She leaned closer. "He knows where you are, Abbie. I overheard him talking to one of the others. He somehow figured out where you are but ordered his men not to come after you. He thinks that this place is too well guarded and, besides, he said he had to 'finish something'. He told everyone to leave." She shook her head and swiped her palm over her eyes. "I came here."

"Where did everyone else go?"

"I don't know. We kind of scattered."

Abbie blinked a few times and then took a long, slow breath, letting it out in a heaving sigh. "Mami, how the hell did you get involved with these people in the first place?"

“Mija, trust me, I had no idea they meant you harm!” Eva-Maria squeezed Abbie’s hand tighter, as if the pressure, itself, could convince Abbie of her words. “I met a man at Albertson’s. I was in the checkout line, reading a passage from the Bible and he asked me if I believed in Jesus. When I told him that, of course, I did, he told me about a meeting that I should attend.” She took a deep, shaking breath and then sighed, herself.

“I was so stupid, Abbie. I was lost in hope and hurt. I went blindly. I attended the meeting. There were people dressed in robes. They handed some to me at the door. I put them on without thinking. Can you believe that?” She shook her head and almost laughed. “Me! I didn’t question it at all. Does that sound like me, mija?”

Abbie shook her head. It did not. If anyone in the family could have been a lawyer, it was her mother. The woman had always loved to argue.

“I sat down with everyone else and then... Then *he* came out.”

“The Redeemer?”

“The man. The man who pretends to be Jesus.”

“When was this?”

“A week ago.” Eva-Marie reached for another tissue and then blew her nose one last time, tossing the used tissue into a nearby waste paper basket. “On my third day among them, he came out of a vision very upset. He was agitated. I don’t know... scared, almost. He turned to me and asked me about my granddaughter.” At that, Eva-Maria began to cry once more and Abbie leaned forward, allowing the woman to rest her head on her shoulder. “At first, I wondered how he’d known about you. And then I reminded myself – he was Jesus. So, I told him about you and about Jessie.”



“What, exactly, did you tell him?” Abbie asked, fighting hard to keep her tone level. A tornado of emotions was ripping through her at that moment. Fear, anger, betrayal and love warred with each other on the inside. On the outside, she was calm. It was her second Oscar-winning performance that night.

“He just wanted to know about Jessie’s birth, about her birthmark mostly. It was strange. That was the first time I began to question -”

“What happened then?”

“Then, nothing. At least, nothing that I was told of.” Her earnest expression was back. “The truth was kept from me, *mija*. I only found out that he wanted you killed this morning, and since then, I haven’t been able to leave the building. He and his men forbade it. What can I do? I am one woman. It was only an hour or two ago that he decided to let everyone go.”

Abbie’s blood ran cold. “Mami, you have been under watch all day, forbidden to leave, and then, suddenly, they just let you go?”

Eva-Marie’s brow furrowed. She peered up at her daughter through eyes that were confused but were growing more frightened by the heart beat.

“Did anyone follow you?” Abbie asked, her tone softer now, but clearly alarmed.

“No, *mija*. What would be the point? I told you that he already knows where you are.”

The point? To kill two birds – no, *three* birds – with one stone. To get rid of the Lucia’s, all at once, once and for all.

Abbie stood, pulling her mother up with her. “We have to get out of here, now.”

Campbell was already heading toward them. Abbie stood and moved toward Jessie where she lay hidden under the desk. Jessie stirred as Abbie lifted her, but she was a toddler, and toddlers adapt quickly. She laid her head on Abbie's shoulder and was immediately back in dream land.

Campbell hurriedly put his arm around them, herding all three of them toward the exit. "Take Jessie and your mother and follow Alex. He'll lead you to the underground passage out of the building."

Abbie nodded, not even questioning the existence of such a passage. The Syndicate didn't seem to be the type of organization that could afford to take risks. If they purchased buildings with offices in basements and outfitted them with bullet proof glass, then creating a safe passage to and from said offices seemed a natural next step.

She quickly made her way to the office door, her mother right behind her.

They didn't reach the door before a series of explosions rocked the first and second floors of the office building, shaking its foundation and sending everyone to the ground. Abbie managed to catch herself with her free arm before she would have fallen on top of Jessie.

Jessie awoke immediately and stared out at Abbie through very wide eyes.

Abbie glanced up to see that the front glass walls of the office had splintered into spider webs of warning. The hum of electricity was suddenly absent, lending the aftermath of the explosions an eerie silence. Abbie looked back down at Jessie, who still hadn't spoken. She held her tight and tried to stand up, but Campbell was beside her, holding her down.

"Stay down!"

Another explosion rocked the floor above them and plaster fell from the ceiling. A corner of the office began to sag dangerously. Cracks raced down the sides of the walls. The glass front doors and windows of the office finally shattered, sending glass skating across the tiled floor.

“Now, up!” Campbell grabbed Abbie’s arms and hoisted her up. Abbie held Jessie tightly. “Move!” He rushed them through the now gaping, open windows of the office and into the hall beyond. The second vampire, Alex, was pulling himself off of the floor. He rushed forward, taking Abbie from Campbell.

“Take them to Tunnel Nine!” Campbell ordered and Alex nodded. Abbie slid once on the glass scattered beneath her feet but Alex caught her. She righted herself quickly, regaining her balance.

Behind them, Campbell pulled a radio from his belt and pressed the button. “Daniel, what the hell is going on out there?”

The radio crackled, but there was no reply. Campbell cursed and headed toward the stairwell that led to the second floor.

Alex led Abbie and her mother down the dark hallway, which was now utterly devoid of any kind of electric lighting. Eva-Marie had grabbed hold of Abbie’s sweater and used it to help guide her progress as she followed them down the passage to some unknown destination.

They rounded a corner and then another corner and finally the hall dead-ended at a strange arched doorway. The metal door looked like an elevator entrance, and beside it was an identification pad. Alex pushed a button and then waved his hand over what looked like a scanning device, and the metal door slid open. Abbie wondered where the

power came from, since the electricity in the rest of the building was out. The Syndicate must have back up generators.

But the door stopped half-way, apparently jammed.

Abbie wasn't surprised. The structural framing of the entire building had most likely been compromised by the blasts.

Alex ushered them through the doorway into another hallway beyond. This hallway was bare cement, unfinished and cool. Abbie would have estimated a good forty degree difference between this area and the summer night outside.

Suddenly, Alex swore softly and brought them to a halt. "The tunnel is blocked."

Abbie stopped and peered ahead into the darkness. He was right. Wherever they were going, if they had to get there using that passageway, they were out of luck. Wood, stone and debris from the upper levels of the building had fallen through the ceiling here and into the basement level. A mountain of rubble stood between them and their destination.

Alex pulled the radio from his waist and pressed a button. "Campbell, the tunnel's blocked. It looks like they knew exactly where to hit us."

He released the button and rapid gunfire sounded over the speaker. Campbell's voice came on. He sounded winded. "The building is surrounded! They're using grenade launchers and some sort of modified flare guns!" There was static and then Campbell's voice came over the speaker again, accompanied by more gunfire. "Matt and Hudson are dead. Daniel's badly wounded!"

Alex swore again and squeezed the radio in frustration. If the building was surrounded and the enemy had created a weapon capable of killing vampires, then there

was no way he could guarantee Abbie and Jessie's safety by taking an above-ground exit. They would never make it.

He pressed the button on the radio and spoke into it. "Head back down and bring Daniel with you!"

There was no answer. Alex repeated himself once more and then placed the radio on his belt. He turned and studied the mound of building remains in front of them and ran a hand through his hair. "Looks like we're doing this the hard way."

Abbie nodded, more to herself than anyone else. She knew they had to get out of the building. If Anson's men knew where to hit them with the grenade launchers, then it was most likely because Anson had seen this place in a vision. Which meant that they would continue to attack them until they were certain the entire building had collapsed and everyone within it was well and truly dead.

Now, more than ever, Abbie wished she possessed some sort of useful power. She certainly couldn't burn the debris away. Why couldn't she possess teleportation abilities so that she could just whisk the wreckage out of the hallway and leave it in a field somewhere? Better yet, she could whisk *them* out of the hallway. She could send them to Disneyworld or Easter Island. Somewhere far away. Somewhere safe.

She stared at the mountain of rubble. The only safe way out for her baby was through the tunnel that it blocked. She had never before felt so helpless, frustrated and angry. She bent to put Jessie on her feet, but the toddler held tightly to her, unwilling to let go.

"Baby, I have to help Alex move that trash, okay? You stay here with Abuela."

Jessie looked desperately from her mother to her grandmother, obviously barely recognizing the second, older woman. “Mama, howd me!” she cried, her little fingers tightly gripping her sweater, her legs wrapped tightly around Abbie’s waist.

“Jessie, Mama’s right here, okay? I’m just right here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m just going to help Alex. You can watch me, okay?”

“It’s all right, Abbie. You can stay with her. Just keep back.” Alex stepped back and Abbie instinctively picked Jessie back up, taking a step back as well.

And then Alex lurched forward and disappeared into a blur of color and movement. The air in the tunnel swirled and wisped through Abbie’s hair as Alex sped to and from the mountain of rubble. He moved too fast for Abbie to be able to make out his form, much less what he was doing. However, within a few seconds, a new pile of trash was beginning to form – this one in the t-section of the hallway behind them. Abbie realized that Alex was pulling items off of the pile in front of them and placing them on another.

“Christ, he’s *Quick Silver*...” Abbie muttered under her breath.

“What’s happening, mija? I can’t see a damned thing.”

“Nothing, Mami. Alex is clearing the way for us. Just hold on to me.”

From above them came a crashing sound and Alex suddenly stopped beside Abbie. She turned to him. “What was that?”

Alex’s radio crackled. He pulled it from his belt and pressed the button. “Campbell, talk to me.”

“They’re in!” came the reply, and then there was more gunfire and the communication fell into static. Alex didn’t hesitate. In an instant, he was back into blurred motion, working on the pile of rubble.

Abbie's skin began to crawl. Her ears pricked at the sound of movement somewhere nearby.

"Alex, they're coming!" She forcefully put Jessie down, prying the child's fingers off of her, and shoved her and her mother against the wall. A second later, sparkling ground flares skittered across the floor, having been thrown there by someone further down the hall. The light they shed illuminated the hall, casting it in harsh lines of yellow-green glow and deep black shadows.

In the next instant, three men dressed in fatigues rounded the corner, automatic weapons strapped over their shoulders. Abbie whirled around, placing her own body between them.

"Get down!" Alex roared a second before the weapons went off. He blurred forward, pushing Abbie and her mother down just as bullets went flying over them to sail into what was left of the blockage behind them.

Eva-Marie screamed, as did Jessie. The sound of her daughter's fear brought Abbie's fury to the surface and the two men at the end of the hallway burst into flame.

They reeled back in shock, but their clothing must have possessed a powerful flame retardant, because the blaze weakened and died within a few seconds. With steely-eyed determination, the men raised their weapons and began shooting again.

This time, they aimed lower.

## Chapter Twenty-two

(Approximately 2,000 years B.P.)

Michael straightened the leather-lined chain lorica over his chest and shoulders. Then he strapped it securely around his arms and waist. The markings on the armor were brass and indicated that its owner was a higher ranking centurion soldier in the Legio X Fretensis.

But, at the moment, the soldier was sleeping off a nasty blow to the head.

Michael had chosen well. The man was roughly the same size as him, which was rare. The centurion was tall and well-built.

Michael bent and unstrapped the brass greaves from the unconscious man's arms. After he securely strapped them on to his own forearms, he straightened, stood still in the shadows, and listened.

Rain beat steadily on the rooftops of the huts around him, soaking the ground to form deep, dark mud. Rain was rare this time of year, yet it had fallen steadily since they'd tied and nailed Thomas onto the *crux comissa* three days ago.

Michael had seen to it. It was one of his gifts. Storms had always answered his call. However, this time around, the rain was not necessary to *give* life, but to take it.

As Michael eased out of the alley and made his way through the street toward the hill where the Roman crosses now stood, his mind swam with the events of the past three days.

Thomas had been tried before the Sanhedrin court and found a blasphemer guilty of Sedition. He had then been taken before Pontius Pilate, who was in the City of David for Passover, most likely to ensure that order was kept. In taking their prisoner to Pilate, the



Sanhedrin completely skipped Antipas's authority, going straight for a much larger seat of power.

Michael marvelled at this. Were they that afraid of Yeshua Bar-abba?

By that time, word had spread of Yeshua's arrest and a group of his followers had gathered outside the gates of Pilate's palace. Michael had watched, from where he hid among them in concealing robes, as the crowd had begun to chant, "Give us Bar-abba!"

He had been afraid, at first, that Pilate would concede, realizing the uprising that Yeshua's arrest had caused. But when Caiaphas informed him of Yeshua's threat on the temple and his destruction of the money-changer's booths, Pilate no doubt came to the conclusion that Yeshua was a danger to the state. The Romans never – *never* – let insurgents walk free. Those guilty of sedition were made an example of and put to death. Every time.

So, Pilate ordered Yeshua's death by crucifixion.

The worst part of Michael's job was seeing it through to its conclusion. Now, as he walked the streets of Jerusalem toward Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, where Romans carried out their executions, he drew his thoughts inward and wrapped them around himself like a blanket against the cold.

The streets were nearly deserted. Most of Jerusalem's residents had taken shelter in their homes, some going so far as to bar their doors. Because the strange storm had coincided with Bar-abba's crucifixion, they believed they were linked. Was God blotting out the sun in punishment?

Michael couldn't help but wonder what effect the last three days might have on future generations. How long would rumors persist of Yeshua Bar-abba and his execution? How long could people tell one story?

His feet and sandals were well drenched by the time he reached the foot of the trail that led to the top of Golgotha. He turned his gaze away from the ground in front of him and looked up. There, against the stormy skyline, were three crosses, giant tau's against the lightning-streaked background. One of the crosses was empty, its victim having been taken down, presumably already dead.

But the other two were occupied.

And, on the one in the middle hung Thomas.

Michael stood there in the rain and watched the still figure for several long moments. Thomas did not move. Michael had been right about the rain. It had drenched the man's body for three days, robbing him of salt and other nutrients. But it was the salt that was essential. A vampire could not survive without it. The rain was the only thing ensuring that Thomas stayed up on that cross. He was dehydrated and weak.

Michael began to climb the slope, all the while studying Thomas's unmoving form. He had heard that Thomas was beaten when he was taken. Whether or not this was true, he could not tell now as he neared the foot of the cross and gazed upward. Any cuts in Thomas's flesh made by mortal weapons would have healed shortly after being dealt. Luckily for the vampire council, they would have bled first, and the blood would have disguised the healing. However, in three days, any blood on Thomas's body had been washed away.

There was nothing to him now but skin that had been washed pale in the wet darkness and a head, crowned with a chaplet of thorn branches, that hung low in defeat.

Michael stood there, beneath that cross, for a long while. Movement to his right caught his attention and he turned to see a man making his way up the slope toward them. Michael studied him carefully. The man did not meet his gaze, instead concentrating on the wet earth beneath his feet as he steadfastly gained the top of the hill.

Michael realized, at length, that he was simply a mourner coming to pay respects to the man he thought was Yeshua Bar-abba, teacher and prophet. Perhaps, son of God.

Michael said nothing to him and allowed him to draw near.

As lightning arced around them and the clouds overhead released a deluge upon the earth, he again gazed upward. Despite the fact that Thomas looked well and truly beaten, Michael could feel his power radiating through the rain-drenched air. It was as strong to his hidden sense as the smell of wet earth was to his nostrils.

There was magic in the night, coiling around him, vampire gifts yet untapped.

He wondered why.

“What are you waiting for?” Michael whispered. “Why do you not save yourself?”

The man who knelt on the wet ground beside him glanced up at him momentarily and then lowered his head in prayer once more.

When nothing happened and Thomas did not even raise his head to respond, Michael had no choice but to believe that the rain and the lack of water for three days had seen to Thomas’s demise. He was truly too weak to act.

It was time to end it.

Calling on a power that was the oldest of his gifts, Michael raised his right hand out at his side and closed his eyes. Light began to pool around his upturned palm. The rain that hit his hand sizzled and sputtered. The light grew more intense and took on a strange green cast.

The man who knelt at the foot of the cross was deep in prayer when Michael's light pulsed with radiant energy, contracted, and then expanded into a long ribbon of light. The light lingered, hovering there above his hand for an instant, and then solidified.

Michael slowly lowered his hand. His fingers were now curled around the hilt of a long, magnificent sword. Its blade was longer than that of the standard Roman sword, stretching beyond 40 inches, and was comprised of a metal that no mortal blacksmith would have recognized.

It glowed in the dim light like a candle in the night. Along the long edge of the blade were burned many strange, beautiful symbols.

The grip of the sword was hued from smooth, polished pitch-black stone. The pommel appeared to be solid gold and, embedded within it was a shimmering stone of black. Anyone gazing into that stone might come to believe they were staring into the heavens themselves, as there seemed to be tiny points of light hovering in its depths.

The cross-guard was the most prominently recognizable feature of the sword, as it was also constructed of solid gold and had been meticulously crafted into the form of a set of magnificent wings.

No sword maker in any land, in any realm, yet possessed the craft knowledge to make such a sword. Michael was fairly certain that none ever would.

But it did not matter, as no one of consequence would witness him using it.

Michael pulled his arm back, above his head, and aimed the sword. With the practiced ease of eternity, he threw the sword. It sailed through the air like lightning, itself, and pierced through Thomas's abdomen.

At once, blood and fluid poured forth from the wound. Michael stepped back, watching the liquid cascade like a gruesome waterfall to the soaked ground below.

The man who had been kneeling at the foot of Thomas's cross looked up and gasped. He stood and took several steps back, sliding in the mud.

"What have you done?"

Michael did not answer. He gazed at his sword, where it was embedded in the wood of the stripped tree that Thomas was tied to. It now looked no different from any other Roman centurion sword. But it wasn't. It was quite different. It was the only blade in the world capable of killing a vampire. Whatever cut it made would not heal.

Michael closed his eyes and turned away from Thomas's dead form. For some reason, he felt cold.

Michael opened his eyes as lightning crashed heavily all around him. The storm had grown stronger, taken on a life of its own.

He turned to the cowering man beside him and levelled him with a piercing blue-eyed gaze. Then, in a voice devoid of emotion, he said, "I've made certain he is dead."

## Chapter Twenty-three

*(Present day)*

Michael knew. He *knew* that Thomas expected him to attack at that moment.

Goaded beyond reason, beyond madness, Michael came very, very close to giving the ancient vampire exactly what he wanted. But something held him back. Despite the fact that he now understood, fully, what had happened that fateful day outside of Jerusalem, he stayed still. In spite of the fact that he now understood the terrible magnitude of his actions, he waited, unmoving. And regardless of the fact that his target was less than a breath away and that Michael's power raced through his veins, just beneath the surface, ready to be *finally* tapped, he remained silent, static, immobile.

Thomas waited there, his face a mere two inches away, until it was obvious that Michael was not going to make a move. And then Thomas grinned unabashedly.

"I'm impressed, Judas." He drew back then and even turned away, both literally and symbolically offering his back to Michael's attack.

Still, Michael did nothing.

"I was impressed that day, as well," Thomas continued, undaunted by Michael's lack of participation. "I had no idea how you had summoned a sword out of thin air, but I knew it had something to do with you being different." He paused, pondering something. "The only thing I didn't understand, and still don't quite get, was why you thought a simple sword could kill me."

Michael turned in place, following Thomas's movements. As he did, he thought of Thomas's words. Of course, he would believe the sword he'd called to be nothing but a

regular Roman sword. There were few people, mortal and immortal alike, who could look upon Michael's sword and see it as it truly was. And then, only while it was in Michael's right hand.

Thomas laughed then and stopped his pacing to face Michael head-on. "I can't tell you the rush of excitement I experienced when you threw that blade into my brother's belly." He took a step forward and cocked his head to one side, his black eyes glittering with roguish malevolence. "But I can come close. I felt free, Judas. Well and truly free." He took another step forward and stopped to once again stand less than a foot away from him. "All I had to do was hide out in the desert for a few hundred years, and I'd be able to work my magic on the world." He lowered his voice then and leaned in once more. "And what magnificent fun I've had."

"Killing children?" Michael's expression and tone remained impassive.

"Judas, I'm surprised at you." Thomas said in mock indignance. "I assure you I only kill adults." He shrugged. "And the occasional teenager. They irritate me so."

"You're as much a liar today as you were two thousand years ago."

Thomas's brow rose. "Oh?" Comprehension dawned on his face. "Oh. You must be speaking of young Abigail Lucia and her daughter." His expression grew serious then and his tone took on a note of gravity. "Jezebel Lucia can not be allowed to live. She will come to impede everything that I am and can be. I will not allow that to happen again."

"You're afraid of a two-year-old child?"

"Not afraid, Judas. Aware." He leaned in close. "She bears the mark. And I have seen things that you can not." He drew away then, striding back a step to regard Michael from head to toe. "Then again, perhaps I should not try so hard. Perhaps I should simply

let you take care of the problem for me.” He smiled a wicked smile. “Maybe I can get you to shove your sword into her belly as well.”

Lightning split the sky overhead and as an ear-splitting report of thunder cracked the silence, Michael attacked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Time seemed to slow down in that instant, as Abbie watched the men reposition their weapons and take aim at her and her family. There was a space of twenty feet between them, between everything she loved, all she had left in the world, and everything that would take it all away.

A space of twenty feet. And two seconds.

But two seconds was all Alex needed.

The wind once more whipped Abbie’s hair about her face as Alex blurred past her toward the gunmen. Abbie watched in stunned silence as a hazy smudge of color and sound slammed into one of the gunmen, sending him flying into the wall behind him. His gun was knocked from his grip and went skittering across the ground to hit an opposite wall. Alex’s blurred form then moved from him to a second gunman. The man doubled over in pain at the waist and dropped his weapon.

But Alex didn’t make it to the third man before the killer’s gun went off, firing several rounds into the space between them.

Abbie didn’t think. She didn’t have time. She only reacted. She only knew that she wanted the bullets to stop. She raised her hand, waving it before her as if she were wiping fog off a mirror.



And the bullets slowed in mid-air, coming to a stop three feet in front of Abbie.

The air felt thick, heavy. Alex materialized in front of the third gunman and spared a glance at Abbie. His eyes widened when he saw the bullets hovering, spinning slowly, in the dense air between them. And then he turned around and punched the stunned man in the throat, pulling the machine gun from his hands as he went down.

He turned to face Abbie again just as the bullets dropped to the floor.

“That’s some gift,” he said as he strapped the gun over his shoulder and strode back to where she and her mother and daughter were crouched low against the wall.

Abbie turned to Jessie and pressed her palm to the child’s cheek. “Are you okay, baby?”

Jessie answered by reaching out and latching onto her mother with the tenacity of a baby monkey. Abbie held her close and looked over at her mother. “Mami, are you all right?”

Eva-Marie had lost most of the color in her cheeks, but she nodded reassuringly and hugged her daughter and granddaughter. Abbie knew what she was thinking. Abbie knew that she blamed herself for this attack. It was probably best that Abbie not even tell her about the others that had taken place that night.

*Long night.*

“Campbell, come in.” Alex had his radio out again and was speaking into its receiver. He released the button and listened. Static.

“How many more of them do you think there are?” Abbie ventured, speaking softly so that they could hear anyone coming down the hall around the corner.

“I don’t know. But if the damage is as bad as it appears to be, then... A lot.” He adjusted the strap over his shoulder so that the gun lay across his back and then he continued to work on the pile of rubble. He’d gone about half way through it at this point, but there were a few large beams and chunks of metal that slowed him down.

“Abbie...”

Abbie looked down at her mother. Eva-Marie was staring at her in shock and wonder and a touch of fear. Like a ton of bricks, it hit Abbie that her mother had no idea about her being a vampire. She realized that, especially by the eerie light shed by the ground flares, seeing Abbie stop bullets in mid-flight and watching Alex blur into supernatural speed was likely putting her well past her ability to reason with the given situation.

“Oh, Mami.” Abbie knelt down, hoisting Jessie onto her bent knee. “I promise I’ll explain everything when this is over. You have to trust me, okay?”

Eva-Marie gazed at her for several long beats. And then Jessie put her palm against her mother’s cheek. Abbie blinked and turned to her.

As if she were an angel who would always know the right words to say, Jessie smiled and said, “I trust you, Mama.”

Abbie felt tears rush to her eyes. To her right, her mother leaned forward, gently placing a kiss on her forehead. “I trust you as well, mija. You are my beautiful daughter. I love you and I always will.”

The tears that had gathered in Abbie’s eyes spilled onto her cheeks. She wiped them away with her free hand and was about to tell her mother she loved her as well when her ears pricked at a strange sound.

“Alex!” she whispered loudly. Alex stopped his supersonic motion, seeming to materialize out of thin air in front of them. “I hear someone –”

It was all she got out before the grenade rolled around the corner. Abbie stared at it blankly for a second and then she turned and covered her daughter’s body with her own, pressing Jessie’s head tightly against her chest. In her periphery vision, she saw Alex blur into motion one last time, and then a blast wave hit her hard, picking her up into the air and slamming her against the wall.

She took Jessie with her and managed to turn ever-so-slightly before their bodies crashed into the cement. Abbie absorbed the brunt of the blow with her shoulder and then they tumbled to the ground. She heard bones snapping beneath her flesh and knew that her arm was broken. She also felt a searing heat at her back and knew, instinctively, that she’d been hit with something bad.

Without preamble, Jessie commenced screaming at the top of her lungs. Abbie had never heard such a beautiful sound in her life. If Jessie was screaming, then she was alive.

Abbie released her with her good arm and pulled back far enough to look her daughter over. Her face was scraped up and there was a mild cut on the back of her head. Her knuckles had been abraded as well, and she was most likely bruised in a few places, but there didn’t seem to be any broken bones.

Abbie started to turn away to get a look at the damage the grenade had done, but a sharp and deep pain in her back prevented her from moving any more than it took to turn her head at a forty-five degree angle.

Abbie grimaced and felt along her back with her left hand. Her blood ran cold, shocked by sheer creep factor, when her fingers touched upon a long metal pipe embedded to the right of her spinal cord.

“Don’t try to move it.”

She heard Alex’s voice but couldn’t turn to look at him. She waited, automatically listening for the sound of further movement in the hall. After all, once they’d done the grenade thing, wouldn’t they surely come around the corner to finish the job?

“Okay, bite down.”

Abbie had nothing to bite down on, but it didn’t matter, as before she truly even had time to contemplate the meaning of what he’d said, Alex was yanking the pipe from her body. She screamed as heated pain flooded her brain, closing in on her vision like dark drapes.

“Mama!”

“Jesus *Christ!*” Abbie yelled, gritting her teeth and falling forward, jostling Jessie as she did so. Sweat broke out on her brow. Crackling agony ate at her flesh, spreading like fire through her body as the gaping wound in her mid-section began to heal. She barely noticed the bone in her arm mending itself, the pain in her back so overshadowed it. Abbie choked on the giggle that climbed into her throat. She just hoped her mother wasn’t watching.

Her mother...

“Mami?”

There was no answer. Abbie lifted up and turned, ignoring the remaining pain that shot through her form as she twisted fully around. Her eyes scanned the wreckage behind her.

“Abbie –”

Whatever Alex had been about to say, Abbie cut short when she spotted a pair of legs sticking out from underneath a board and a spraying of cement dust a few yards away. She didn’t even fully register what she was seeing; the strange angle that the legs were laying in, the huge gashes in the jeans and flesh beneath them. She simply jumped up and ran to her mother’s side.

“Help me!” she yelled at Alex as she began to pull the rubble off of her mother’s prone form. Alex didn’t argue. He moved to her side and helped her with the heavier items until Eva-Marie was uncovered.

She lay face-down. Blood pooled across the floor beneath her.

Abbie reached down and, without heed to all of the warnings she’d heard about moving injured people, she gently rolled her mother over.

Perhaps it was because, deep down, she knew that waiting wouldn’t do any good. Maybe, subconsciously, she knew it was already too late.

Abbie stared down into her mother’s face. It was pale in the darkness. The grenade had blown the ground flares to smithereens, casting the area once more into black. Her eyes were open, but unseeing. A huge slash across her cheek had stopped bleeding.

Abbie’s gaze slid downward. Numerous lacerations decorated her body. Some were shallow or superficial. Others were not. But it was the section of pipe that protruded from

her mother's chest that Abbie's gaze settled upon. It was a piece from the same pipe that Alex had just pulled out of her back.

Unthinking, Abbie reached out to touch it and noticed that her hand was shaking.

"Abbie, don't –"

"I have to pull it out," she said softly. Her tone was devoid of sensation. *I imagine it hurts really bad*, she thought. *She's in pain*.

"No, Abbie." Alex stood and bent over her, reaching down to pull her up with him. Jessie pressed against her mother's side, unsure of what to do, but knowing only that she needed to be close. "She's gone." Alex gently grasped Abbie by the upper arm and began to lift when a scratching sound drew his immediate attention to the hallway ahead of them.

"Oh shit –"

Alex never finished the sentiment, as the remaining gunmen from Anson's posse rounded the corner, brandishing their weapons as if they were facing an entire army.

Abbie glanced up from her mother's body in time to see them line up in formation at the end of the hall. There were at least half a dozen of them.

They opened fire.

Abbie raised her right hand, utterly oblivious to fact that the bones inside of it were still restoring themselves. She waved her hand in front of her like a fan.

A few bullets slid past her, embedding themselves in the walls and ground. She felt one enter her left thigh and exit her right hip. She ignored it. She concentrated.

The second barrage of bullets slowed in mid-air and stopped half way between the gunmen and Abbie. They spun in place and the air around them grew thick. The atmosphere felt electrically charged.

Thunder rolled somewhere in the distance.

The bullets dropped to the ground.

Alex blurred past her into motion, moving from one gunman to the next, as he had done with the others. Before he could reach them all, the remaining men left standing got off another round, but Abbie stopped those bullets as well.

A wave of weakness and dizziness washed over her as Alex dispatched the last camouflaged attacker. She closed her eyes and the last of the bullets that she'd frozen in place dropped from their spinning stations in the air and clanked to the floor.

And then it was suddenly quiet.

Abbie glanced up at Alex. He was standing in the center of the group of prone shooters, his eyes locked on something beyond Abbie.

Abbie froze.

She realized that she no longer felt Jessie bumping anxiously up against her side.

She no longer heard her crying.

Abbie's brow furrowed. She turned to face her daughter, but then, a second later, realized that she hadn't moved at all. She was still kneeling there, staring at Alex. Unable to look. Unwilling to look.

Alex's horrified gaze slid to Abbie's face. He stared at her, his expression reflecting everything that Abbie had ever really feared.

*No.*

And then she really did turn around. It was the most difficult thing she had ever done in her life. She fought every muscle, every tendon, every living cell within her body that screamed for her to stay where she was, to not check, to not find what she knew she would find.

Abbie stared, almost unseeing, at the tiny form that lay sprawled two feet away. Jessie's eyes were closed. Abbie knew she was asleep.

But her chest did not move.

Her eyelids did not flutter. Surely, they would flutter?

Not even knowing she was doing so, Abbie began crawling to her daughter's side. In Abbie's mind, she was utterly unaware that she had moved at all. She could only stare down at her daughter, at the blood stain spread across her baby girl's neck and chest.

*It was the one I missed*, she thought, absently. It was another voice in her head, speaking to her from far off. Jessie had been hit by one of the bullets Abbie hadn't stopped. One of the first bullets. *It was the bullet that hit me...*

In the next instant, her own heart officially stopped beating. She began to rock back and forth. With arms she did not feel, she scooped up her daughter's limp form and pulled her against her chest. Jessie did not wrap around her mother like a monkey. She hung, sagging and lifeless, in her mother's arms.

*Rag doll*, Abbie thought. *My baby is a rag doll.*

Behind her, standing still in the intersecting hallways, Alexander Temple watched as Abigail Lucia hugged her dead baby against her chest and continued rocking.

Thunder rolled somewhere above them.



## **Chapter Twenty-four**

Michael hit the wall hard, cracking the plaster beneath him as he dropped to his feet on the ground. He spun instantly, getting his arms back up as Thomas barreled into him, knocking them both back against the same wall. More plaster cracked and crumbled to the ground. Michael pushed off of the wall, taking Thomas into the air with him.

They were fighting like mortals, and Michael didn't even know why. There was too much anger within Michael, and too much of a need for slow, painful revenge within Thomas.

The ceiling in the Watson Building was two stories high. Michael climbed through the air and managed to get his right hand around Thomas's throat. Thomas raised his right hand and Michael let him go before he could strike.

Thomas fell through the air toward the ground on the first floor. He hit the hard wood and it splintered beneath him. He lay still for only a moment before pulling himself back up off the ground and gaining his feet just as Michael landed beside him.

Giving him no time to retreat, Michael reached out and pressed the palm of his right hand against the exposed flesh above the buttons of Thomas's black shirt.

For the first time in many centuries, Michael called forth a power he almost never used. Through his fingertips, he sent out vicious licks of intense force. They entered Thomas's body with a vengeance, commanding a horrible authority on the very cells that made up his tissue and bone.

Thomas suddenly stood frozen to the spot, his back arched, his head thrown back as he bellowed in pain.

Crystals of saline rime formed around Michael's hand as he pulled the salt from Thomas's body through his very touch. It was excruciating, Michael knew. And it only worked on vampires.

But it required that the touch not be broken. Thomas was a very old, very strong vampire. He lowered his head, his eyes now burning with such intense hatred that they had taken on an eerie amber-like glow. With great effort, Thomas wedged his left hand beneath Michael's arm and shoved hard.

Michael moved forward, attempting to maintain the contact, but Thomas fell as the touch was lessened, letting his body drop to the ground. The motion knocked Michael off balance and he stumbled forward.

He caught himself and turned in time to see Thomas disappear from where he'd been lying on the floor. He simply vanished.

*Not again.*

Without hesitation, Michael pulled the gun from his shoulder holster and brought it up.

"Nasty trick, Judas." Thomas's voice was behind him.

Michael spun and fired off two rounds. The semi-automatic Glock held fourteen. Michael decided to use them right then and there. He turned in a circle, evenly firing off the rounds in every direction.

Thomas's answering grunt of pain was all the reward he needed for an empty chamber.

Thomas's form shimmered before him and solidified into view once more. Michael wasn't certain where the bullet had entered, but it had exited through his collarbone; a chunk of flesh was torn away from his shoulder and throat.

"Is this the best you can do, Thomas?" Michael asked softly. His British accent lent an infuriatingly sophisticated note to his taunting words. "Call forth a couple of bugs and then disappear into thin air?" Michael strode slowly toward Thomas, who stood still, his shoulder healing before their eyes.

"Where is all of your great and wonderful power, Thomas? Where is the magic you talk of conquering nations with?"

Thomas's hate-filled gaze narrowed on Michael. He opened his mouth to retort and then stopped. His eyes widened slightly. He cocked his head to one side as if listening. And then he smiled and his expression became serene. "Can't you feel it, Judas?" he said softly, raising his arms palm-up at his sides. "It is done! My disciples have succeeded."

Michael's heart skipped a beat. A lump of pure cold formed in his gut, sending a numbing fear coursing through his veins. Could he mean...

"She is dead." Thomas leveled his dark gaze on the ancient vampire. "You have failed, Judas. Once more, your star has led you astray."

Michael's world tilted on its axis and his vision became a blind, red-tinted haze. With a bellow of rage, he rushed forward, pushed too far to care whether or not the move would get him killed.

Before he could reach Thomas, however, the black-clad vampire raised his right hand and held it, palm-out, toward Michael. A bolt of energy that resembled lightning shot forth from the center of Thomas's palm and slammed into Michael's chest.

Michael was instantly thrown back several yards as the arc of crackling force encircled his body in a rippling, hissing cocoon of painful power. Michael could feel the energy seeping into his pores, striking him at his core. It was relentless. It drove the wind from his lungs, the strength from his limbs. All coherent thought vanished from his mind.

He hit the ground hard and rolled several feet before coming to a stunned stop, face-down.

“Is that more along the lines of what you were looking for, Judas?” Thomas asked as he slowly strolled toward Michael’s prone form.

Stars swam before Michael’s eyes. His body felt almost comfortably numb where it lay motionless on the cool hard wood. With great effort, he lifted his head and turned it in Thomas’s direction.

“I never could understand what it was he saw in you, Judas.” Thomas came to stand beside him, less than a foot away. Michael stared at his black dress shoes.

“You betrayed him and failed him. And now you’ve done it twice.”

Michael closed his eyes. He let Thomas’s voice fade away, pulling his consciousness inward, letting his strength pool at his core. Whether Thomas spoke the truth or not, there were two ways Michael could end this tonight. He could allow himself to be defeated and Thomas would live. God only knew what havoc he would wreak on the world.

Or, Michael could win. He could take Thomas down and end it here and now.

Despite his own mounting dread and grief, Michael knew that the latter was his only real choice. He could not let Thomas live.

With the decision made, he opened his mouth to speak. Only a whisper came out.

Thomas chuckled. “What did you say, Judas? I didn’t quite catch that.” He knelt beside Michael and then reached down to grab a handful of his thick black hair. With brute force, he yanked Michael’s head back up until they were at eye level.

Michael’s arms dangled uselessly at his sides. He closed his eyes and tried, once more, to speak.

“One more time, brother,” Thomas taunted and leaned in close, offering Michael his right ear.

Like quick silver, Michael raised his right hand and wrapped it once more around Thomas’s throat. He squeezed hard, sending his power shooting fast and violent through his fingers and into the vampire’s body. Thomas gasped and choked as the salty rime formed around Michael’s fingers at an alarming rate. It was much faster than it had been the first time.

Michael was much angrier.

He rose, pulling Thomas up with him.

Thomas tried to backpedal, but Michael squeezed harder, cutting off the man’s air supply. Thomas raised his hand to shoot Michael with another bolt of power, but Michael’s left hand wrapped around Thomas’s wrist and salt began to form around that hand as well.

Thomas closed his eyes against the pain.

“I *said*,” Michael hissed, vehemently, “My. Name. Is. Not. Judas.” He jerked Thomas’s body with each word, sending salt crystals cascading to the floor.

Thomas's face was now a bluish white and Michael could feel that he'd pulled nearly all of the salt from the man's body. With undisguised contempt, Michael released him, letting him drop to the floor.

Michael stood towering over him, all fury and force. Lightning lit up the interior of the building and thunder crashed overhead.

Thomas gazed up at the man standing above him. He was struggling to remain conscious. Michael knew what he was suffering right now. Weakness, dizziness, heart pains and nausea. And fear.

"One day, a vampire will be born among us who has the power to turn back time," Michael said calmly, almost conversationally, as he raised his right arm again, palm toward the ceiling. A light began to pool above it. "Until then, I can not change the past." The light above his hand grew and then pulsed, extending and stretching into a long strip of ultra-white radiance.

"But I can do one thing," he continued, his tone growing softer. The light solidified, then, and Michael lowered his hand. For the first time in two-thousand years, he held his sword firmly in his grip.

"I can make it right," Michael said, letting the sword rest at his side.

Thomas Bar-Josef gazed up at the man standing over him. He was a man and yet not one. If Thomas had possessed the strength to speak, he would have said two things. He knew he was about to die. There were just a few things he wanted squared away before he did.

The first phrase he'd have spoken would have been a question. He wanted to know Judas's real name. He'd always suspected that Judas was more than he claimed to be.

Now, as he gaped up at him, he realized the verity in his suspicions. For Judas was no longer clothed in a gray business suit, but in glowing raiment of white, black and gold. His eyes blazed like blue flame in his face. But it wasn't the eyes or the clothing or even the magnificent sword that astounded Thomas the most. It was the raven black wings that stretched into forever behind him. The dark wings of an angel.

The second was a confession. In fact, he would have spoken it first. A declaration about something that had happened two millennia ago. A confession about a man who had been resurrected from the dead.

Above him, Michael raised his sword arm once more and held the shining weapon over Thomas's body, point down. Thomas closed his eyes.

With a mighty thrust, Michael drove the sword through his chest and into the wooden floor beneath him. Then he released the hilt and stepped back.

Lightning flashed and thunder roared across the sky. Energy crackled across Thomas's body and along the blade. Then, without warning, that energy arced across the distance between the sword and Michael, encasing him in the strange lightning before he could react.

Michael cried out and fell to his knees, throwing back his head as wave after wave of power forced itself into and through him. It swirled inside his mind, twisted itself around his soul, until he thought he would explode from the pressure. Behind closed lids, images began to flash.

He saw himself placing his hand to a young boy's forehead, curing him of epilepsy. And then he was healing a young girl who was sick with a fever. Next came an old blind man. A crippled woman. One after another.

Michael realized what he was seeing. He realized, then, what was happening. He could feel it being sucked from Thomas's body to his own. He was taking the vampire's power, absorbing his abilities as he died. It was the sword.

He'd never used it to kill a vampire before. Even though, for two-thousand years, he fully believed he had.

Hope filled Michael. If he could truly absorb all of Thomas's gifts, then there was a chance! There was a chance he could save Jessie.

The healings stopped behind his closed lids and then he felt himself growing inside, becoming stronger, more powerful. There were flickering images, times and places seen through visions like dreams in an endless night. He felt his body shimmer in and out of existence, flashing here and gone and back again, as he absorbed Thomas's invisibility gift. Along with it came the ability to mold his body, change his form. He felt his face take on the mask of many visages, young and old.

Next came a crawling sensation in his mind. He heard the distant sound of crickets in the night and it grew into the endless chirping buzz of locusts. He cried out again as a sixth power slammed into him, this time searing the palms of his hands and scorching its pathway along his arms.

And then, as lightning flashed and lit up the interior of the building one last time, the crackling energy nimbus surrounding him and Thomas began to wane. The glow dimmed and disappeared entirely.

Michael fell forward and blinked. There had been one power missing. It was the only one he really wanted. The only one he needed.



Confusion now added itself to the anguished chorus of emotions swimming through Michael. *I don't understand.* Where the hell was Thomas's seventh power? *I just don't understand...*

Thomas lay still, pinned beneath a sword that now looked no different than any simple iron alloy weapon, its blade shining only slightly in the dim light. Michael remained on his knees, catching his breath. His body ached and yet burned with new and untapped strength.

The storm had stopped raging outside and the rain that fell on the roof far above had settled into a gentle tapping.

Michael at last stood and slowly made his way once more to Thomas's side. With one hand, he reached out and grasped the hilt of his sword. He wrenched the blade from the floorboards and pulled it from Thomas's form.

The moment the blade left the fallen vampire's remains, Thomas's body began to change. Little by little, bit by bit, it collapsed. His clothes disintegrated, the flesh beneath crumbling into fine red-gold sand. From his feet to his legs to his hands and arms and, finally, his head, he became a mound of desert, thousands of miles from his homeland.

Michael watched with a mixture of exhaustion, numb grief, and strange fascination as the sand began to swirl in the charged air. It rose in a spiral of gold toward the ceiling. Michael's gaze followed it to an open window on the second floor. The sand swirled toward the window, shimmering in the light, and then floated out into the early morning dawn beyond.

## Chapter Twenty-five

Abbie gazed lovingly down at the infant in her arms. Jessie was latched securely onto her breast, nursing like a pro, her enormous, bright eyes staring up at her mother with fondness. Abbie smiled and Jessie raised her right arm and then very gently, somewhat clumsily, patted her mother's chest. Abbie laughed, placing her left hand over her daughter's tiny fingers.

And then Jessie was waddling toward her, her footed pajamas shuffling along the tiled floor of the kitchen. She had an apple in her hands. Abbie stopped doing the dishes and knelt down to her level. Jessie put the apple to her lips, took a small scraping bite and then held it out toward her mother.

"Oh, thank you, baby. Is that apple for me? Are you going to share your apple with Mama?"

Jessie smiled broadly. She had four teeth; two on the top, two on the bottom.

"Appetish!"

Abbie laughed and kissed her on the forehead.

Then she stood back up and turned around. She looked down. Jessie gazed up at her through the darkening room. The sun had gone down. Abbie pulled the blankets up to her daughter's chin and gently caressed her cheek with the back of her forefinger. "You have sweet dreams, okay little heart?"

"Kay."

"I love you so much, Jessie."

"I wuv you too."

Abbie's eyes widened. She'd finally said it. Her heart skipped a beat and her chest swelled. Tears leapt to her eyes. "Oh, baby girl. You are my everything. My heart and soul. Have some sweet dreams for Mama, okay?"

"Kay."

Abbie turned away, knowing she would go to her room then and write in her journal.

She stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind her.

In front of her, an early spring morning illuminated a park beside a pond. Baby ducks were huddled close to their mother. Gulls circled overhead and children were fighting over the jungle gym, others seated in the sand box.

Jessie grabbed hold of the chains on either side of the baby swing that she was sitting in. "Can you give me an underdog?" she asked, her voice raised in excitement.

"Are you *sure* you want an underdog?"

"Yeah!"

"Positive?" Abbie grinned, pulling the swing back with both hands.

"Yeah! Yeah!"

"Okay, here it comes!" Abbie pulled the swing back another step and then rushed forward, pushing the swing up as far as she could before ducking low beneath it and letting it go. Jessie squealed behind her. Abbie turned to see her daughter's cotton-candy hair flying about her head like Einstein's. Jessie laughed and yelled "High wike a biwd!"

Abbie clapped and put her hands up. "Yeah! Go girl! Fly high like a bird!"

High like a bird.

Abbie looked down. Jessie's face looked like an angel's. Thick lashes brushed the tops of her cheeks. A white-blond curl tapered off beneath her chin. Abbie rocked back

and forth. It was all she could do. Her body was a temple of misery. Her soul a spire of pain. It was a bottomless pain, without end, that kept digging deeper and deeper, well past the point of no return.

A pain so bad that she barely felt it.

She rocked back and forth, her body moving of its own accord. She closed her eyes. She was too far gone to hear the men talking behind her. She was in another world, a world of endless shadow, so she didn't notice the British accent or the soft footsteps that came up beside her.

Nothing mattered. There was nothing left.

A gentle touch brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. She felt it as if she'd been dipped in Novocain, from head to toe. It was barely there. She was barely there. She didn't hear the sound of Syndicate vampires moving about the hallways around her. She didn't see them carting off the unconscious bodies of the gunmen. She didn't notice the Syndicate clean up crew as they worked at disguising the wreckage. She didn't even feel the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

"Mama, are you crying?"

"Yes, baby. Mama's crying," she said softly, her voice a thousand miles away.

As if it were the only thing that was real in this new pretend world, she felt Jessie's hand on her cheek.

"Why you crying? Do you need a Band-Aid?"

Abbie opened her eyes. She gazed down at her daughter. But it was not the infant, nor the swinging little girl, nor the dreaming baby that stared back up at her. It was a

toddler with dried blood across her neck and shoulder, but with cheeks and lips that were a healthy pink.

“Can I kiss it bettow, Mama?” Jessie asked, her expression concerned.

The world around Abbie closed in on her so fast, it was like she’d been sucked through a tube to come out with a popping sound, there, kneeling once more in reality.

“Christ, I don’t believe it,” someone whispered beside her. “Someone get me some salt on the double!”

There was a buzz of excitement around her as people she hadn’t known were there ran around her, bustling with purpose and working under a time schedule. Someone came running up to them and knelt down.

“She doesn’t need it, Michael.”

“Anna! What are you –”

“A vision.”

Abbie barely listened to what they were saying. She’d yet to look up. She stared down into her daughter’s eyes, not believing what she saw. Her mind was playing a trick on her. It couldn’t take the pain. This wasn’t real.

A harsh twinge of throbbing pain shot through her leg and side as her body continued to heal the damage the bullet had done. The shattered bone in her right hip was pulling itself together, from the tiniest smashed fragments to the larger, split chunks. She grimaced against the terrible discomfort, but did not close her eyes.

The reality of the pain grounded her. The world solidified into present day and time and everything that was factual, existent and true. She just gazed down at her baby girl. Who gazed back.

“Jessie?”

“Mama, I’m hungwy. Can you get me some soy, pwease? And some wice cwackers? Wots of ‘em?” She nodded as she spoke, as if she were pulling the Jedi mind trick on her mother.

“Jessie...”

“Abbie, she’s one of us. She’s made the change.”

Abbie recognized the voice now. It was Michael, right beside her. With great effort, she turned her head and glanced up at him. He looked deep into her eyes, reaching into her core. “She’s alive, Abbie. She’s alive.” He palmed her cheek gently and nodded once. Apparently everyone knew the Jedi mind trick.

Abbie turned back to her daughter. Jessie was trying to sit up. Abbie lessened her grip and Jessie pushed herself up off of her lap and stood facing her. As she did often, the toddler grabbed a lock of Abbie’s hair and rubbed it between her little fingers. “Can we get out of heow?”

And then Abbie’s heart began to beat again. It slammed against her rib cage with brute force, knocking a breath from her lungs with a whoosh. She moved forward and wrapped her arms around her daughter, squeezing her as hard as she dared squeeze. There were no words for this, so she said nothing. She just held her living, breathing daughter, pressing her ear to Jessie’s chest to hear her own little heart beating rapidly within it.

“What’s wong wif Abuewa?”

Abbie hesitantly pulled away. Her daughter was staring at something over Abbie’s shoulder.

*Mami.*

Tears welled within her eyes once again and she shook her head, placing her hand to her daughter's cheek. "She's asleep, little one. She's going to sleep for a long time."

"But it's morning. It's time to wake up," Jessie said, her expression confused.

"I know, baby. But Abuela is... tired."

Jessie pulled away from her mother and Abbie couldn't help taking hold of one of her hands. She wasn't ready to break contact just yet. She turned as Jessie moved around her. She thought of stopping her daughter, not wanting her to see her grandmother as she was. But Abbie wouldn't want someone keeping *her* from a loved one's side. Didn't everybody have the right to say goodbye?

Anna had been crouching down along with them, and she scooted out of the way as Jessie brushed past her to walk to where Eva-Marie lay, unmoving, several feet away.

Michael watched as Jessie dropped to her knees beside her grandmother and reached out to touch the woman's face.

"Abuewa, it's time to wake up!" she said. There was an impatient note to her tone. "No sweeping now!"

Eva-Marie's eyes fluttered open.

Michael's heart skipped.

Abbie's eyes widened.

Anna said nothing and did not seem surprised.

"Abuewa, no sweeping, okay? Wet's get some food."

Michael stared, stunned into immobility and silence, as Eva-Marie's wounds began to heal before his eyes. After a few seconds, the woman sat up and looked about herself, a confused expression on her face.

Michael's gaze slid to Jessie, who was once more standing and offering her little hand to her grandmother. The light from the portable lamps reflected off of the small gold "J" on a chain around her neck.

A voice sounded in Michael's memory.

*"Oh, you of little faith..."*



## **Epilogue**

“What on earth are you doing?” Michael came to stand beside Abbie, who was seated on the white plush carpet in one of the bedrooms of her new, Syndicate-financed home. She was surrounded by beer bottles – dozens of them. Most were still full, but nearly all of them had been stripped of their labels. A neat pile of the labels sat beside Abbie’s right leg.

Abbie glanced up, lowering the bottle from her lips. She swallowed and then glanced around. “I need seventy-two of them.”

Without waiting for a reply from him, she proceeded to pull the label off of the beer she was drinking, and managed to do so without it tearing.

“That’s sixty-four. I just need eight more.”

“Abbie –”

He stopped mid-sentence, when she suddenly dropped the beer she’d been holding and her head slammed back against the wall behind her.

Images danced before her closed lids. She was laying somewhere cool. Her eyes were closed. She felt fresh, damp dirt beneath her cheek. She forced her eyes open. Her vision was blurry, but she waited for it to focus. There was something red in front of her.

They solidified into view. Berries. Lots of them, surrounded by glossy green and yellow leaves. She heard water nearby, splashing against a shore. On the ground beside her, beneath the berries, was a hand and arm.

She recognized the hand.

And then she was opening her eyes. Michael was kneeling over her, his hand behind her head. Apparently, he was worried she would slam it into the wall again.

“Michael, I know where Wasim is!”

Michael didn’t hesitate. He stood and pulled a phone out of his pocket, flipping it open to dial.

Abbie ran her hand through her hair and pushed against the wall. “He’s in a grove of catkins! Right next to the shore line on Lake Michigan! He’s alive. He’s weak and won’t be alive for long if you don’t get to him soon, but he’s alive!” She stood and looked around her feet. “I can stop at sixty-four.”

“Anna, tell the search team to look for catkin berries. Abbie had a vision. He’s alive.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Wasim let his eyes close again. The sound of the Lake Michigan waves crashing on the shore became quieter. He could hear his heart beat. It was erratic. Tired.

After everything he’d been through – everything he’d done...

He wondered about Abbie and Michael. And Jessie. Had they made it? Were they alive? Was Anson dead?

And then he exhaled. He was so sleepy.

“Over here! I’ve found him!”

Someone spoke through a tunnel, far away, in another world. With a body that was nearly entirely numb, he felt himself being moved. He no longer cared.

There was a moment of pain on the inside of his elbow, but this soon deadened as well, as his entire being became anesthetized.

He floated, somewhere between this world and the next, between consciousness and unconsciousness, and, were he able to form coherent thought at that moment, he'd have realized that he was no longer thinking.

No longer dreaming. No longer hearing or feeling. There was nothing.

Brenna Drake stared down into the face of her patient. He was sleeping. He wouldn't know it. To him, it would feel like nothing. It was a vampire's restorative sleep. He'd lost all but a trace of the salt in his body. Salt which she now pumped back into him as quickly as the IV would allow her to.

He would live.

**The End**