

The book cover features a muscular man from the back, his skin smeared with red blood. He is looking down at a motorcycle in the distance. The background is dark with a bright, jagged light source and lightning bolts. The title is in a distressed, red, stencil-like font at the top, and the author's name is in a white, distressed font at the bottom.

NO REST for the WICKED

A.M. RILEY

Loose Id

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“When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That is my religion.”

—Abraham Lincoln

Chapter One

At ten o'clock on a Friday night on the streets of Hollywood, the sound of sirens aren't likely to turn a lot of heads. Even if those sirens are accompanied by police helicopters, their search lights strafing Sunset Boulevard, swinging to illuminate the dark cracks and crevices behind and around Grauman's Chinese theater, occasionally clashing with spotlights midair like some kind of matter-antimatter event.

And that thought you can blame on the movie I just saw here in the theater.

The latest sci-fi feature had opened amid the proverbial glamour of Hollywood, complete with lines that circled the city block, clowns and street musicians, vendors peddling cheap flashing lights, Darth Vader and Spider-Man soliciting five bucks per photo from the tourists, and an exsanguinated body in the men's room stall.

That last was the reason I was standing in the rain, chatting with a Marilyn Monroe look-alike, instead of in a nice warm bed fucking the socks off a certain somebody.

Okay, first let me explain.

It was a Friday night and Peter and I were, for lack of a better term, "on a date." That's right, dinner and a movie. With a good chance of an aperitif at his place later.

Now, if you know me, you know dating's not exactly my shtick. But after years of finding Peter conveniently available whenever I was in the mood to drop in, I'd found Peter inconveniently being "courted" by a younger man and, well, I felt called upon to step up to the plate, as they say.

"You want to see that?" We were near a construction site, the plywood walls built around it plastered with posters for one movie.

Peter dragged his gaze away from the poster he'd been ogling. "Nah," he said.

"Yes you do."

He sneaked another peek at the life-size image of a gorgeous young man in a spandex costume with a little logo on the left breast. "When I was a kid I wanted to be James Kirk," Peter confessed sheepishly.

I eyed the poster. My guess was Peter had wanted to do James Kirk, but I had an intuition suggesting this would be like suggesting he'd wanted to do his priest, so I kept my yap shut.

"Well, then. Let's go see it next week."

There, I'd surprised him. "Okay."

Jonathan, the aforesaid young man, had taken Peter to some symphonic performance a few weeks previously. Peter kept telling me that he and Jonathan were just friends, but nobody lays down a couple hundred bucks on tickets to sit in a stuffy room and listen to men play violins unless he has ulterior motives. A man is a man; I don't care how pink cheeked and bright eyed that man may be. So, not to be outdone, I'd gone whole hog. Gotten tickets for the opening week in the main theater at the Grauman's Chinese, reservations at Peter's favorite restaurant. Kind of place you have to wear a tie.

"Hang on." Peter brushed at invisible lint on my shoulder. "Turn around," he commanded.

So I did the runway turn there in his hallway. "Peter, we're going to be late."

When I faced him again, he had that smile he sometimes gets. Like he knew a secret about me that even I didn't know. A look in his eyes that made me want to tear off both our suits and drag him into the bedroom. It'd been a long time since I'd seen Peter anything but worried and exhausted. Made the whole damned rigmarole worth it.

Things started going wrong right off the bat, of course. Firstly, it was the coldest day on record since 1922 in the city of Los Angeles. Rain poured from the sky as if from a bucket. The traffic was an unholy mess from the mountains to the sea, and the restaurant I'd made reservations at had a flood in the basement that blew out their generators and shut the place down.

"It's okay," Peter said. And he still had that smile. "We'll pick up something on our way back to my place."

Then while we stood in line at the theater, it started to rain, again. Peter had to give his umbrella to a couple of old people in front of us, so we got good and wet and waited in line pressed up under the eaves of a pawn shop, trying to stay out of the direct downpour.

Peter's head was damp enough that the tips of his short blond hair were dark. The ends of his fingers, when I surreptitiously grabbed his hand, were freezing cold. I could feel water dribbling down the back of my neck, uncomfortably combining with the itch of the wool suit.

But none of that mattered, really. Peter's cheeks and the tip of his nose were pink, the way they got when he was happy. And as we stood there, I observed a couple of boyish hops for glee. In the theater proper he actually sneaked his hand over and squeezed my leg, and I figured payback afterward was going to be something to write home about.

My mistake was running into the men's room before leaving. Damned buttered popcorn goes through me like chaff. Anyway, the minute I walked through the door I sensed it. Something particular and very familiar.

The place wasn't crowded, but there were two guys standing at the urinal. They both gave me a look and shifted their shoulders, dropping eyes immediately. I'm a big guy, and men tend to do that when they feel vulnerable. For instance, when they've got their pants unzipped and their dicks out. Anyway, neither looked up and into the mirrors again, which was a good thing because it gave me a few minutes to suss out the source of the particular something.

The end stall was closed and, I noted, jammed shut. Both of the dudes finished their business without looking or commenting, while I jerked on the door a few times until whatever it was tore loose, and I could swing it open.

A young Caucasian male had been propped, fully dressed, on the pot. Legs spread, head back and resting against the wall, lips parted, eyes closed, but not in sleep. Deader than the proverbial doornail. He was white white and still, with two big red holes in his neck. He hadn't been there long. I guessed maybe an hour, maybe less. I discerned this by running a few tests that a crime scene tech would gag to observe.

I heard the door to the men's room swing open, footsteps on the tile, and then Peter calling, "Hey, Adam, you almost finished?"

"Sure, Peter, give me a second."

What to do with my unfortunate friend?

Because the minute Peter found out there was a dead body in there, our date was over.

Peter's a homicide detective, and he'd undoubtedly feel it was his duty to call in a dead body. Then stand around waiting for the officers to answer the call, then helpfully inform said officers of anything he might have noted and then, probably, end up working through the night.

The man was dead. Had been dead, as I said, for at least an hour. What the hell difference could it make if Peter spent a few hours relaxing and maybe getting some for the first time in weeks?

Not that I'm selfish or anything. Okay, hell yes, I'm selfish. In the past six months, I don't think Peter has taken one day off.

Close on the heels of the investigation resulting from the death of yours truly, Peter had been assigned the murder of Howard Snipes, a flamboyant former child actor frequently in the news before he had been found at the foot of a flight of stairs, a red silk scarf knotted around his throat, face blue, tongue extended—an image that had hit every tabloid's front page almost before the body had made it to the coroner's office.

It had been one of those investigations cursed from the get-go. From the compromised crime scene to questions of jurisdiction and a challenged will.

And then one day a former girlfriend had simply walked into the LA Sheriff's Department Compton office and confessed.

Peter had a break. For the first time in years. And I planned to take full advantage of it.

Here's something I'll tell you from the unique perspective of having all eternity to look forward to: no job in the world is as important as you think it is. Peter works too hard. I've told him so before. We've argued about it a bit actually. There are over one thousand homicides in the city of Los Angeles in a year. No way these guys are ever going to catch up. What's one more stiff, I reasoned.

Rigor hadn't begun to set in, so I was able to push the corpse's head down between his knees, pulling his feet up and his arms around so that his body assumed a kind of ball shape. Which I fitted neatly onto the toilet seat. Then I kept the door locked, pulled myself up and over the stall wall, and came out of the stall next door.

Peter watched me worriedly. “What are you doing?”

“Door was stuck,” I said. I turned on the tap and washed my hands, raising my head to check my reflection in the mirror and, as usual, getting that small shock when all I saw was the row of stalls behind me. I looked away from the mirror and saw that Peter was still eyeing the bathroom stall door. “You want to stop for something to eat or you want takeout?” I asked him.

But Peter had begun shaking the stall door, frowning. And then he leaned over and looked underneath it.

Dammit all to heck.

He stood up, flipping open his cell phone, just giving me that *look*.

Etcetera, as they say.

Peter sets a higher standard for me than I feel is reasonable, given my past, but he read me the riot act anyway. Cheesed off at me for tampering with the crime scene and the body, he commanded that I put everything back exactly as I had found it.

Meanwhile he secured the scene. He flashed his badge at a guy who tried to enter and then jammed the door closed with a trash bin. He brought out a slim black notebook from his inner pocket and licked at the pencil nub before starting to jot down notes.

“Exactly as you found him,” he said to me.

“Yeah yeah yeah.”

It was when I was lifting the stiff off the toilet that a derringer fell off his lap and clattered onto the tile floor.

“Don't touch it,” snapped Peter needlessly. He dug around in his pocket and brought out a pair of gloves. Peter's such a Boy Scout, he carries them with him everywhere. He gingerly lifted the gun by the corner of the handle and gave it a tentative sniff. He looked at me. “It's been fired.”

“Fat lot of good it did him.” I propped the body up as best I could. I had no idea where the gun had been originally, so I just stuffed it in a pocket. Peter had already begun looking for the bullet.

I was a homicide detective for a bit too, and even I could feel the wonkiness of the situation. Here was a guy totally drained, and no blood anywhere. Not even a dribble on his shirt. Holding a piece, but with no sign of a gun having been fired in the small room.

"It didn't happen in here," I told Peter, who stood in the center of the room, head down, hand rubbing at his still-damp hair in that thoughtful way of his. It made the short blond ends stick up in peaks at the back. Which made me think of my original agenda for the night, which made me sound a little snarly.

Peter knew me so well he could feel every nuance in my voice, and he shot a look at me. His eyes were tired. "I'm sorry," he said. And I immediately felt like the worm I am.

"No biggie."

"I just need to wait until a unit arrives," he told me. "Then we can leave."

I didn't express my doubts about this statement but proceeded to check out the corpse. He had been youngish, midtwenties I'd have guessed. I searched the body and found his wallet, still full of cash and a couple of credit cards that identified him as a Justin Lake out of Thousand Oaks. Thirty-two.

"He looks more like a kid," I said. He was dressed in a green hoodie with the recognizable skater company logo emblazoned across its front pocket. This had been pulled back by his attacker to reveal a band T-shirt. His feet were long and bedecked in checkered black-and-white skater shoes.

Peter had finished his perusal of the scene and was once more staring at the corpse. "Is he going to..." His brow acquired that pained wrinkle it always did when we talked about my "condition."

"No, I don't think so." It's not a science, this thing. Plenty of people get turned accidentally, yours truly being a perfect example. But our bloodless friend had a sticky, soft, meat-gone-bad feel to him that usually meant he was just dead. Not pre-undead.

"Look at this," I said, drawing back his sleeve.

The watch on his wrist would have set Peter back two months' pay. Who wears a Rolex with a Target T-shirt? Bit of an enigma, this Mr. Lake. On the back of his hand, one of those marker stamps you get at a club. A pale blue cloud.

"Why leave the watch?" I asked. Most of the time the victim was robbed as well as drained. Undead creatures of the night need cash as much as anybody. Not everyone's lucky enough to have a deal like mine.

I turned Lake's head a little to check out the bite marks. They were perfect. Round and black-red in the center where the remaining blood had coagulated, with clean pink edges.

"Never seen such a neat job," I told Peter.

The human being in Peter warred with the homicide detective. He wanted to know more, but he didn't want to know more. The homicide detective won. "What do you mean?"

"Well, see. A lot of guys kind of lose control, start chewing before they're done. There's no bite marks to indicate that kind of savagery." I checked out the closely shaved skin of Lake's cheeks and neck. "Not even bruising. And he didn't spill, didn't drool out onto the floor, or spatter. You know what I mean." Peter had seen me eat from the blood bags he delivered to me. It was probably like watching a pig feeding at a trough.

He looked at me, his dark blue eyes troubled. Six months ago, he would have asked me if I'd done it. If I'd been the one to eat the guy in the stall. It was a measure of the progress we'd made that he knew better than to ask me that now.

"Your prints are all over him," he said. "That could raise some eyebrows."

"God knows how long it will take SI to process the evidence," I answered. Currently, the LAPD was ten months behind on forensic processing. Unless the stiff was the king of a foreign country or a state senator, odds were those prints wouldn't be matched to mine for some time.

"Maybe you could save us the trouble," said Peter hopefully.

"What *us*? *You* aren't on this case. *You* are on a break, remember?"

"Ye-e-es, but..."

"No. No *buts*. You have a week off and you are going to spend all seven days of it doing nothing, Peter." Nothing but sex and replays of the championship, that is. I'd recorded the whole damned thing for him.

"When the ME sees the COD there's going to be a lot of hard questions. I'd just rather we had a few answers." Exsanguination via holes in a major artery had been happening in Los Angeles County with increasing frequency. The coroner's office and select homicide departments had already begun to notice. It was just a matter of time before it hit the media radar, but until then those in the know at the LAPD and sheriff's homicide division were trying to keep it under wraps. "Adam, did you see anybody?"

“Two guys were in here when I came in.” I gave him a quick description. “Neither could have done this.” I’m getting so I can spot my fellows, you know?

“But they might have seen something.”

“They might have.”

We’d been hearing voices and thuds outside the door as various people tried to get into the restroom.

“Maybe they’re still out there,” said Peter. “Can you go out there and look around? And, Adam? SI will search outside for the original scene. But it’s been raining hard all night, and there’s got to be a thousand tourists out there,” he said. “Could you...you know, to save time?”

“I’ll look around outside and see what I can find,” I told him. Besides, the sound of sirens warned me that my former colleagues were about to arrive. Technically, I’m dead. I’ve been collecting death benefits at any rate, via Peter, who I’d named as my next of kin. And it would be pretty hard to explain my reanimated corpse to any LAPD officer who might recognize me. So I elbowed my way through the crowd that had gathered on the other side of the door and scanned the wet pavement outside.

Now, when I say “scanned” what I really mean is “smelled.” I try not to smell the warm blood around me most of the time. It’s like a dieter surrounded by chocolate. It’s best just to ignore it. But now that I was paying attention, the smell of the people around me had me salivating. I focused as best I could and isolated something older. Something deader. And that’s when I saw the little puddle of pinkish water in Burt Lancaster’s footprint.

“You find something?” Peter had come out of the men’s room holding his shield aloft and loudly ordering the crowd to back off.

“Trail of his blood leads that way,” I said, pointing and averting my face. The smell of blood brings the change on. Especially when I haven’t eaten in a while. I could feel my upper lip receding, which meant the pointed canines were showing. My eyes had that bulging sensation. I knew from seeing others like me that my pupils were probably slitting and my green eyes going pale and luminous. I hated Peter seeing me like that.

Peter followed the direction of my pointing finger. “Looks like there’s a breezeway between the buildings there.”

A few more paces in that direction and the evidence of my nose was undeniable. "I smell fresh blood," I told him. "There's your crime scene."

And then LAPD was on the scene, so I dissolved into the crowd while Peter received the officers and showed them what we'd found.

I stood about watching as the coroner's van trundled across the alleyway and right up onto the pavement. Only when it had inserted itself between them and one of the exits did the crowd finally realize this wasn't business as usual. Then I intuited that something more than your average homicide was up just seconds before a pair of LAPD black vans pulled onto the sidewalks, disgorging a phalange of men in military black, shiny black helmets with black reflective visors, black rubber-coated batons and black boots. Like a black hand, they pushed back Martha and George from Idaho with a fierce efficiency.

Tourists are more tenacious than cockroaches. The terrifying show of military force only made them give a few feet of ground, and now their cameras were flashing. Like the cops were part of the entertainment.

I saw the great eyes of betacams coming from several directions, aggressive news reporters adding to the fray. And I *knew*. The stiff in the stall was *somebody*.

This was not my night. I groaned out loud despite myself. Something out there was obviously determined to put the kibosh on any after-hours activities I had planned with Peter.

Because if the dead guy was *somebody*, LAPD was sure to assign his murder to Homicide Special, their elite homicide detective branch. Which happened to be the division in which Peter worked.

Sure enough, I saw Peter straighten, his gaze scanning the crowd until he spotted me and nodded, mouth grim. He flipped open his cell phone, and a minute later mine rang.

"Sergeant Davis lives out in Riverside. He'll be an hour with the rain and the traffic, so he asked me to supervise until he arrives," he said.

Davis was Peter's superior in Robbery Homicide Division.

"Adam, I'm sorry, but it looks like it might take some time to process this scene. They went to the alleyway you indicated and found quite a mess back there. Looks like it might be the original scene, but there's still not as much blood as they'd expect. Did you get a chance to check it out?"

“The units showed up before I could.”

“Did you happen to spot the men from the restroom?”

“No sign of them.”

“Well, according to the prelim liver temp, he'd probably been in there for around forty-five minutes.”

“I told you that.”

“I know.” I saw a uniformed officer come up to him at that point. She held up a clipboard, and he signed something and then pointed the pen at a spot on the ground. When he came back on the line, he said, “I'm going to help them question the kiosk employees. It's Friday night, they're understaffed and...”

“It's okay, Peter. I understand. I'll meet you back at your place?”

The hesitation before he answered told me all I needed to know. “I don't know how long this might take.”

“You aren't up next on the rotation. Who's been assigned?”

A pause, and I saw him scanning the crowd until he spotted me. “I'll call you,” was all he said.

“Sure.” I hung up and let loose a few swear words. The Marilyn Monroe look-alike standing nearby fanned herself and grinned appreciatively. Her fake eyelashes drooped as she scanned me from head to toe.

And got stuck on a certain part of me that was making its presence a nuisance more and more of late.

“Darling,” she said in a husky contralto that barely concealed her actual gender.

I snarled something ungentlemanly and marched off.

Chapter Two

Despite what he'd said, I still thought I'd go back to Peter's and wait for him there, but the plan continued to go arse up.

Firstly, there were *no* cabs on Sunset Boulevard, and when I called a taxi service they coolly reminded me that I had to give them at least thirty minutes lead time for a pickup. We'd come in Peter's car, which, obviously, he'd need later; so I was stranded in a mob of tourists with a hard-on, a recently stimulated appetite, and in an increasingly bad mood.

"Yo," snapped Caballo when he answered his cell phone.

"I need a ride," I said. "I'm outside the Chinese."

There was a lot of noise behind him. Sounded like he was in some sort of sports arena. "You piss off your boyfriend again, Adam?"

"Just come get me."

"It's the last half," said Caballo. "We're up by two."

"Listen, there's at least a hundred human beings standing around me, and I could eat a horse. Get me the fuck out of here, man."

"I'm not your twelve-step sponsor," Caballo said crabbily.

"Somebody had a tourist for dinner here," I told him.

"Fuck. Did you call Betsy?"

"No, I did *not* call Betsy. LAPD is on the scene."

"I'll call her." Before I could protest, he'd rung off. A few minutes later my cell rang again.

I could hear the stadium crowd screaming in the background as Caballo shouted. "Betsy called a meeting."

I swore to myself. "I don't have time for a meeting."

Caballo just laughed. "I'll be there in twenty."

By the time Caballo had worked his Kawasaki through the traffic, LAPD crowd control had managed to drive back the unfortunate tourists around the Chinese. The entire area was cordoned off. Little yellow plastic triangles marked every bloody footstep in the pavement. News helicopters bobbed and swooped overhead. Their racket made it impossible to hear the betacam-wielding reporters straining at the hastily erected boundaries, shouting questions.

“Who died?” said Caballo when he'd pulled his red rocket up to the curb. In the months that I'd known him, Caballo had totally transformed himself from a Chicago Southside transplant to a Los Angeleno. He wore shredded black jeans that hugged his long, muscular thighs. His leathers were opened to reveal a T-shirt with LAKERS emblazoned across it in purple and gold. Despite my continuous lectures about motorcycle safety, he wore designer sneakers instead of proper boots. His helmet was more stylish than practical. He'd had it custom painted to look like a screaming monkey, an opaque black visor where the monkey's throat should have been. His low-slung jeans slid down his ass, revealing bright yellow boxers when he rode.

Caballo and I had shared a few sweaty moments on a mattress, but I was a one-man monster these days. Caballo, on the other hand, seemed to be sampling the entire population of Los Angeles, male and female. *Sampling* in a sexual way only, if I were to believe him. Like me, Caballo was bagging it—our term for drinking the artificial blood we were provided. Or tainted blood that occasionally fell down from the blood banks.

I had my reasons for choosing not to kill. One of them was still over there, supervising the crime scene. I didn't know all of Caballo's reasons, and I hadn't asked.

I climbed aboard behind him. “Somebody had dinner in the men's room of the Chinese. Must have been *a person of note*, because Peter's crew is on the case.”

“Damn, bro, I'm sorry,” said Caballo. He'd leaned over his rocket, and I was obliged to do so as well. I felt rather than saw his grin when he gave his hips the subtlest shove and encountered my raging hard-on.

“Shut up,” I growled.

“You're a martyr, Adam,” shouted Caballo, cranking the throttle.

He probably couldn't hear my reply over the scream of the bike. Just as well.

* * *

Caballo swung down the alley near Peter's, where I'd left my Harley. He stopped and I hopped off.

"Okay, you can leave me here," I told him.

"If I don't bring you to the meeting, Betsy'll tear my head off." He meant that literally. "And we got some O neg that fell off a truck this morning."

I weighed the odds of Peter making it back home that night and added in the factor of fresh O. I knew Peter kept a supply of artificial blood, but nothing beat organic. Just the thought of it made me salivate and tipped the scale definitely in Caballo's favor. "Fine, wait here while I wheel her out."

Caballo waited, smirking a little bit, while I trotted down the alleyway, ducked in next to one of the garages, and fetched my bike from under a tarp Peter kept there for the purpose. I rolled her back down the alley and got the bitch going again. She'd been having some trouble lately. Burning through oil like a motherfucker. Something's up with her pipes, I think.

"When you going to give up on that old horse?" he asked, petting his Kawasaki ZX-10R Ninja.

I climbed on and kicked the clutch again. She belched and filled the night with a roar that was mythological in its power. "They'll bury me on her," I shouted at him.

Caballo's face acquired a peculiar expression. It took me a second to hear my own words.

Oh. Yeah.

Fuck.

* * *

Before we exited from the alley into the street, I checked my phone for messages.

It's one of those new iPhones, and I always feel like a pretentious Valley brat when I pull it out of my pocket. But Peter gave it to me. And it's got this cool game on it called Minesweeper. I've killed many a long, lonely hour in my little cave playing that game.

I didn't really expect a call from Peter for hours, but I dialed and said to the voice mail, "I'm on the road. Do you want me to meet you at your place?" Please, God, I thought as I sent the message and pocketed the phone.

Caballo turned his helmet-encased head toward me. "You ready?" he asked.

* * *

Caballo and I cruised east on the 10, hopped onto the 101, and got off at Third Street. Our motors were better than horns. Motorists heard us coming and edged warily to the side as we threaded the needle and came out in Chinatown in just a few minutes.

We parked our bikes outside the Empress Parlor. Caballo liked to irritate me by calling the place headquarters, like we're characters in some Batman movie or something.

The Empress Parlor is a well-known dim sum restaurant. The former owner had been running a numbers business out of it as well. He'd ended as most Chinatown bosses did, his bloated corpse clogging a pipe in the LA River. The new owner was nervous about the bad chi he'd possibly inherited, and only too happy to have a little extra security located upstairs. Betsy had been shrewd enough to hack out a deal with him.

Above the massive main dining room that crawled with tourists and waitstaff from four p.m. to eight p.m. Monday through Friday and ten a.m. to ten p.m. weekends, there was a wide, windowless attic, invisible from the street and only accessible by ladder or the service elevator. The numbers racket had required a lot of electronics, so when we'd moved in, it was already fitted with power strips and supported electrical sockets throughout. Perfect for a group of people with unusual needs. Like no windows and lots of electricity for our computers and refrigeration units. Long as you didn't mind the smell of fish, which seemed to have penetrated the walls.

Caballo and I went through the roof access, an easy ten-foot jump, and the handsome young Asian man, sitting at the row of desks against one wall, barely flinched when our feet hit the floor.

"Betsy's fit to be tied," said Drew, without looking up. He sat in front of an array of monitors, long fingers of his left hand flying over a fat keypad, right hand slamming an electronic mouse mercilessly on the hard desktop. He spared a quick, sweeping glance in our direction, and his dark eyes narrowed. "What the hell took so long?"

Drew, a self-styled vampire groupie, was human. At least I assumed he was. Sometimes when I'd watch him staring into those monitors, the colors and images flashing across his black eyes, I'd start to imagine that he was a robot.

He'd been compiling information on bloodsuckers longer than I'd been one and seemed to know more about us than we did ourselves. Still, he was always looking for new info and he'd

been bugging me for months to be a participant in some new study of his. This seemed to involve answering a hell of a lot of personal questions. Personal questions are not my forte, so to speak. So I'd been avoiding Drew more than usual. Guess I'd hurt the little nerd's feelings, because now he was pouting and shooting dirty looks at me.

“Had to pick up my ride,” I said. “Where is the Queen of the Night anyway?”

Drew jerked his head toward a closed door that led into a suite of rooms Betsy sometimes used as an apartment. “She found another one,” he said.

Caballo cursed mildly.

I went straight to one of the three large chrome refrigerators and opened it. A row of neatly labeled blood bags filled the shelves. I removed the top two and tossed one to Caballo, who raised it and ripped a hole in it with a smooth flash of his incisors, his face transforming fluidly to demonic as he did so. I was only halfway through my own bag when he'd finished and pulled another out of the refrigerator.

I've had an intimate relationship with a few narcotics in my day, but nothing compared to the rush I got off fresh blood. Caballo and I both reclined on a nearby sofa, sucking O like starving baby goats sucking at the teat. The sugary sweetness flooded my body, brain, and aching dick.

I swam up from the bliss to find Caballo's hand on my groin.

“Take that back before I break it,” I said.

He removed his hand, a good-natured grin on his face. “You don't do somethin' about that soon, it's gonna fall off, dog.”

I hoped not.

Drew watched us with a bored expression. “Betsy said there's a new outbreak?” he asked. “What makes you two think that?”

Drew had taken it upon himself to monitor the spread of vampires throughout Los Angeles. It was part of his whole research project. Hell of a hobby for a computer geek, if you ask me, but we'd been finding it useful.

“Who said anything about an outbreak? Adam found a stiff up on Sunset,” said Caballo. He tossed his empty blood bag into a biohazard bin and strode across the room to Drew's

computer array, swinging a long leg over a chair and sliding in next to him. "In the Chinese." He looked up at the monitor, where cartoon zombies stumbled into a field of mushrooms. Drew appeared to be controlling their demolition.

"That far west?" said Drew. Barely pausing, he reached over to another keyboard and tapped out a code. Now on the monitor next to the one on which he played his game, a map of Los Angeles appeared. He tapped another key, and the map zoomed in on the Hollywood area. Small red dots were scattered across it. I knew each dot represented a suspected vampire kill. Each dot had a date on it. There were distinct cluster areas. I'd been a homicide detective out of the Hollywood Station and I recognized the heavy activity zones as the same ones where most of the robberies and assaults occurred, the darker, less glamorous dumps and dives frequented by less affluent locals. When Drew keyed a new dot on the Chinese, it was noticeably much farther west on Sunset than any of the others.

"We've never recorded a draining near there," said Drew, going back to his game. "You sure about what you saw?"

"There's no mistake," I told him. "And whoever did it bled him dry."

"Newbie," said Drew. He slammed the mouse a few times, and a row of zombies on screen rolled their eyes before their heads blew off.

Experienced vampires don't kill just to eat. If you've been around awhile, you learn it's better to leave your victim alive. That way there's less dead bodies lying around the city, causing consternation amongst the PD, and you may be able to revisit the trough, so to speak, when your snack has had time to create more plasma. Believe it or not, there are people out there who enjoy the sensation of a dangerous creature sucking at their neck.

When I put it like that it doesn't sound half bad to me, either.

But I digress. Complete draining was the action of a newly turned vampire. One who hadn't learned the self-control necessary for survival.

"Neat job for a newbie," I told him. "No mess, no backwash. I didn't see one drop of blood spilled. Stiff might have gotten a round into him, too."

"Or her," said Betsy, coming in from the other room. Or, I should say, making her entrance. All three males turned their heads. Even me, if for no other reason than to admire the boots. Thigh-high, supple black leather jobbies with about ten buckles down each side and three-

inch soles. Kick-ass queen of the vampire enclave boots. Which, I guess, was appropriate. Not that our ragtag little band constituted a real enclave.

In life, Betsy had been a skinny, five-two, coke-addicted street rat with a cheap goth style and a motorcycle gang boyfriend who'd turned her purely by accident and lived to regret it. She'd become a kind of undead vigilante. Caballo and I helped her because it was easier than arguing with her. Drew had signed on as a means of collecting data on us and to impress Betsy, with whom he was hopelessly besotted.

She turned back toward the doorway from which she'd emerged and made a beckoning gesture. "C'mon, sweetie. Don't be afraid."

What came through the door then had Caballo rolling his eyes and hissing a curse. A skinny boy, looked about twelve, with an overgrown mop of dirty brown hair and half-luminous, half-human eyes. His canines were fully exposed, yet the look of fear and wide-eyed innocence were unmistakable. Probably didn't even know what had happened to him yet.

"Where'd you find *him*?" Caballo growled.

Betsy shot him a look. "Be nice. This is Frank. Frank woke up down on Broadway, near Union Station."

"Hi, Frank," we all said just like good boys at an NA meeting. Frank blinked a few times and licked his lips. From twenty paces I could see him shaking. Probably a combination of fear and hunger. Imagine waking up and seeing Betsy leaning over you. Imagine that vision feeding you blood from a sippy cup. Yeah. Frank was having a very bad day.

"Somebody is picking up runaways as they come in from out of town," said Betsy.

"I'm not a runaway," protested Frank in a voice that cracked. "I'm eighteen," he told all of us.

"Yeah? What year were you born?" I asked.

His lips opened and closed, and he licked them, blinking, while his poor stupefied brain tried to do the math. "Uhhmm..."

I thought momentarily of the horror of being stuck for all eternity in puberty. Poor kid.

"Don't worry," said Caballo. "Nobody here is going to call Social Services on you." He gave him the once-over, his gaze tasting every inch.

“He's just a kid,” I hissed, low.

“Not anymore, he isn't,” said Caballo, eyes glinting.

“*Putá.*”

“*Pinche.*”

“Stop it,” said Betsy. She indicated a chair for Frank, who sat obediently. “Don't listen to them,” she said. “So what's this about a stiff near the Chinese?”

“New guy in town, maybe,” I said.

Betsy lit a cigarette, long black talons flicking as she pocketed the lighter. She set her skinny butt down on the table next to Drew's keyboard and said, “Don't always assume it's a man.”

“He was left in the *men's* room,” I pointed out.

“Plenty of times I've used the boys' when the line to the girls' was too long.”

I imagined a strapping young female vampire, exsanguinated body hefted daintily on one shoulder, finding the line to the ladies' too long and marching over to the men's room. Unnoticed and unremarked. Sometimes Betsy's thought processes, if you could call them that, scared me.

“Well, it didn't happen in the men's room,” I said. “That was just the dump site. There was a trail of blood heading toward a side alley.”

Her kohl-lined eyes rolled toward me. “Maybe your stiff was getting a blow.”

“He still had his pants on.” I shrugged. “And a gun in his hand.” Last I heard, one didn't pull a gun on whoever was sucking one off. Of course it'd been so long, maybe things had changed.

Drew had gone back to his video game. He slammed the mouse a couple of times and said, “There was a rave near there last night. Maybe culled him from the party.”

Caballo sighed. “We'll have to track him down.”

Betsy nodded agreement. “Before he eats a tourist.”

Which brings us to the scary truth, boys and girls. The computer geek, the former Crip, the goth streetwalker, and yours truly are the Good Guys. We are all that stands between you citizens of Los Angeles and the ravenous evil dead.

I questioned our mission statement on a daily basis, but my involvement with them seemed to comfort Peter considerably.

“What do you do all day?” He was standing in my subbasement digs beneath the Academy, surveying the mess with a pensive expression. Hands on hips and lips pursed, just like some Dutch housewife.

“I sleep a lot.”

A quick look from Peter. “That can't be healthy.”

“Healthy?” Is he kidding? Dead man here.

“You know. Mentally. You need something to do to keep you occupied.”

“I could learn to knit.”

Which surprised a quick grin, but he said, “I'm glad you have your little group.”

On a scale of one to ten, I'd guess that vampire hunting rated about a six as a hobby. Just above NASCAR. But it got extra points for the way it made Peter look at me sometimes.

“I think he just popped up to two on the Most Wanted list,” he said.

The greasy ash drifted a little across the cement where I'd dusted a certain serial killer.

“I wish I could give you a corpse to call in,” I told him.

Peter shook his head. “Last count, he'd killed fifteen people. I don't much care what makes him stop. How long you think he was...you know?”

“Recent. That's why we caught him so easily.”

“So he was still alive when he killed all those people.”

You want another scary truth? Of all the monsters I've met in the past crazy year, human beings still rank highest in the sick and twisted category.

“The PD will be mucking around with the scene all night, but Caballo and I might be able to slip in and pick up the trail without being noticed,” I told Betsy.

Caballo grinned at me and licked his teeth. "It's a date," he said. And his gaze dropped to where my body was responding to the new blood. "If you can wait that long."

His gaze was like a touch. "I'll let it fall off first," I said.

Caballo's eyes flashed a momentary brilliant green and he snapped his teeth. "Bitch."

"Whore," I said.

"Stop it, both of you," said Betsy.

On one of the other monitors, the CNN feed, which Drew seemed able to watch while playing computer games and crunching numbers, suddenly switched to an emergency broadcast.

Bizarre killing, read the streaming Chyron. Behind it, we could see the Grauman's Chinese with its mob of officers and the flashing EMT vehicles.

"That your stiff?" asked Drew.

"That's the guy."

Drew hit a switch; his video-game screen went black, and the volume on the CNN feed ramped up.

"From Hollywood, Internet mogul, corporate dragon, and Nobel Prize recipient Justin Lake has been found dead in the restroom of the Grauman's Chinese Theater." The neatly coiffed blonde newswoman turned her head so the camera could zoom in on the crime scene tape and the milling techs. I searched the crowd for my heart's desire, but Peter must have followed the corpse back to the coroner's office already.

"Mr. Lake and his former partner, Orville Suits, have been in the news for the past several months as they battled over rights to software developed by their business, Cloud Ninety," said the reporter. "Lake's lawyers were standing outside Suit's Hollywood mansion waiting to serve him with new warrants when the news came that Mr. Lake's body had been found."

The camera cut to another part of town. In the background, a skyscraper view of downtown Los Angeles from the vantage of a fine restaurant, where a camera showed the beefy red face of Orville Suits saying into a microphone, "I have no comment, no comment, no comment..." he kept repeating. He had that supercilious, conceited expression that I was used to seeing on the faces of politicians and crime bosses who were sure they were getting away with something.

"Two guesses who done your stiff," said Caballo.

“That man isn't blood,” said Betsy. Betsy has something Caballo calls “vaydar.” She can spot a bloodsucker a mile away. I can smell 'em, so I usually have to be in the vicinity. Caballo, oddly, can't tell a thing. It's like he's sense deprived.

The broadcast cut back to the reporter in front of the Chinese. She walked and talked while behind her grinning tourists waved at the camera. “Mr. Lake was taken to UCLA Medical Center where he was pronounced dead of what a source close to the medical examiner has called a 'bizarre act of violence.’”

There followed a photo montage of Lake in newspaper photos. Giving speeches, accepting awards, volunteering for Habitat for Humanity...

Drew switched off the set. He looked more shook up than I've ever seen him.

“Do you know who that is?” he said.

“The stiff in the stall? No.”

“Justin Lake was the next Linus Torvalds,” Drew explained. “Rumor was he had coded the new cloud network.”

“Cloud?” I asked.

“It was only a theory, really,” said Drew. “4G would have enabled users to work off a worldwide net, like networking works in a company but in a larger, faster, global way.”

“Um, English?” I said.

Drew made a sour face. “Your hardware wouldn't limit your speed of access. Like that pathetic relic of a computer Caballo here uses? He'd actually be able to do something with it besides play Pong.”

“Hey!” said Caballo.

“Everyone everywhere could utilize the cloud of individual users' systems. It would make the Internet exponentially faster and more reliable.”

“Sounds like a clusterfuck of a mess to police,” I said. “There'll be kiddie porn showing up everywhere now.”

“*You* would think that,” he said. “Don't you see what it means that Lake is dead?”

That Peter would be working around the clock for at least the next month if we didn't catch this mofobag, I thought.

Caballo gave me a wise look, like he knew what I was thinking. "Suppose you tell us," he said to Drew.

"Justin Lake was going to liberate the entire computer industry," said Drew. "He was releasing the kernel next month, open source, just like Torvalds, despite bids from Jobs, Gates, and every other greedy mogul out there who wanted to privatize it."

Caballo's eyes were starting to glaze over. "Tragic," he said.

Drew had closed his zombie game and begun typing madly into a new Internet screen. His eyes were enormous and he looked freaked out. "The CIA has been trying to monitor him for years, and I'd heard he hired protection."

"The CIA?" I mocked. Drew was a rabid conspiracy theorist.

He didn't even pause in his typing when he said, "Didn't 9/11 teach you anything?"

"So, you think we got a little time before we head back to Hollyweird?" Caballo did a leonine stretch and gave Betsy the once-over. Those tight jeans did nothing to conceal his bulging package, currently threatening to pop the zipper.

Betsy did a little hip circle and swayed toward him. Like her magnetic north was just being pulled toward Caballo's generous needle.

Drew slapped his mouse a few times. The computer monitors changed images. The map of Los Angeles with victim dots appeared again. His dark gaze sliced sideways at Betsy and Caballo, now noticeably ogling each other. He slammed his mouse a few more times. "You think the partner got a vampire to do his dirty work?" he asked Betsy.

She pulled her gaze from Caballo and frowned at Drew's extensive map. "When was the last draining we had near the tourist zone?"

"Three months ago, that teenager who'd been left up near the Hollywood Bowl," said Drew. "Remember? He said he'd wandered down and found himself eating a tourist before he even knew what he was doing."

Betsy sighed. She'd lost that one, and we'd ended up having to dust him. We ended up dusting most of them. Not many were highly motivated to bag it.

"It looked more like murder than dinner to me," I said. "I bet Drew's on to something. Bet the partner paid someone to drain Lake."

Betsy chewed at one of her fingernails. She wasn't the brightest bulb, but even she could see the danger here. The last great threat had been a clan of vampires in league with some very criminal citizens of Los Angeles. It was a lethal combo. If Suits had found a vampire who would kill for him, it was like the man had his very own nuclear arsenal.

"The LAPD might be willing to work with us," I suggested. Besides, the sooner we found the rogue vampire and shut him down, the sooner Peter and I could get back to the vacation I'd planned.

Caballo sneered. "You mean your boyfriend?"

Boyfriend? Like I was fourteen or something. "Peter's RHD. He has resources."

"So do we," said Betsy. She hadn't been, in life, the most law-abiding citizen and carried a certain innate distrust of authority figures, a distrust undoubtedly rooted in the same murky childhood that led her to save children and runaways in her current incarnation. Our little missions were generally the results of the failure of the system. Betsy wasn't inclined to assist the local PD.

"The cops would just get in our way," she said.

Speak of the devil, my cell phone rang. It was Peter.

"I think I'm gonna take an early retirement," he said. Peter said this frequently, so I didn't get too excited.

"What happened?"

"The usual. Fucking NSA sticking their big paws into everything." His voice was low, and it sounded like he was cupping the phone with one hand. National Security was a sore spot for the RHD. Seemed a helluva lot of high-profile cases were swallowed into the black hole of NS these days. Peter had had a human trafficking case snatched from his hands the year before. Five women dead and the probable perps in witness protection. He was still bitter about that one.

"Seems this guy was some kind of cyber genius. They've brought in the FBI and commandeered the murder room. Davis had us hand over our files."

"I'm sorry," I lied.

"How soon can you meet me at my place?" he said.

As if my feet had wings. "Fifteen minutes," I told him.

Chapter Three

“So Adam, Peter tells me you served a tour in the Marines?”

I gave Peter a look. Bastard just grinned right back at me. I'd shown up at the door already unbuttoning my shirt. Barely waiting for him to unlatch the screen before I'd gotten him up against the wall and my tongue down his throat.

Then I heard the cough behind me.

I whirled around, shoving Peter behind me and flashing into my battle face.

A rather startled middle-aged woman stared back at me.

“Adam, this is Nancy Dickes,” said Peter.

I washed my face with one hand, checking to make sure my fangs weren't hanging out, and stuck the other paw out to grasp the woman's hand.

“Nancy's with the Bureau,” Peter explained. “She's the field agent I worked with on the Amtrak case. Remember?”

The hand that gripped mine was hard, dry, and muscular. I'd heard of her, though I'd never met her. She'd been called “Mulder” Dickes behind her back, after the television character who hunted aliens and urban myths. The Amtrak case, as I recalled, had featured several citizens who claimed a large black wolf with the eyes of a man had run onto the tracks just before the crash. As it happened, they'd found traces of drugs in the engineer's body, and Peter had made a few jokes privately about the woman standing before me.

“*Ol' Moldy Dickes.*” The nickname had, of course, devolved to the lowest common denominator. “*What a nutcase,*” he'd said.

She didn't look like a nutcase, though she did look like she'd seen better days. The standard black suit, white shirt, and ugly tie all seemed a little worse for wear, wrinkled and just a tad threadbare at the cuffs. The tie needed a trip to the dry cleaner. She exuded a certain musty

smell, as if she'd been sleeping in her car. Blondish hair pulled back tight in a bun, with an inch of new growth that told me somebody hadn't had time to get her roots done. Tired lines around pale blue eyes regarded me with an unflinching weariness. I considered that "Moldy" suited her.

"I've heard a lot about you, Adam."

I wondered what all Peter had told her. "And you still shake my hand?"

"Heh." She barely laughed. One corner of her mouth turning up as if even that small humor was too much of an effort.

God knows what she had just seen. My eyes had that bulging sensation, and my lips were curling back. But it had been my experience that most citizens were blind to the unexplainable or distasteful. It was like their memories hit the Delete key seconds after recording something that did not compute.

Nancy "Moldy" Dickes had a considering expression, as if her mind were a little more open to the inexplicable.

Or maybe she was wondering why I'd just been sticking my tongue down Peter's throat.

"Hello, Adam," said a familiar tenor voice, and Jonathan came around the corner from behind Nancy.

I felt my hackles rise again. "Hello, Jonathan."

He smiled at me. Crisp cotton shirt, khaki slacks, hands stuffed in the pockets so they tugged snugly against what I'd already surmised was a fairly decent package. Somehow Jonathan always managed to look casual but not sloppy. Clean but never prissy. Well-hung without appearing to flaunt it.

"Jonathan happened to drop by," Peter explained.

"Happened to?"

Jonathan gave Peter a melty look that made me want to pop him in the nose. "I forgot my sweater the other night," he told me.

The other night?

"As it happens, Jonathan's something of a computer aficionado. I thought he might have some insight."

“Of course he is.” Jonathan seemed to be something of an expert at everything. I guess being a perpetual student gave him plenty of time to read up on a wide range of subjects. And plenty of time to drop by Peter's place, leaving behind various articles of clothing. And plenty of insight into what exactly was wrong with yours truly.

“Peter was soaked to the skin and sneezing,” said Jonathan to me. “What the hell did you drag him into this time?”

“So you've got your sweater, right? Why are you still here?” I replied.

“Why are *you* here, Adam?” asked Jonathan. Whenever he smiled at me, he somehow managed to show *all* his teeth.

Before I could answer, Peter put a hand on my arm. “Adam might be working with us.”

I turned to him. “On what? You told me NSA took over the case.”

Peter rubbed his chin and looked everywhere but at me. “Not exactly.”

“CITAC snatched Suits before Peter could finish questioning him,” said Nancy. CITAC, the Computer Investigations and Infrastructure Threat Assessment Center, was the FBI's relatively new cyber threat investigation unit.

“Too bad.” I studied Peter, who still wouldn't meet my eye.

“Peter and Davis had... words.”

“Really?” Davis was a mulish meathead whose appointment to head the Robbery Homicide Division was generally known to have been more political than deserved.

“So I suggested that Peter help me follow a few leads that CITAC couldn't, and he agreed.”

“Oh, he *did*, did he?” said I.

Peter was frowning at his toes like they puzzled him.

Son of a bitch.

“Can I have a word, Peter?” He didn't resist when I grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him into the kitchen, swinging the door shut and turning on him. “You said you'd take a break when you closed Snipes,” I whispered. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

You think I'm a stubborn, recalcitrant SOB? You should see Peter when he's made up his mind. He planted both feet there and crossed his arms, lower lip stuck out. “It's my job, Adam.”

“It's not your job to solve every homicide in Los Angeles County.”

“Don't exaggerate. I've got a leg up on this because I was there. And because of you. And Nancy and I have worked together before.”

“You're exhausted. You haven't had a day off in months.” *You haven't had a good, hard fuck in weeks.* I glanced at the open door that led to the living room where, I presumed, Nancy and Jonathan stood wondering what the hell we were whispering about. *At least I hope you haven't.*

Peter still was frowning at his feet. There was more. “What?” I asked.

“I think we should tell her.”

“I think she figured out we're fucking, Peter. Not that we actually *are* lately, but in theory. I think she got that.”

He looked impatient. “No. About the...” He made a circling gesture with his hand. “You know...”

“*Are you out of your mind?*” My voice squeaked a bit.

Peter glanced at the doorway. “If we tell her, then we can skip all the bullshit and maybe catch this guy.”

“Wouldn't even be an issue if you hadn't volunteered to work the case.”

He eyed me for a minute. Now, Peter's your classic hard-nosed cop most of the time, but he can shift gears as smoothly as Mario Andretti when he needs to. Suddenly, his entire body posture changed. He smiled, slid his arm over my shoulder, and said softly, “Wouldn't it be a hoot to work a homicide together again?” I could feel his body heat, smell his cologne and the minty shampoo he used.

“I'd rather you passed this on to someone else,” I whispered back.

He laid a hand on the tie I still wore. It was my only tie. A little out of date, but it was the one he'd given me when I'd made detective a decade ago and needed a decent suit. Now he straightened it just a little, tugging at it. He may as well have tugged at my dick.

“Just this one case and I'll take a break,” he said. A smile appeared on his lips. “I promise.”

“I've heard that before.”

His hand on the back of my neck was warm, and he did that thing with his finger that made the fur rise up my spine. “Help me out here.”

He was close to me and whispering. I could smell his essence. That cinnamon scent underneath all the others that was wholly Peter. Hell, I could still taste him on my tongue from the kiss earlier. He stroked my tie again, and I would have agreed to walking on my hands and chirping like a bird if he'd asked me to. "Fine, whatever," I said. "But I'm not telling Jonathan."

"We'll wait until he's gone home."

Well, that mollified me considerably. The assumption that Jonathan would be leaving and I would be staying, that is. "Oh. Okay."

And now Peter had that look in his eyes. The one that said he knew my secret. He grabbed my chin and planted a warm, damp kiss on my mouth and by the time he'd released me I couldn't even remember what we'd been arguing about just moments ago. "C'mon, let's get to work."

* * *

"Jonathan, I hope you don't mind," said Peter when we reentered the living room. "The material we have to discuss is confidential, and..."

Jonathan did mind. I could tell by the knives he looked at me. "What about *him*?"

"Adam is on the case too."

Jonathan raised his clean-shaven chin and shrugged as if it was no big deal. "Sure." What else could he say? He gathered his things together, then stopped at the door. "We still on for lunch tomorrow?"

Peter glanced in my direction. "Maybe. You know how it is when a case first breaks."

Jonathan had an expression of disappointment that was entirely out of proportion for a cancelled meal between "friends." "But if you're only consulting, can't you take an hour for lunch?" he pleaded. Really, he was pathetic. Somebody should kill him and put him out of his misery.

"Maybe," said Peter. "We'll see." He opened the door.

Jonathan turned one more dirty look in my direction. "Good night, Adam," he said. "Keep the shiny side up. Isn't that what you bikers say?"

"Something like that. Pedal safely now, Lance." Ostensibly to save gas, Jonathan rode around the West Side on a fat old beach cruiser.

"Ha ha," said Jonathan.

We grinned at each other like Death Heads.

“Lunch?” I said when Peter had reseated himself.

I thought I managed to sound casually curious, but Peter shot me one of his “don't go there” warning looks. “Payday Wednesdays,” he said. “Remember?”

Payday Wednesday at the Police Revolver and Athletic Club downtown was an LAPD tradition. He and I had met there for drinks for years. And then, after I'd taken the pledge, we'd met for late lunch. Of course, now I couldn't. Chances were half the men I'd see there had attended my funeral. I guess I'd assumed that Peter had stopped going as well.

Yes, the world revolves around yours truly.

It didn't seem fair that Jonathan could have lunch in my stead just because he wasn't dead. I couldn't say shit, though, because, according to Peter, Jonathan and I weren't competing.

Right.

Nancy had begun digging folded sheets of paper out of her briefcase. I didn't like the way she was spreading herself out over Peter's dining-room table like she planned to be staying awhile. I could see that they were badly Xeroxed copies of LAPD crime scene files. “I managed to copy these before we handed the file over to CITAC,” she said.

“Wait. I thought you were working on this in tandem with the cyber squad?”

Peter made an impatient gesture. “You know how territorial the feds can be.”

There was something up. I knew by the way both he and Nancy were averting their gazes. Nancy picked up a pen and a sheaf of papers that were stapled at one corner. “Justin Lake had been in the news for weeks because of the lawsuit between him and his partner,” she said. “Over the rights to a code he'd written. Rumor is he'd perfected it and instead of selling it was going to release it open source.”

This sounded exactly like what Drew had been babbling about. I still had no idea what it meant. “Right.”

Nancy gave me a keen look. “Which of course would tick off the partner if he wanted to sell it the old-fashioned way.”

I gave up trying to look like I knew what she was talking about. “What is 'open source'?”

“Lake would release the code for free use. As long as you didn't make a profit off it, you could utilize it, personalize it, whatever.”

“But if this code was supposedly worth millions, why would he do that?” I asked.

“Altruism,” said Peter. “For the greater good.”

This explained the holy gleam Peter had in his eye. The one he'd get when a homicide investigation had become personal. “With Lake dead, Orville Suits gets it all,” he said.

“Looks that way,” said Nancy. “The company was a simple partnership. The popular mythology is that Cloud Ninety was begun with a handshake at a LAN event. Neither man was married, so they both had wills that stipulated that, in the event of either's death, the whole ownership was set to go to the other. That's where the thing gets complicated, though. An attorney has come forward and claimed that Lake had approached him recently with questions about changing his will.”

“What did Suits say?”

Peter's face flushed. “Goddamn Davis. I was minutes away from something.”

Nancy nodded. “He was starting to sweat. I was watching the interview,” she told me. “Suits wasn't even a little surprised to hear that Lake was dead. He started to twitch when we told him the manner of the death, though. And, of course, the first thing he asked was if we'd recovered a hard drive or anything that might have held several gigs of material.”

“According to Suits, Lake had the only copy of the code, and nobody but he knew where it was located,” said Peter.

“Of course you didn't believe him.”

Peter shrugged. “Suits can't release the code for sale or use without the FBI knocking on his door three seconds later, so I believed him.”

“So, you don't think the code was the motive?”

“Oh, that code is at the bottom of it, but we haven't figured out how.”

“Odds are Lake hid the code somewhere. Suits had some choice words about how paranoid Lake was, etcetera,” said Nancy. “He was pretty damned upset about it. More than he was about Lake's death. CITAC seized every computer they could find at his home and office. NS is convinced the cloud code could be used by cyber terrorists to attack our government.” She rolled

her eyes. "And they call me paranoid. They want to get their hands on it so they can begin building a firewall against it. But our cyber experts are pessimistic about locating the code on some random computer lying around Lake's offices. They all seem to think he was some sort of mad genius who would cover his tracks digitally."

Peter nodded, looking grave. "Best-case scenario, the code is lost forever. Worst-case, it's lying around somewhere waiting for anyone to find." He tapped the table for emphasis. "*Anyone*. Suits couldn't stop obsessing about that."

"One of the CITAC guys let me in on their theory. They think Lake's murder was accidental," said Nancy. "Maybe somebody Suits hired to scare Lake into giving out the location of this...thing. And that somebody went too far. So, they figure they'll get Suits to work with them to recover the code and give him a deal in return."

"That was no accident," I said. "That was a deliberate kill."

Nancy's eyebrows rose. "Pardon me?"

"I think," I amended feebly.

Peter cleared his throat, looking sheepish. "Um, by the way, Nancy. There's something I've been meaning to tell you about Adam."

"I understand," said Nancy. "You know I kind of figured it out. I'm surprised you thought you had to mention it. What you do in your private time is *your* business."

"No, not that. I mean..." God bless him, Peter was blushing like a schoolgirl. "I mean, yeah, that. But Adam isn't your average man. He's a..."

I don't think he'd ever said the word. He looked to me, and damned if I couldn't say it either.

"Something funny happened during a drug bust last year," I said. "And I woke up dead."

Nancy squinted from me to Peter, a smile hovering on her lips. She thought we were jerking her chain, of course.

"Somebody stuck their fangs in my neck and left me to bleed to death. Except I woke up in the morgue. Changed. We're still trying to figure out what it means," I elucidated a bit.

Nancy's smile began to fade.

“Ever since this happened to Adam, I've been following these deaths,” Peter told her. “It's not something I feel comfortable making official, you understand.”

I couldn't identify the expression on Nancy's face. “Sure, I understand.”

“So, normally I'd keep this to myself. But I need to get you on the same page as fast as possible. The marks on Lake's neck and the manner of his death are in keeping with a rash of similar homicides all occurring this past year. Adam's...state...was the result of an attack by one of these...persons.” Peter looked truly uncomfortable.

By now Nancy was clearly angry. “Funny,” she said. “Did Thomas put you up to this? Because I don't have time for any of his bullshit.”

Of course. Nancy “Mulder” Dickes probably had had a bellyful of practical jokes at her expense.

“Show her,” said Peter.

So I did. All I had to do was think about blood, and the change crept up over me like a chill. Of course, she'd caught a glimpse earlier, but this time I held it long enough for her to really get a good look. Nancy barely flinched, though I heard her heart do a little *kathump*. Half that incredulous smile still hovered on her lips, so I went and got a bag of blood from Peter's vegetable bin. I was hungry anyway.

I always lose myself in the process but when I broke away, Nancy's smile was gone. She looked a little pale.

“I see,” she said shakily. “I understand why you take care whom you tell this to.”

Peter was pink in the face, like he was embarrassed. “Once you get used to it, it's just like a skin condition.”

I managed not to laugh in disbelief. *A skin condition?*

“I'll toss this,” I said, picking up the bag and heading back to the kitchen. By the time I'd disposed of everything, wiped my face, and sat down again, Nancy had recovered some of her aplomb.

“I've always suspected there was something going on out here that nobody would admit to,” she said. Her pale, tired demeanor was gone, and she had a glow as if lit by some inner fire.

I exchanged glances with Peter. “We're trying to keep it quiet,” I told her.

“Citizens have a right to know,” said Nancy. “You can't cover something like this up.”

Peter frowned. “There's no cover-up. Murders by exsanguination of this particular sort had been popping up around town without anyone really taking note of them for a year or so. Homeless men, Jane Does, that sort of thing. Then, last year Adam uncovered a...clan...in the Pasadena Hills.”

“A clan of vampires?”

“No,” said Peter. His cheeks were flaming red again. “Well, not exactly. Anyway, the situation was contained as far as the LAPD was concerned. Case closed. Bizarre anomalies more or less ignored. Most of the bloodshed was between rival gangs and, well, you know how it is.”

Nancy's expression was that of someone who has been disappointed more times than she could count. “Sure. I know how it is.” She looked at me. “What about you?”

“As far as the LAPD is concerned, Adam died in the line of duty last year. We haven't quite figured out how to explain it, and it just seems easier to keep it quiet for now. But nobody's ignoring this. My former partner was killed by one of these...people.”

“But they aren't really people, are they?” said Nancy.

“Hey,” I protested mildly.

“Sorry. So, you're letting me in on your little secret now because...?”

“Lake was bled out by something like Adam,” said Peter.

“Hey!”

“You know what I mean.”

Nancy folded her hands together on the table like she was trying to remain calm. “How many like you are there ?” she asked me.

Peter looked at me expectantly, like I was the final word on all things vampire. I felt a little like a kid who hadn't read the assignment. All these months listening to Drew I'd tuned out most of it.

“More than you'd care to know. There was an epidemic brewing a few months back, but then there was a war and most of them killed each other off or left town.”

Nancy's left eye twitched a little, but she merely said, “You can tell me that story later. So, if I understand you, you don't think this was a random attack? Not just Lake's bad luck?”

I shook my head. "We don't think so."

"We?"

"Adam has a team that is tracking new outbreaks."

Nancy was having trouble keeping that impassive FBI demeanor in place. "Really. I'd like to meet them."

"That might be tricky," I said. "They aren't exactly model citizens."

"I imagine not."

Peter was looking at me expectantly, so I reluctantly brought out my phone and dialed.

"You fucking shit, you left me to take the heat," Caballo answered.

I could hear traffic and the buzz of many voices behind them. They must be down by the crime scene, sniffing around.

"I'm talking to a fed about the case right now."

"Betsy doesn't like to wear a helmet," Caballo went on as if he hadn't heard me. "You know what kind of mood she's in?"

"Let me talk to her."

"You jerk," said Betsy when she'd picked up the phone. "I had to ride Caballo's bike, and my hair is sticking straight out".

"Feds are looking for the guy too. You want to team up?"

Betsy hissed. "I'm busy, Adam." And she disconnected.

I raised a shoulder and said, "You see?"

Peter said, "You'll talk them into it."

"Do they all drink human blood?" Nancy asked.

"Adam doesn't kill," Peter put forth. He was looking anxiously from her to me. "He survives on that artificial blood he just drank."

"You provide him this blood?" And at Peter's nod, "Is he an official CI?"

"I'm not officially alive," I said. "So, that would be a no."

Nancy looked concerned. And now she resembled any bureaucrat confronted with a situation that would not fit neatly into the boxes of a report. I understood her trepidation. On a

purely practical level, it was a paperwork nightmare to explain sources that couldn't be named and resources that were secrets.

"I don't work cases," I assured her. Though my hand sometimes still went to the pocket where I'd kept my shield for years. "I'm more a consultant."

"I call Adam when I hear about one of these homicides," Peter told her. "And his team checks it out."

She looked from me to Peter, sussing it out. *Yeah, I'm a pussy-whipped old bloodsucker, lady.*

"So, when we found Lake at the Chinese, I did a quick look-see and found his blood dissolving into puddles outside."

"Maybe his blood."

"No, it was his." I'd said it with enough assurance to make her raise an eyebrow.

"Adam's faster than the DNA testing lab," bragged Peter. *Oh, look at that. My boyfriend's proud because I can smell blood. Yippee.*

Nancy took this in, digesting, moving on. "We went over the entire alley, but we don't think that was the crime scene either. We thought it might have been a robbery gone wrong. But his wallet and watch were still on him."

"It was a hit," I said again. "Whoever ate him was an expert."

"Ate him?" asked Nancy.

"We're racing the clock to contain this before the press gets wind of it," said Peter.

"Typical LAPD. Covering up the facts," said Nancy.

"There'd be complete panic," Peter protested.

Nancy made a noise halfway between a snort and a laugh. She had a wild look in her eye. I could just imagine all the years of ribbing and teasing. The years of being passed over for promotions. Her fingers were probably itching to pick up her phone and start calling colleagues with the news about yours truly. I'd bet the only thing that was stopping her was the fear of appearing, yet again, to be a nutcase.

Telling this woman had been a mistake. I shoved Peter's foot with mine and gave him a look. His eyes warned me to keep my opinions to myself. "We have a small lead," he told me.

“And I thought you might be able to help us with it. Lake had a girlfriend. Somebody new that he'd met. A work associate said he was going to a rave with her the night he was killed.”

Peter's foot was damp. He'd taken off his shoes but was still wearing his wet socks. I found the arch of his right foot with my big toe and gave it a suggestive shove.

“You can't wait a few hours? Maybe get some sleep first?” I ran my toe across the arch of his foot and was satisfied to see him shift in his chair.

“I'd like you to come along while we talk to her, so I hoped to do it tonight.”

“Why?”

“We think she might be...you know.”

I thought it over. It would be so much simpler just to send Betsy and Caballo over there. Suss it out. If the girl was feeding from the human population, they could dispose of her quietly. But that wouldn't satisfy Peter's sense of fair play.

“Sure, I can do that.”

* * *

The address was in Echo Park. A block up from Sunset, a narrow, twisted dead-end street led to a pile of stucco one-bedroom apartments with garages that opened directly onto the pitted and uneven asphalt, their hinges crooked and the stairs leading up to each doorway decorated with succulents in terra-cotta containers.

It was past two a.m. and the cul-de-sac in which the apartments huddled was pitch-black, shadows swallowing the thin streetlight bleeding over from Sunset. Porch lights off, barred windows dark.

The buzzer hung loose from its wiring, and the door Peter knocked on had been repainted so many times it was inches thicker than it had been originally and only gave off a dull *thud* when he rapped on it.

After he'd been knocking for several minutes, we heard someone reveal the spy hole on the other side, but no one opened the door.

I could smell the human on the other side, so I banged hard on the door and called, “Open up, Miss. We know you're in there.”

“How do you know it's a—” asked Nancy, but she stilled at Peter's look. “Oh.”

Another whispery, mousy sound and then the apartment resident decided to open the door as far as the safety chain would allow. A pale female with big dark eyes stared out at us. “Yes?”

“Jessica Bramson?” asked Peter, showing his shield.

She shook her head.

“Nickname Eclypse?”

“She is my roommate,” said the girl, her accent thickly Hispanic. “Not home.”

She remained mostly in shadow. Dark hair and dark skin and that accent gave me a clue though.

“¿Dónde está ella?”

A flash of black eyes. *“No sé.”*

“¿Cuándo usted último la vio?”

Her gaze went from Peter to Nancy to me.

“Adam?” Peter asked.

I shook my head. “Just a scared girl,” I said. No vampires here.

Lights had gone on in a couple of other entryways. Peter looked around. “May we come in?” he asked her.

She looked at me.

“Solamente hablar de Eclypse,” I assured her. Whatever else she felt she needed to hide was none of our business.

She closed the door long enough to release the safety chain and then opened it wide.

* * *

“You okay?” asked Peter.

I tossed the match into the dirt next to the driveway and inhaled deeply before answering. “Sure.”

My skin was still crawling, but I wasn't going to admit that.

Jessica's roommate, Emily Guadalupe, had led us into a tiny, dark ten-by-ten living room with a sofa, a chair, and two tables. Every square inch of wall and table had been covered with crosses, images of saints, votives, and tiny little altars. Candles flickered in the draft and made

the shadowy edges of the statues move as if they breathed. I could see and smell the garlic hanging by the windows and doors. It'd make anyone edgy, I'd told myself.

Emily seated herself in one of the chairs and, after a few more minutes of nervous silence, explained that Jessica had gone out with Justin Lake the night before and never returned. Her English was good, if hesitant. She seemed to calm considerably when she finally assured herself that Peter was Homicide, not INS. The LAPD's policy has always been to ignore citizenship issues when larger felonies are at stake.

I had to push aside a pillow with *Quién duermen en el polvo de la tierra se despertarán* stitched on it. The quote was surrounded by a border of crosses. Emily's eyes seemed fastened on my face as she answered Peter's questions.

"Is it usual for Jessica to stay out all night?" asked Peter.

Emily looked embarrassed. "No. Mr. Lake was a new boyfriend."

"You have a cell phone number for her?" asked Peter.

Emily wrote it down on a scrap of paper. "But she does not answer," she said. It was starting to give me the creeps the way she stared at me.

"How long has Eclipse known Mr. Lake?" asked Nancy.

Emily's gaze traveled from my eyes to my mouth and down, seemingly to my hands. "She met him at"—a pause while she thought about it—"sobrevivientes del cancer."

"Cancer survivors group?" And at her nod, Peter continued. "Lake was sick?"

"Mr. Lake was dying," pronounced Emily solemnly. "He asked for me to pray for him."

Those big black eyes gazed unblinking at my mouth.

Nancy had her cell phone out and was dialing. Four a.m. and somebody at the feds answered her by the third ring. Your tax dollars at work. "Ron? We have a medical history on Lake? Anything, really. Was he being treated for something serious? Oncology? Or any blood tests? How about the ME report? Sure, thanks."

She disconnected. "It was a well-kept secret if it's true. Ron James will call me if he can find out anything."

Peter glanced at his watch and then looked toward the windows of Emily's apartment. The moon had not yet set, but I knew he was thinking of the time and the approach of dawn. "We'd better get going."

I couldn't wait to get out of the room, but Emily stopped me at the door.

"*Gracia de Dios*," she said, her eyes huge and liquid.

"*Gracias*," I replied. God's grace is a matter for debate, in my opinion, but what the hell.

* * *

I had to smoke a cigarette before I climbed back into the car.

"What's eating you?" asked Peter. "You look like you're standing on an anthill."

It wasn't just the room full of saints and crosses. Something was setting my teeth on edge. Like a ripple of something dark out there was watching us. When you work undercover, you learn to trust these feelings.

"It's nothing," I told Peter. "Let's get out of here."

* * *

On the drive back to his place, Peter laid out his ideas for Nancy.

"Before Davis put the kibosh on my investigation, I asked the ME to run a DNA test on the wounds in Lake's throat. We might get lucky and have a hit in CODIS. They usually stick around the areas they habituated in life."

Nancy's gaze came over to me for a moment. "I see."

"But Adam's people might be able to work the streets faster."

"It didn't sound like they wanted to work with us."

"He always talks them into it," said Peter confidently. "But we need to move quickly. I'm thinking we get a line on the girlfriend, then follow it quick, before the trail goes cold."

"Drew said there was a rave in the area of the Chinese last night," I told them. "Maybe a coincidence. Maybe not."

"This Drew know where the same DJ is playing next?" asked Peter. The LAPD has been following raves for almost two decades. What began as mostly illegal, impromptu, unadvertised house-music parties had rapidly become an accepted clubbing ritual where cops often acted as security. "Maybe your team could get an invite and ask around about Jessica and Lake."

Nancy looked dubious. “You want to put a vampire undercover?” she said.

Peter flushed red, as if the word embarrassed him. “Adam worked undercover for vice before he...” Peter did that thing with his hand that signified my change of life. He'd reached the alley that led to his garage. “They can't work it in daylight, but if we have a location and maybe a contact or two by tomorrow night we might be able to send them in.”

Nancy regarded me thoughtfully. “There's miles of red tape to process to set up a surveillance like that.”

She and Peter exchanged that look again. I wondered what the hell was going on that Peter didn't want me to know about.

“I need to make some calls,” said Nancy. “Give me a few hours.”

“I need some sleep,” said Peter, reaching up to press the button that would open his garage door. “Let's talk in a few hours, then.”

* * *

After I'd promised the services of “my” group—and wouldn't Betsy hiss if she heard me calling them that?—Nancy climbed into her old Buick Skylark and drove off.

Peter hadn't even gotten the latch secure before I'd pressed him up against it. Mouth on his neck, hand down his pants, cock pressed against his ass where I seesawed it up and down and whispered in his ear. “You're lucky I waited for her to leave.”

Peter was too busy to answer. Breathing hard through his mouth, wiggling his ass against me, unbuttoning his slacks, and lowering his zipper to give me better access. His ears were hot. His neck was hot. I licked a line from his collarbone to his chin and said, “Bed.”

We made it halfway there. We got our clothes halfway off. But once I had him against the bed, one of his knees on the mattress, the other in my hand, my cock buried inside him, there was no halfway about it.

He was even hot inside. How long had it been? This couldn't be healthy for either one of us.

“There?” I said when he whimpered and clawed at my hand. I shoved again and again. I knew where “there” was like I knew my own navel.

Peter panted and moaned and at some point managed to communicate enough to get me to grip his cock, which was as hard and hot and wet as I'd ever felt it. And then I just got into my rhythm until he arched his head back, hair pushing into my nose and mouth, whole body shaking, and I felt an orgasm escalate and crawl up my spine in agonizingly slow inches.

When the room stopped pulsing, I noticed two things. One, we'd knocked the lamp off the nightstand again. And, two, Peter was still really hot. And he was wheezing.

"You okay?" I asked him.

He mumbled and waved two fingers of his hand feebly. "Yeah," he whispered, "was great..." and then he was asleep, mouth open, snoring. Silly old bear.

I pulled the covers up over us both and wound myself around his hot little bod, pressing my face up against his neck where the vein beat steady and warm. I've pressed my face there, just smelling, so many times, I'd bet I could find Peter in a crowded room just by scent. A fact I don't plan on telling him anytime soon.

I dozed there for a while and then I got the munchies and rolled quietly out of bed to scrounge in the fridge for a little midnight snack. I took it to the garage and after sucking on it for a while I popped open my cell phone and dialed Drew.

"Hello?" Drew was on the night shift, of course. Working with the undead necessitates that. I could hear the noise of his fingers on the keyboard even as we spoke.

"You guys find anything on the blood that did Lake?"

"Betsy's pissed off at you, dude. She says you and she need to have a talk." *Clickety clack clack* went Drew's fingers.

"Who died and made her queen?"

Drew blew out a breath that was almost a laugh. "I wouldn't say that to *her*."

"What's the problem, anyway?"

"You took off out of here like your ass was on fire."

Close, though a little further to port.

"And then you called her from that cop's place. Betsy doesn't like to work with the cops."

"She works with *me*."

"You're no cop, man."

“I *was* a cop.”

“From what I've heard, with cops like you we didn't need criminals.”

I dropped this fruitless argument. “Well, I've found out something that may or may not be related. The stiff had a girlfriend who I've got an intuition wasn't on the up- and- up.” I rattled off the address and the girl's name.

“You think she's the blood that did him?”

“Not exactly. Just, the place smells off. And the roommate's got antivampire crap all over her living room.”

“Okay, I'm on it.” Drew's fingers clattered away on the keyboard.

“Wait till the sun's up, geek.”

“I'm not an idiot,” said Drew, busily typing.

“Thanks.” I disconnected, tossed the empty blood bag into the bin Peter kept for that purpose, and headed back into the house.

On the way back through the living room, I saw a soft blue sweater flung over a chair. It looked like the sort of thing a teenage girl would wear. Upon inspection, I could see it was clearly a man's sweater. The kind preppy young men wore with their pressed khaki slacks.

And then there was Jonathan.

After a few tricky incidents, mostly the result of idiot moves by yours truly, it seemed to me that Peter had grown tired of Jonathan. He never mentioned him, and an entire summer went by without that lime green beach cruiser showing up anywhere outside Peter's condo.

And then one night awhile back, I'd shown up at Peter's place unannounced, as per usual, and Jonathan had opened the door.

Okay, in my defense, I was starving. I hadn't gotten the hang of eating. It's not got the same rhythm as food, you know. And the hunger had stripped away whatever was left of my admittedly meager self-control, so when Jonathan answered the door and said, “Adam!” and didn't invite me in, I might have shoved him a little bit.

And maybe he hit the wall a little harder than I'd intended.

“Where's Peter?”

But of course Peter was right there, standing at the end of the hallway in his apron that said KISS THE COOK, a big fat red cooking mitt on one hand and an astonished expression on his face. “Did you just hit Jonathan?”

“What? *No!*” I grabbed Jonathan's shoulders and sort of straightened him out, brushed my hand down the front of his crisp cotton shirt. “He's fine.”

Peter sniffed, and I followed him as he went back into the kitchen.

“We were having dinner,” said Jonathan rather loudly, coming up behind me. “I only brought two steaks.”

“I don't eat steak,” I said to him. “But I'm starving. Peter, I thought you were working late tonight.”

“Davis ordered us to take the night off.” Peter's brow furrowed in that troubled way it did whenever I mentioned my need to feed. “Jonathan, we're out of beer. Can you fetch another six-pack?”

“Sure, babe.” Jonathan went to the back door, ostensibly heading to the cooler in Peter's garage where he kept his case of Millers.

Peter waited until Jonathan was out of earshot and then he said, “Under the tomatoes. Take it to the bathroom.”

I grabbed the blood bag but stalled. “What's he doing here?”

“What do you mean? He's just back and wanted to tell me about his trip to Thailand.”

“Trip?” I could hear Jonathan's footsteps coming through the walkway between the garage and the kitchen. “So you two are still fucking?”

I got the patented Peter eye roll. “Nicely put. Jonathan and I are just friends, Adam.”

I went off to sup, and when I reemerged, they were sitting at the table. It had been set with napkins, and there were two tapered candles lit in the middle of it. No kidding. Candles. “Friends,” my great Aunt Agnes. Peter had a stubborn set to his jaw, and Jonathan had a surly expression that I took to mean they'd had a discussion about my presence and I had won.

There was an opened beer bottle on the table at the place where I would have sat, but no plate. Jonathan sneered, “You said you don't eat steak. Do you need a glass?”

I thought what a pleasure it would be to flash my other visage at him, but managed to quell that impulse. “Never mind. I know where Peter keeps them.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t set a place for you,” called Jonathan while I was in the kitchen. “I didn’t know you were coming,” he reminded me when I returned.

I was pleased to see Jonathan receive the patented Peter eye roll. I thought I was the only one who earned those.

“I’m not hungry.” I snagged the beer and went to the couch instead, picking up the remote. “I’ll just watch the news while I wait.”

Peter spread his napkin on his lap. “I recorded the game. Jonathan, would you pass the butter?”

“Sure, babe.” Peter kept his butter in its own little container, just like my grandmother had. Jonathan passed the thing to him. The surly expression now seemed etched into his features. I considered that it was a good look on him.

“I’ll wait till you’re done with your steak and we can watch the game together,” I said to Peter.

“I brought my *Living Dead* DVD,” Jonathan told me. “Peter said he’s never seen it.”

I couldn’t resist. “Peter’s seen the living dead.”

“You’re kidding.” Jonathan poured dressing on his salad. It was the thin, watery dressing that women on diets use. “Do you mind watching it again, babe?”

I imagined Peter wasn’t looking at me because he’d bust out laughing. He just shook his head, stuffing food in his mouth.

I said, “You can’t have too much of the living dead.”

Peter struggled not to choke on his food.

I’ll admit I dozed through most of the movie. Maybe someday I’ll write a screenplay that’ll clear up a few Hollywood misconceptions. Then Jonathan paused at the door. His evening plans had clearly been ruined hours earlier, but he couldn’t relinquish the faint hope that Peter might ask me to leave first.

“Good night.” He shook Peter’s hand at the door and gave him a look of such fevered longing it was all I could do not to growl.

Thirty seconds later I had Peter bent over a chair, his pants around his ankles, my aching dick buried deep inside him.

“God,” he moaned.

“Never. Thought. He'd. Leave,” I said, shoving hard on every word.

Peter mumbled something and found my hand. “Touch me.”

I obliged, feeling him swell against my palm.

“This what you want?” Copious cum drooled from his dick and greased my movements.

Peter wriggled his ass on my cock, squeezing it so I gasped. “Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I want...yeah, that...”

Then for about ten minutes we didn't say anything, and I waited until Peter had come back from the bathroom, wiping his hands on a towel before I said, “Did I ruin your date?”

“Jonathan's just a friend.”

“He doesn't think so.”

“Are you jealous?”

“That's a stupid question.”

“That's not an answer.”

I flicked the remote to the DVR command. “Where's the game?”

He took the thing out of my hand, set the commands to playback, and we sat, listening to the pregame synopsis until the first commercial break. *But I couldn't let it go, could I?* I muted the sound and said, “I don't want to tell you what to do, Peter, but...”

“Don't you?”

In retrospect, I should have gotten a clue from his tone and just dropped the whole topic. But I didn't. “It's just, I know you, Peter. You can't have recreational sex...”

“Can't I?”

Christ. There was no way out of this.

“I wish you wouldn't,” I admitted.

He didn't answer, and I was a little afraid to look at him. “Okay, Peter?”

“You realize what a hypocrite you sound,” he replied flatly.

Of course I do. “I don't know what you mean.”

Silence. I could feel him looking at me.

“Yeah, I know. I have no right to ask.”

Still no answer.

I turned my head then and met his gaze. Serious, somber, dark blue eyes, like he could see inside my skull. “I know what you're thinking,” I told him.

He raised his eyebrows.

“What's good for the goose, huh? I'm surprised at you, Peter.”

His eyes narrowed a little, but otherwise he didn't comment. We use the silence technique in interrogations. It makes the suspect sweat and blurt out things they might not say otherwise.

“I'll try,” I blurted. I could have bit my tongue off, but then Peter smiled. A satisfied, smugly victorious smile, and a second later his hand slid up my thigh and made my dick grow again.

This time I waited until I'd dragged him into the bedroom.

So, I found myself on the wagon, so to speak. Any time I might rethink that decision, I'd remember Jonathan. Like a specter hanging over me whenever I thought to stray.

I stuffed the sweater behind a cushion on the couch, then went into the bedroom, where I crawled under the covers again with Peter, wrapped my arms around his hot little bod, and pressed my nose into his neck. His heartbeat was like a shuffling dance step. *KA thump KA thump thump* that lulled me and soothed me and I drifted off into the coma I call sleep.

* * *

When I woke Peter was coughing up a lung.

Chapter Four

“You can't go into work.”

Peter raised his head from the sink to look at me in the mirror. Since he couldn't see me, it was weird and he turned around. His eyes were red, the rims a pink color. His nose was red and swollen. His lips were chapped, and he'd only scraped half the shaving cream off so he looked like a moldy old ceramic garden gnome standing there in his boxer shorts.

God help me, I wanted him anyway.

“I hab to go,” he said. He turned back to the mirror and continued with his shave. “Nancy needs me.”

“I'm sure she can handle it. We can't move until dark anyway.”

“It's nod that,” snuffled Peter. “I jus' hab to go, Adam.”

“You have a fever.”

“I toog some pills.” He wiped his face with a towel and pushed past me, thumping back down to the bedroom, sniffing and wiping his nose with his arm as he went.

Okay, I'll admit part of my motivation was making him break his lunch date with Jonathan.

“You need bed rest.” I got up close behind him. My fingers tangled with his while he tried to button up his shirt. “Lots of bed rest,” I growled against his ear. Then I unzipped his pants twice before he slapped my hands and said, “Adam...” in a tone of voice I knew better than to argue with.

So I withdrew to the living room. Some time back, Peter had taken the trouble of having louvered wooden blinds installed in the big picture window. It turned the room into a virtual cave. So yours truly could sprawl on the couch with the remote in hand and sulk.

Peter followed me, looping his tie with practiced fingers and saying, “Stop sulking.”

“Spend all my time in the dark waiting for you to stop working,” I groused.

Peter ignored this, going to the hall closet and bringing out his trench coat and hat. It was for the rain, of course, but it made him look like a real honest-to-God Dick Tracy.

"You forgot your gun," I told him, thumbing the button on the remote idly.

"I didn't forget it, for Chrissakes." He stomped back into his bedroom to get it.

The news began with the now-familiar image of Orville Suits speaking to the press about Lake's death. He was now "assisting the LAPD with the investigation," I noted. I flicked past that channel to the local morning news, which showed a stream of traffic from the vantage of a traffic helicopter.

"There's a mess on the 101," I called to him. "You'll be sitting in a parking lot if you leave now."

Peter reemerged from the bedroom. "I've got to go *now*, Adam." He had on the trench coat. I idly wondered if I could get him to wear it without any clothes underneath some time. Of course, that thought only made me crankier.

"I might as well be a bat," I whined, pressing the button on the remote so the channels flew by.

"I'll see you later," he said. He was busy with his keys, so he didn't catch the glare I shot at him.

"You still have a lunch date?"

Peter frowned at the waspish sting in my words. "Adam, you said you'd try to get along with him."

"I *am* trying."

"If last night was your idea of trying..."

"He gets on my nerves."

"I'll bet the feeling's mutual. It's only lunch."

I pressed the remote over and over. The damned thing must have had low batteries or something. I tossed it onto the couch. "Of course. You have to eat."

I was too cranky to answer when he called out his good-bye and left.

Chapter Five

I'm a nocturnal creature.

Not that I wasn't before the change, mind you. The workaday world of drug dealers and vice cops pretty much starts after noon and rolls on into the wee hours. But these days it seemed I could barely keep my eyes open when the sun was up.

So, after I heard Peter's Mustang pull out of his garage, I sort of dozed in front of the tube for a while. Finally, I dropped off completely and only woke when the remote fell from my hand and hit the wood floor.

The morning edition of the news was long gone, and an afternoon soap was on.

"You told me you weren't seeing her anymore."

An emaciated woman with stiff blonde hair stalked up and down inside a living room. The actor she was shouting at looked ashamed.

"It was only coffee," he said, looking guilty as sin. *"I felt sorry for her and then..."*

"Timothy told me he saw you leave the hotel with her!" screamed Blondie.

I picked up the phone and dialed Drew.

"I need a ride," I said.

"I'm busy," said Drew.

Over the phone I could hear the *clickety clack* of his fingers on a keyboard.

"Busy playing that stupid game?"

"Busy researching your stiff, as it happens. Everybody is online, freaking out about Justin Lake."

"He's not my stiff. Who does *everybody* think killed him?"

"Oh, you know, Bill Gates. The government. Some dude claiming that Lake was working with the Pentagon on something top secret..." *Clickety clackety click.* "The entire world is

looking for his code. Rumor has it he hid it on an obscure server. Every kid in Hong Kong is searching for the host site as we speak, hoping to find the pot of gold.”

I writhed with impatience. Hey, I can writhe. I'm a frickin' creature of the night. We writhe. “I've got to get the hell out of here.”

“Betsy's still pissed off at you.” *Clickety clack clack* went Drew's fingers. “I gave her your message and she gave me a message to give back to you. Um...” He chuckled. “I don't think you want to hear it.”

“Pick me up and I'll talk to her face-to-face.”

A while back Betsy had had the brilliant idea of sealing up the rear of an old ice-cream truck so the interior was light free. Only the driver and passenger seats were exposed to the sun. Since Drew was the only human in our group, he was, by default, the driver. The fact that he drove like a confused old woman was not factored into this brilliant plan.

Still, it beat sitting trapped in a condo imagining Peter and Jonathan sharing shots at the Academy's Revolver bar.

“Give me the address, and I'll try to get over there,” said Drew.

Here's the thing: given that my associates are a species that survive by sucking the blood of human beings, I was loath to hand Peter's address out to any of them. Caballo knew the alley where I sometimes hid my bike, but he didn't know the name of the man who lived in the building or his specific condo address.

“No way,” I said.

“Dude,” said Drew in a tone that adequately expressed a paragraph of dismay, irritation, and amusement.

I'd been spinning through channels while we talked. Besides the disturbing soap opera, the only game was a rerun of the championships. The news was on a loop, Oprah smiled out at me in a satisfied way, and I clicked the thing off.

“Get Caballo to show you the location of the alley. I'll meet you there.”

* * *

I was a rotten kid.

I grew up in a northern rural part of the United States, the youngest of too many, and made my mother's difficult life just a little more so. I still remember her trying to get me safely dressed to go out in the cold. I'd whine and fidget and fight her while she tried to get my coat buttoned, my mittens tucked up into my sleeves, a scarf adequately sealing off the opening to the coat.

See, it's karma. The fact that, now, just going outside on a cloudy but warm day in Southern California required extensive preparation—and the clouds were the only reason I could attempt exposure at all.

I had a heavy wool coat and big waders. Thick work gloves. Then I wrapped a scarf around and around my neck and face until I resembled the Invisible Man. A big straw sunbonnet and an oversized black umbrella. I opened the door to the condo and waited until I was reasonably sure none of Peter's neighbors were out and about, and then I ran as fast as I could, as close to the walls as possible until I reached the overhang that led down the covered stairs to the back of the building.

Peter has an attached garage, but I didn't feel comfortable with Drew knowing the location of it. Too easy to figure out the unit number from there.

From the narrow porch under which I stood, I gathered my courage and ran like I was under fire to the shed where they keep the trash bins. By the time I'd gotten there, my pants were on fire, so I beat it out with the scarf and caught the hat in the process. I had to throw it on the ground and stomp on it to put that out. The waders had melted a bit, and I looked like a crazy person and smelled like burning rubber, but I was still intact.

I waited there for about fifteen minutes until Drew drove up in the truck.

It rattled down the alley on bad shocks, repainted a dusty white and still bearing the faded outlines of red rockets and Push-Ups around the windows. Those were sealed shut, though Drew had argued that the police would be less likely to notice a working ice-cream truck and had wanted to continue selling goods from it.

They'd actually listened to me on that one. Still, every time some dumb kid ran up to the truck with a dollar, Drew would start whining again.

"You stink, man." Caballo held the door open long enough for me to squeeze in, then slammed it closed and turned the big handle that sealed it shut.

There were four plush chairs inside, upholstered in black-and-white zebra stripes. Caballo threw himself into one, barely looking at me. He had one of those little plastic boxes in his hands and he was pressing the buttons frantically with both thumbs.

“Better than being flambé,” I said, peeling off my layers and tossing them into the corner.

Caballo's game emitted a sound that I recognized as digital defeat. He swore and tossed the thing on the chair next to him.

“What are you playing?” I asked him.

“It's called Minesweeper,” he said.

“Oh, I play that. What's your high score?”

He made a face. “I don't know, man. That's a kiddie game. At headquarters I'm in a Quake tournament.”

“They have tournaments?” That was something I had to see. I moved to the front of the truck and rapped on the window behind Drew's driver's seat. “I need to make a short stop on the way,” I told him.

“Betsy's waiting, man.”

“It'll only take ten minutes,” I lied.

Drew had taken to wearing eyeglasses with thick green frames and tinted amber lenses. They were very artsy and almost completely hid his eloquent dark eyes. Still, the lack of trust in his expression was clear.

“Ten minutes,” he said. “And then we move on. What's the address?”

“It's near Elysian Park,” I said, and rattled off the address.

As Drew cruised slowly up Academy Drive, I tried to work out a plan.

The ice-cream truck would definitely attract too much attention parked in the lot, and I couldn't risk an observant off-duty LAPD officer coming over to chat. So I'd have to have Drew park down the street where I could see Peter if he came out.

“You asshole,” said Drew suddenly as we cruised around a curve. “Is this some cop hangout?”

“What makes you think that?”

“All those fucking General Motors cars in the parking lot with the 'Support Your Local Sheriff' and 'NRA' bumper stickers,” he said. “Oh, and the sign,” he added, as the REVOLVER AND ATHLETIC CLUB sign appeared around a bend in the road.

“Just cruise past the lot. I'll tell you when to stop.”

Drew's mouth set in a grim line, but he did as I asked. Sure enough, I spotted Peter's Mustang in the attendant parking lot. I waited until we were almost out of sight and then said. “Here. Just park it here for a while. Try to look inconspicuous.”

“Inconspicuous? What the hell you up to, man?”

“Just do it.”

From where I sat, I could see the parking lot behind us in Drew's driver's side rearview mirror.

Happily, Peter was a punctual creature of habit. He'd always had the late brunch around three p.m., and, sure enough, just as Drew was beginning to glance at his watch, I saw Peter and Jonathan appear next to Peter's Mustang. They chatted for a minute there by the car.

Jonathan put his hand on Peter's arm.

Peter smiled and shook his head. He unlocked his car.

But Jonathan kept his hand on Peter's arm and said something else. He seemed insistent.

“Dude, Betsy's gonna pierce me a new one,” said Drew.

“Another minute,” I said.

Peter hesitated, listening to Jonathan talk earnestly. Then he planted both feet and stuck his hands in his pockets. He seemed to be considering whatever case Jonathan was pleading.

Drew cranked the ignition and put the truck into gear.

“Don't move,” I commanded. I pulled out my phone and dialed Peter's number.

“Hello, Adam,” he answered. “We were just talking about you.”

“Guess my ears were burning,” I said lightly.

Two blocks away, still I saw his little bat ears prick up and his head raise and swivel as if he could instinctively feel me nearby. Happily, Peter had never seen Drew's truck so he wouldn't recognize it.

“What's up?” he asked.

“Just wanted to say hello,” I said.

A silence and I kicked myself. Now he was suspicious. I never called Peter just to chat. I hated shooting the shit.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“You sure?” Peter was definitely picking up the scent of something hinky.

“Yeah. Um. Gotta go. See you tonight?”

“Your team in?”

“Not sure yet.”

Peter made an impatient noise. “Nancy's sticking her neck out on this. I want to back her up.”

“I just need to finesse things a little.”

In the mirror, I could see him pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. Over the phone receiver, I heard him snuffling into it. “Is there a problem?”

“No.”

He exhaled a disbelieving laugh but said, “She's set to go as soon as we have a location. Call me soon, okay?”

“You got it.”

We simultaneously disconnected and I watched as he pocketed his phone, saying something to Jonathan, who crossed his arms, looking truculent. Good.

“Dude, Betsy's paging me,” said Drew.

Jonathan was still talking, but Peter was shaking his head, and I knew that expression. Even from far away and seeing him through two layers of glass, I could tell that Peter was not going to be swayed by whatever Jonathan had to say.

“Okay, we can go,” I told Drew.

Drew pulled out from the curb and kept driving around the curve of Academy Road until we got back to Elysian and hung a left toward the freeway.

After Peter had passed from my limited view, I went back to sit with Caballo, who had taken up his game again.

“We done spying on your hottie boyfriend?”

He was focused on the little toy, thumbs busy, eyes on the screen.

“How do you know he's a hottie?” I asked.

Caballo laughed. “Seen him before, dog. He lives in the condo where you stash your bike, right?”

Caballo dropped the game when I landed on him, one fist holding his throat, the other raised to splinter his face into a million pieces. “Don't you go near him.”

Caballo's mouth opened and closed, but he didn't say anything. Probably because I had his throat squeezed shut in my hand. His eyes bulged.

Then his knee came up and caught me hard enough to knock me loose. I fell back and he jumped me. “You son of a bitch,” he rasped.

The ice-cream truck rocked back and forth as we tossed each other around inside it. Drew drove on, blissfully unconcerned. Truth was, Caballo and I got into fights pretty regularly. About once a week one of us drew down on the other over something. Maybe it was some kind of violent vampiric urges. Maybe the fear of any of these mofobags getting anywhere near Peter.

Maybe I just liked sitting on top of him.

“Fuck, man.” Caballo ducked, then came around in a scissor kick that knocked my head into the side of the van. That quelled my homicidal urges a bit and I sat down hard, ears ringing.

“You're an asshole,” I told him, holding my head to make it stop vibrating.

“Yeah. Well.” Breathing hard, Caballo threw himself back into the chair, picking up his game again and resuming play, despite a swollen eye and split lip. “Takes one to know one.”

“I don't ever want one of you bastards anywhere near him.”

“Got the message loud and clear.” Caballo grinned. “Hell, he must be something else.”

“He is,” I said quietly.

Caballo gave me a look with his one good eye. “Listen to me. You know why I hook up with a different one every night? I don't want to get attached to them.”

“Them?” What the hell was he talking about?

“Mortals, man. Life is short, Adam. Really short.”

My lip was bleeding. I touched it with the back of my hand and said, “Asshole. Just stay away from him.”

The van lurched to a stop, and Drew turned around in his seat, calling through the tiny window, “We're home, boys.”

Chapter Six

Betsy gave Caballo and me the eye when we walked in bloody and disheveled, but all she said was, “Have a seat.”

Betsy's dark hair, dark eyes, and diminutive frame were not the only things about her that reminded me of a rat. She was a hoarder. Headquarters was filled with the various objects she'd ferreted out of dumpsters or found abandoned by the curb. The only reason the rooms weren't an intolerable rat's nest of her treasures was Drew, who would surreptitiously cart the trash out again. One night, Betsy had scavenged a long folding table and some really uncomfortable chairs from somewhere. Unfortunately, Drew hadn't been able to dispose of these yet, and periodically Betsy would make us all sit at the table and have a meeting.

It reminded me of the murder room at the old Hollywood station, actually. We even had a patch of moldy carpeting and a water stain in the asbestos tile hanging overhead. As I sat there watching Drew and Betsy set up, I remembered a night years back when I was still working with Peter in Hollywood Homicide, when the rain had come right through the tile. Peter and I had been going over a case with Leroy Smith and Bernice, back before Bernice had been made adjutant to the chief. We were closing the files. We had the guy and were now involved in the lengthy process of dotting all the i's for the DA's office. Peter and I had just discovered that we batted for the same team, and I looked up and saw Peter gazing at me across the top of a file, his eyes hot. And I was just thinking that maybe tonight I should follow him home when the steady *drip drip* of the rain outside suddenly became a rushing noise, and then the whole wall behind Peter was covered with bits of asbestos tile and dirty water.

“Adam, are you listening?”

I snapped to attention, pulling my feet off the table and leaning forward so the chair righted itself and both my feet hit the floor. “Yeah?”

Betsy leveled a murderous look down the long table. "You're the one who wants us to work with the cops. Least you could do is pay attention." Frank sat in a chair near her elbow, and she put a hand on his head. Betsy had dressed him in an overly cute rose-colored shirt with a smiling cat on it, and she'd styled his hair. He vibrated continuously, the whites of his eyes showing every time he glanced at Caballo. He resembled nothing so much as one of those terrified little dogs women carry around in their purses.

Betsy lay a comforting hand on his head and pet him exactly like a shih tzu. "Don't worry," she crooned.

"I'm hungry," whispered Frank. When he talked, his tiny white canines showed. Poor kid had absolutely no control, and I wondered suddenly if that had something to do with the age at which he'd been turned.

"You've consumed thirteen pints in less than twelve hours," said Drew, sounding interested. "That's twice the normal amount for an adult."

Frank's eyeballs seemed bigger than his entire face. "I'm hungry," he said again. "I can't help it."

"You can eat when we're through here," said Betsy. She turned back to a computer monitor that Drew had mounted on a desk at the head of the table.

"Drew was online, following info about your stiff at the Chinese, and he found this Web site."

The monitor featured a highly dynamic Web site, animated letters proclaiming TAKE OUT THE TRASH whipping across flashing images of bad guys held in compromising positions by ninjalike warriors. Fast, stylized, black and red, it looked like a comic book.

"Check it out." Caballo selected a button on the screen, and a young, lithe woman fully clothed in black latex appeared to jump-kick the camera lens. He clicked on another button, and a man efficiently decimated four ugly thugs à la Jackie Chan. Another, and a scrolling list of prices and services appeared.

There was no contest. The new kids on the block were cooler than us.

Drew looked chagrined. "I could have done something like that, but Betsy wanted to keep a low profile."

"Don't be stupid," said Betsy.

“Anyway, these same guys are offering a lot of money to anyone who comes up with the cloud code,” said Drew.

“From what you told me, every cyber freak in the world is looking for that code. What makes you think there's a connection?”

“Frank, tell Adam what the man told you.”

Frank stared at me, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard and whispered, “He said I'd be able to beat the shit out of my stepfather. He said they'd teach me how to fight.” Frank's brow produced two deep worried lines, and he looked up at Betsy. “I didn't understand.”

She petted his hair again. “I know you didn't.” She looked at me. “They're recruiting kids. They asked Frank first if he'd ever been arrested.”

I studied the kid. No arrests would mean no fingerprints on file. No way to trace the doers. When the Mexican vampire gang had recruited bikers, they'd been turning men with criminal records. Peter had been able to use DNA left on the bite wounds to identify the killers and track their whereabouts through known associates. These kids would have no records, no trace.

“So, I sent them an e-mail, and a dude named Mitch invited me to their rave tonight,” said Drew.

“Who's the DJ?” asked Caballo.

“Dead Mouse.”

Caballo stretched, cracking muscles in his back as he did so. “I'm in.”

“This isn't a party,” snapped Betsy.

“We should bring Peter in on this,” I insisted. “Especially if underage citizens are at risk.”

“What do you think will happen to these kids once the system gets hold of them? Foster care? Back to their parents? Are you kidding, Adam?”

She had a valid point. “Peter will figure something out.”

Betsy looked doubtful. Her estimation of the LAPD was somewhat lower than mine. “I want to talk to him. Get something in writing.”

I tried to imagine what kind of legally binding document Peter could produce to protect underage living dead runaways. “I'll get him to come up with something.”

Betsy had a truculent expression, but she nodded and I pressed my speed dial.

“Hey,” I said when Peter answered. “Were your ears burning?”

“Everything is burning,” he said in a congested voice. “I feel like shit. But that's not the worst of it. Suits has disappeared.”

“I thought he was in protective custody.”

Peter coughed, wheezed. “He was. Somebody claiming to be LAPD called his house yesterday, according to his wife. Changed the location of the pickup.”

“You know who this somebody was by any chance?”

“Jesus Christ, of course not. Anyway, the FBI has boxed everything up and carted it away. It's like the whole case never existed.”

“So you're off the case?” I asked hopefully.

“No, Adam,” he said testily. “I'm on the case. I just don't have access to any of the information I need to solve it.” He paused and I heard the honking sound of him blowing his nose. “I have to fill out a form just to see the murder book.”

“Well, then, we might have a lead for you.”

“That's the sexiest thing you've ever said to me,” he declared. “What is it?”

“Thing is, there's underage kids involved.”

“Crap.”

“Betsy wants assurances about them.”

“What kind of assurances?”

As if she knew what he'd asked, Betsy said, “He has to promise he won't turn them in to Social Services without talking to me first.”

“She wants you to leave them in her hands.”

“Adam, you know I can't...”

“Right.” I looked up at Betsy, and gave her a nod. “He says you got it.”

Betsy's cunning far outstripped her intellect. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I want it in writing.”

“Sure. Sure. He'll have everything by tonight.”

“What?” said Peter into my ear. “What are you promising her, Adam?”

I held Betsy's gaze as I rattled the address of the warehouse into the phone.

"Good," said Peter, taking it down. "What's your plan?"

"We've got a lead into the place. Drew is set to meet somebody at a rave."

"Nancy might have a surveillance team at her disposal," he said excitedly. "Where can we meet you?"

I put my finger over the receiver. "You want him to come here?"

"I don't want him knowing our location."

"You've got to be kidding me."

She lit a cigarette and exhaled before saying, "He's your friend, not mine."

She had a point. "Peter," I said. "I'll pick you up at your place and lead you to a meet location." Betsy crossed her arms and nodded.

He sighed. "Fine. Hold on." He moved the phone away from his mouth then, and I could hear his voice, quick, terse, and low, talking to someone else. Then he came back on the line.

"Okay. Nancy is getting her team together. We'll meet up at my place. I'll call and confirm with you at sunset."

"You got it." I disconnected and looked up to see Caballo watching me from across the table.

"So I finally get to meet the hottie boyfriend?"

"What is your problem?"

"Me? I got no problem, dog. You're the one's got a problem." He grinned wolfishly, and his gaze went from me to where Betsy was feeding Frank across the room. "You the one hates hisself."

"I don't need psychoanalysis from some whore gangbanger," I said, standing and going to the door that led to the roof access stairs. "I'm going up top."

"Running away from the truth," Caballo called after me. "Ain't that what Jerry Springer would say?"

"Fuck off." I shut the door on his knowing expression.

* * *

Up top was a four-by-four tar paper and concrete shell on the roof of our building. It was the only place we could smoke during daylight hours and it was hot and uncomfortable and, for the likes of me, an edgy, itchy place, with the sunlight inches away, its heat crawling through the hairs on my arms.

I liked to hang out there anyway. It wasn't easy being shut up in the dark. Plus, the proximity to certain immolation gave me a tense, aware feeling I'd craved in life and seldom felt now that I was dead.

I lit up and tossed the match across the line where the shadow of the doorway crossed into the sun. A pile of those twisted sticks lay out there. I smoked and studied the buildings across the way, trying not to think about what Caballo had said.

Across from the Empress Diner was a two-story building that housed a series of beauty parlors, black-market DVD distributors, dry cleaners, and a Chinese market that featured a four-foot-high barrel of dried mushrooms. I'd spent enough hours in this sweat box, smoking and watching, that I'd memorized every Chinese character painted across the windows and noticed any change.

Today, I saw a couple of figures in the noticeable red uniform of the Red Patrol, the privately financed, Chinese American security group that worked in tandem with the Chinese businessmen and the LAPD, having a serious conversation with the old woman who ran the grocery. They were showing her some photographs, I guessed. The old lady was shaking her head repeatedly.

I watched as they headed to the next shop. After some minutes a skinny old man holding a broom came to the door with them. He pointed at our diner, and I saw the faces with their high-tech headphones and helmets turn our way.

Chinatown is its own ecosystem. The Red Patrol has been found to be useful at getting past the brick wall of the community. I wondered who they might be searching for and who might have sent them.

I stashed the information away for further use. The one thing we did *not* want was the LAPD searching our building. Four refrigerator units filled with neatly labeled semilegal blood would be a hell of a thing to explain.

I stubbed out my cigarette and jumped down to the floor below. Betsy and Frank were out of sight. Caballo was curled up in a corner, making a pig of himself with a bag of blood, and Drew had moved from the meeting table to his gaming setup. I saw a cartoon character that looked a lot like a vampire on there and was drawn to stand behind him and frown at it.

“The Red Patrol is searching for someone,” I told Drew. “Where's Betsy?”

“She's talking to Frank.” The vampire in Drew's game had a cape that fell to his ankles. Not very practical, if you asked me.

“What's that?”

“My avatar for Quake.”

“Is that the game that Caballo was talking about?”

Drew rolled his eyes up and looked at me like I was lame and old and impossible—which, well yeah, guilty.

“Dude, everybody knows Quake.” He slipped his headphones on and began slamming the mouse on the desktop.

I wondered if there was any more of the O in the fridge and was rifling through the bags there when Caballo sidled up and said, low, “Hey, man. Betsy wants to talk to me in private.” Caballo had a look and a leer that told me what that talk would be about. I glanced at Drew. Poor little robot had no idea.

“Keep the kid and the geek busy,” said Caballo. “Help yourself to blood, and if you look in the cabinet there, I scored some of those crullers you like.”

“Sure. C'mere kid.” Frank rolled his eyes toward me and came a little closer at a kind of sideways crabwalk, one eye on the doors to Betsy's room.

I made Frank and myself a lunch of blood and doughnuts. Hey, don't knock it till you've tried it. I stuck Caballo's Game Boy in the kid's hands and then I moved over to Drew's workstation, pulling out a chair. There was a digital timer on one of his monitors that reported the exact time of sunset in Los Angeles. It told me I had over two hours to kill.

Drew glanced at me. “That stamp on Lake's hand was from a new club. Don't you think it's too big a coincidence that the club is called Blue Cloud?”

"I think you'd make a halfway decent homicide investigator," I said, "if it weren't for your known criminal associations."

"Which is why," said Drew, typing furiously, "I'm getting us invites to the gig tonight. Maybe we'll luck into a quick connection."

"Sounds like a plan." The faster the better. I'd moved a small TV and VCR into Peter's bedroom so we wouldn't even have to get up to watch the game. Multitasking, I think they call it.

"What are you doing there?" I asked him.

On one of the computers, Drew had an extensive database. The names at the top seemed predominantly Hispanic in origin. I noted that as the database descended on the screen, the names became more and more diverse in ethnicity.

"I'm tracing the vampire bloodline in Los Angeles. It looks like it all started with one source vampire. I'm calling him Vamp Zero for the time being."

He censored down and clicked on a box. My name appeared. Above it was the name of someone I didn't know. I half rose from my chair. "Is that the guy that—"

"No," said Drew. "I mean, possibly. I'm working hypothetically. The same name came up with Freeway and a few Mexican Mafia vamps I interviewed when I was working for Ozone. Nobody copped to doing you, so I'm only guessing."

I sat, feeling deflated. I don't know why it was that I really wanted to know who had turned me into what I was. It was like not knowing your murderer. Or your father. It's hard to say which side of the coin I felt about the bastard, whoever he had been.

"You know, it's interesting," said Drew, staring up at the monitors. Little squares with names on them danced in his shining eye whites. "Mathematically, I've worked out that if vampirism had existed all along and spread and if vampires are immortal, there would not be any humans left. So something must be wiping the vampires out on occasion."

"Maybe villagers armed with pitchforks?" I suggested.

He glanced at me. "You have a dark sense of humor."

"Why do you suppose that is? I mean besides the waking up in a morgue with my toe tagged?"

A face. "I'd give anything, you know. I bet a lot of people would."

That was something that had never occurred to me. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight.” Drew typed away at his keyboard, head down, not looking at me. I regarded him. He was svelte and good-looking, with that shining black hair all goosed to one side so that he looked *très* chic and clubby. And his eyes were a rich black, with thick lashes, the brows also black and wide. Never mind the nerdy computer geek thing. I'd seen Drew on the streets. He could pull off the look.

Long fingers with broad white nails tapped away. How could he want to be undead?

“She's not worth it, you know. No woman is.”

A quick grin. “Of course *you'd* say that.”

“All right, then; no piece of ass is worth it.”

The wide smile quickly disappeared. “She's not a piece of ass.”

It was a good thing that Betsy's office was well soundproofed, I considered. Drew had an expression on his face that evoked memories of high school renditions of *Romeo and Juliet*. The kind that impassioned, heartbroken young men wore when they stepped off rooftops. “Sorry. You know what I mean,” I said.

“What about your whoever he is?”

“He had nothing to do with this.”

“But wouldn't it have been worth it? If he were what you are and you weren't?”

He glanced at me again when I didn't answer.

“What's that you're typing?” I said to change the subject.

“I've started a blog,” said Drew. “It's like the *Vampire Diaries*, but I already have over five hundred followers.” His fingers flew, and a scrolling screen appeared on the monitor. Gray, with skulls and bats and red letters, for Christ's sake.

I must have made some sort of sound because he shot an angry look at me and said, “Everyone's a critic.” He tapped away and said, “See, look at all the comments.”

“Comments?”

Drew had entered some sort of information. I could see my name and quotation marks around something I'd said to him. “Hey!”

“You have a question,” said Drew. “See. Cherryblossoms from South Dakota wants me to ask you 'do vampires have souls'? I told her, of course, we aren't sure...”

“You've got to be kidding?”

I pushed him aside and frowned at the questions. One person named personaldirge had asked if I was gay before my transformation or if that had only happened afterward.

“What the hell have you been telling them?” I asked Drew. My hands hovered over the keyboard in bewilderment. “Erase this stuff. How do I work this...”

“Calm down, man. They don't know who you are. And you can't erase it. The Internet is forever.”

I'd figured out the arrow keys and was scrolling through comments. One question said, “How do you know if you're evil?”

“Oh fuck.” I puzzled it out and opened the comment.

Dear Mr. Vampire,

I am twelve years old and I think I am evil. My question is, how do you know? Signed, anon.

“Drew, these are just kids. God knows what kind of trash you're feeding them.”

“It's all PG-13,” he protested.

“Never mind. How do I answer him?”

I ignored the expression on Drew's face as he showed me how to hit the Reply button and type my answer into the box that appeared.

Dear anon. I've met a lot of evil dudes and I can tell you that just the fact that you asked that question proves to me that you are one of the good guys.

God knows I'd never asked *myself* that question. I hit the Send key. I pulled up one of Drew's chairs and sat down in front of the computer. “Where the hell are their parents?” I scrolled down and found another entry to Mr. Vampire.

Dear Mr. Vampire,

I want to be a vampire! Tell me, how did you do it? Signed, wantstobeavampire

Christ. I was about to reply when I noticed that several of the entries were along the same lines.

“Somebody has to set these kids straight,” I told Drew. “Next thing you know we’ll have lines of them down on Santa Monica Boulevard with cardboard signs, asking to be turned.”

“You can make a blog entry,” he said. He did something with the keys that opened a brand new box on the screen. “See, just tell them all at the same time.”

“Good. Good. Great.” I thought for a minute, and then I just started typing, both forefingers punching away as fast as they could go. Tell them the truth, I figured. If that didn’t scare them, nothing would.

I always figured I’d go down this way: a bad drug bust, the proverbial hail of bullets...

I didn’t even notice Drew moving away and leaving me to it.

Chapter Seven

Time flew by until Caballo's hand on my shoulder stopped me midsentence.

"Whatchya doing, dog?"

I looked up at him. He appeared sleepy and sated, and he reeked of sex.

"Blogging."

"Hmmm, okay whatever. It's sundown, you know. Didn't you need to be somewhere?"

"Crap." I pulled out my phone and checked it, but Peter hadn't called. I punched in his number and was sent straight to voice mail.

I called his office number and got the operator. "Lieutenant Ortiz is not available," said the bored nasal voice. "I can put you through to his supervisor."

No way I wanted to talk to Davis. "No thanks." I hung up, dug out Nancy's card, and called her.

"I'm in Northridge. I've scored a surveillance van and a crew. Peter hasn't been in touch?"

"He isn't at the station, either."

"Really?" There it was again, that evasive tone. I made a mental note to ask Peter what he and Nancy were up to. "He probably went home to take a nap. He's pretty sick. I'm still planning to meet you back there, right?"

"Right."

When I disconnected from Nancy, I called Peter again. The call went straight to voice mail again.

You know what I was thinking, right? Okay, maybe you don't. Maybe you don't know just how crazy a fucktard I am yet. I was thinking Peter had called Jonathan up and told him he'd changed his mind. That whatever Jonathan had proposed in the parking lot this afternoon

suddenly seemed to Peter like a really fanfuckingtastic idea. “Peter, where the fuck are you?” I said into the phone. And snapped it shut.

“Where's your ride?” asked Caballo, stretching. Behind him, I saw Betsy appear. She, too, looked overly relaxed, and her hair was mussed. “I didn't see your old beast outside.”

“I could use a lift back,” I told him.

He glanced back at Betsy. “Can Drew drive you?”

Damn. I felt for the geek. I really did.

“Drew, my man, can you do me a favor?”

Drew seemed to be playing another video game. He removed a set of headphones and looked an inquiry at Caballo and me.

“Take the kid along with you, maybe,” Caballo suggested smoothly. “Give him a treat.”

We all piled into the ice-cream truck and Drew drove to Peter's part of town in relative silence. When we got to my designated drop-off point, I climbed out of the van, and then Drew said, “Hey, Adam.”

From where I stood, I could see the corner of the window of Peter's condo. There was a light on, like he was home. But he hadn't called me back yet. I thought of that after-lunch conversation with Jonathan I'd witnessed. Jonathan's hand on Peter's arm. That wholesome all-American face of his pleading his case. I thought of Peter and his obnoxious idea of fair play. I had a bad, tight, feeling in my gut. “What?” I asked impatiently.

“Betsy said eight o'clock. Don't forget.”

“I'll be there.”

“And Adam?” He adjusted the rearview mirror. Oddly, he seemed to be talking to himself more than to me.

“Yeah?”

“Love is worth anything.”

Poor oblivious dude. “Sure it is,” I said.

* * *

I used the key to open Peter's door. He'd given it to me a few months ago.

“What's this?” A regular sized house key and a little one, looked like to a mailbox.

“I thought you should have your own key.” He was busy with something on the stove. I'd come out of the shower and found the pair of keys on a ring sitting next to my wallet.

“Why?”

The spoon clattered into the pot. Peter just standing there, looking at the stove, not moving. “I don't know, Adam. Just take it, okay?”

“Sure.” I slid it onto my ring of keys.

Of course I hadn't used it. If Peter weren't home, I had no reason to sit around in an empty condo. And if he were, he'd hear my big feet stomping up the stairs and open the door before I was there.

Tonight I took care to walk quietly for reasons I avoided examining too closely. They were there, though, bubbling away in my imagination like a lava pit.

Jonathan's clean brown hair with the long bangs hanging in laughing eyes, gazing up at me from where he lay on Peter's bed. Peter next to him, his expression serious.

Adam, you should have knocked.

You gave me a key so I wouldn't have to knock, I'd tell him.

But you never used it, he'd say.

If you gave me a key, I'd use it, Jonathan would say.

I know you would, Peter would say, and then they'd kiss. Just before my head exploded.

But I found Peter asleep on the sofa instead. Facedown, one arm flung off the side so his knuckles touched the floor. His snores sounded like a garbage disposal grinding up hamburger.

“Hey, buddy, wake up.”

There was a tissue box on the floor beside a huge pile of crumpled, used tissues. A glass half-full of some sickening looking green liquid that I guessed was probably cold medication. Peter's skin was hot to the touch, and he sniffled and groaned against the material of the sofa cushion, then opened one bleary eye.

“Did I fall asleep?”

“Yeah, looks like. I've been trying to get hold of you for the past hour.”

“Dammit.” He pushed himself upright. His hair was askew and his eyelids were swollen and red. His nose was swollen too, and raw at the end as if he'd been blowing it all day long. His lips were chapped, and he licked at them as if his mouth were dry.

“Can you get me some water?” he said.

I went off to the kitchen to do so, and when I came back he was on the phone to Nancy.

“Yeah, Adam's here. I'm sorry. I fell asleep,” he told her. “What time do you want to meet?” He listened some more. From a pile of debris on the table he sought and found a couple of gel capsules. He threw those into his mouth and downed the water I gave him in one go. “Okay, we'll see you then.” He hung up.

I sat down next to him on the sofa. His body was like a hot water bottle when I wrapped an arm around him. “How long till Nancy gets here?”

“She's driving down from Simi, so maybe forty-five minutes.”

I pulled him against me, feeling him up with one hand. From the hard muscle of his bicep to his forearm to his waist. Peter didn't have an ounce of fat on him. “That gives us plenty of time,” I said against his ear.

Peter wheezed and then he shook his head. “I can't, Adam. I can barely breathe.”

He wanted it as much as I did. I could feel his want when his hips shoved toward my hand and his head turned toward my mouth. He wheezed deeply. “I can't kiss you,” he apologized.

“You don't need to. Just lie back,” I said, giving him a little shove. I undid his slacks and got hold of him. His breathing squeaked a bit when I rolled my tongue around the head of his cock, and he wheezed and moaned, hips jerking as I sucked him down, rolling my tongue around his length a few times. His hand fell on my hair, and he gasped a few times more. His prick was hot, and his belly, when I pressed my nose in there, was hot, and his balls were hot and hard and ready to go almost immediately. I slid off with a pop and whispered, “You want me?”

He sniffled and nodded. “Yeah.”

It took seconds to get him turned around and onto his knees on the area rug, both his arms spread out on the sofa cushions.

“Ow,” he whispered. His skin was dry, probably from the cold meds.

“Move up,” I told him and held both tight buns in my hands as I laved his hole with my tongue. I don't rim Peter often and he went batshit, wriggling and whimpering, clawing at the cushions.

He tasted like Peter and cherry cough syrup. A strange combo, but not altogether awful, and I was well into it, the point of my tongue plunging in when I heard him saying my name.

“Adam. Enough. Fuck me dammit.”

“Bossy bottom boy.” I chuckled, getting my dick in place.

Peter moaned when I pressed myself in, and then just hung on to the cushions, the sofa banging against the wall, Peter oofing with every stroke, his lungs protesting as he gasped for air and demanded that I do it harder and faster.

My orgasm surprised me, lighting up my brain like a lightning bolt. I remember I lifted him a bit; maybe I even howled.

Afterward I lay spread across his back. “I think you cleared my sinuses,” Peter whispered, and there was a smile in his voice.

“Call me Dr. Good Fuck.” I chuckled.

We were drenched with sweat and though Peter's skin was still hot, he was shivering violently.

“I think we could both use a hot shower,” I said, helping him to his feet.

He was oddly passive. I bundled him into the bathroom and under the hot spray, then stood there with my arms wrapped around him for a while. By the time he'd reached down to turn off the water, my cock was hard against his backside again, but this time Peter was definitely not up for it.

“Nancy will be here soon.” He rubbed a towel over his wet hair, evading my hands every time I reached for him.

I followed him out, pulling a clean T-shirt over my head in time to see him swallowing more of the gel capsules. “Didn't you just take some of those?”

“Did I?” He looked at the empty palm of his hand in bewilderment. The condo buzzer rang at that moment, and I went to let Nancy in.

"You look terrible," she told Peter as she came through the door. I saw her detective's gaze go from my wet head to his, add it up, store it away, and move on. "So, Peter told me we're meeting some more of these creatures tonight. Your friends?"

"Associates," I said. *Creatures?*

"I'm not clear on something, Adam. If this goes to trial, could any of you testify?"

I looked at Peter. This touched on one of the reasons we hadn't told the department of my existence. He rubbed his swollen nose and shook his head. "None of dese guys would make it to trial," he told her. "Transport, jail, the whole system, sooner or later they'd step into the sunlight. Plus, it's hard to say if they would be allowed to testify. I doubt the DA wants a deposition from a dead man."

Nancy looked me up and down. "What happens with sunlight?"

"Spontaneous combustion."

Her eyes widened. "Oh." I could see her puzzling it out. "The perfect hit men, really. They can't testify against you, even if they want to. And why would they want to? They're already dead."

Peter had gone into the kitchen and come out with a bottle of water. I snatched the cold tablets from Peter's hand before he swallowed them. "You already took those," I said.

"Did I? Why don't I feel better?" He snagged some Kleenex from the box and blew his nose. The process looked painful. "So did you find the girl?" he asked Nancy.

"Not yet." She filled me in. "Eclipse was enrolled at CSUN but she's missed all her classes these past couple of days, and no one I spoke to seems to have seen her."

"Sounds like we can assume somebody ate the girlfriend too," I said.

"Ate? Why do you put it that way?" asked Nancy.

I shrugged. "Dunno. It's food, I guess."

"Do I look like food to you?" she asked. She didn't look scared. Angry, maybe. I decided to change the subject.

"Wasn't Lake a little old to be dating a college kid?"

"Sounds like your classic midlife crisis."

"Yeah." I gave Peter a look with my eyebrows raised. How old was Jonathan? Late twenties maybe? "Lot of men get insecure around their forties, I guess."

Peter narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to get changed." He padded off to the bedroom, pulling more Kleenex from his pocket as he went.

Nancy watched him go. "He shouldn't be out of bed."

"I've been telling him the same thing."

She looked mildly amused. "You've known each other for a long time."

"Peter and I met at the Academy."

"So this...condition of yours hasn't changed anything?"

The question made me feel twitchy and irritated. "Why should it?" I left her and followed Peter into the bedroom. He was just standing there, staring at a shirt in his hands. "Peter?"

He looked up at me. "What?"

Christ. "Are you almost ready?"

The years had left their mark on Peter, like they do on anybody. He's got lines around his eyes and parenthesizing his mouth. A certain weary look to him that probably came of seeing too many people dead for no good reason. Plus, just the wear and tear of life.

But in the dim light of the bedroom, his eyes bright with fever, cheeks flushed. Standing there in his undershirt and jeans, he looked like the hard-bodied cadet I'd first lusted after.

"We don't have to go," I said, moving in so I could wrap my arms around his hot body.

"Nancy's waiting," he said.

I nuzzled the hot skin just behind his ear. "She says I should put you to bed."

"I'll bet." He pushed me away and pulled the sweater on over his head. He went to the closet and brought out his shoulder holster. It was the old one, and instead of his service revolver he went to the other side of the closet and found the older Smith & Wesson he'd used a decade ago when he was still a beat cop.

"Where's your piece?"

He looked at the gun like he'd only just realized it wasn't his usual one. "Needs to be cleaned," he said.

Keep in mind I've sat here and watched Peter get ready for work more times than I can count. And Peter is as methodical and predictable as a single man with a controlling bent can be. When he didn't reach into the left drawer of his dresser and bring out his shield and its clip, I knew.

"What exactly happened between you and Davis?" I asked.

He froze as if caught. "Davis is a dick."

"Given. You didn't really retire, did you?"

Peter pursed his lips and finished stuffing his wallet and handkerchief into his pockets. "I've got several weeks paid leave coming to me. We decided I should take off for a few of them."

"He *suspended* you? Peter, what the *hell* did you say to him?"

"I didn't say anything. I punched a fucking hole in his wall, and he took it the wrong way."

"How many ways are there to take something like that?"

Nancy peeked around the doorway. "Thank God," she said. "I was afraid you were doing something else. You ready?"

"Not quite," I said.

"Yes, we're ready," said Peter, getting that stubborn set to his jaw that brooked no argument. "Call your people. Let's roll."

Chapter Eight

We were set to meet near the corner of Adams and Fourth in the Los Angeles warehouse district. Gentrification was creeping like overpriced mold across the city, but it hadn't yet hit this part of town.

I'd been a cop in Los Angeles for over a decade and I still sometimes wondered what was going on in the so-called loft district. The ebb and flow of businesses and usage permits was so fluid it would have taken a mathematician to track them. Buildings that appeared to be empty would suddenly light up at night and sprout an artsy sign. Then, just as suddenly, the lights would be gone. After a while, the sign would disappear too.

NEWLY REFURBISHED LOFTS! said a poster on the building across the way. THE NEW ARTS DISTRICT! bragged another. The colors on it were faded, and something had torn a hole in one corner.

"We have an arts district?" I asked Peter.

He looked at his watch. "You sure these people are going to show?"

The one constant in this neighborhood were the homeless who sheltered in the arched doorways and recessed windows of the old brick buildings. They'd receded when we first entered the street, but began to reemerge while we waited. Hulking, shambling, shadowed creatures, like some old horror movie.

At Peter's question, Nancy popped open her phone and made a call. She flipped it closed and stuffed it deep into the pockets of her London Fog raincoat. The thing was as wrinkled as her suits and looked sorely in need of cleaning. "Richardson and Selkey are parked two blocks from here," she told us.

Peter looked at me.

"They'll show," I assured them. "Remember: Don't give them your last names or addresses. Don't divulge any personal information that they could use to find you if they wanted to."

"I thought these people were your friends," said Nancy.

"Don't trust them; that's all I'm saying." I could hear now the whine of a high-powered motorcycle at a distance, and several blocks down I saw the white square of the ice-cream truck coming around a corner.

Peter watched it coming, his eyes acquiring that meditative look they got when the tumblers of his memory were turning.

"You'll finally meet Caballo," I said to distract him.

It did more than distract him. "The Crip you cohabited with at the vampire compound?"

"We were prisoners, Peter," I said. "Hardly roommates."

But he had that closed-down expression I'd only recently begun to notice. And when Caballo pulled up and hopped off his bike, I could see Peter observing and taking note of his tall, lean, well-muscled body, broad shoulders, the generous package that had given him his nickname, barely hidden by tight black jeans. Glossy skin, big dark eyes, and wide white smile. That cock-of-the-walk swagger of his as he strutted his stuff for anyone willing to look. Caballo oozed sex and danger and a loose willingness.

"Must have been tough," said Peter in that stony little voice that told me I was on thin ice again.

* * *

"It's the cop," said Caballo, dark eyes lidded and amused. He proffered his hand.

Peter pursed his lips and buried his hands deeper into the pockets of his LAPD blue windbreaker. "I got a cold," he said. "Don't want you to catch it."

"You can't get me sick, man," said Caballo, sneering like illness was a weapon against which Caballo was more than sufficiently armed.

Peter had that expression that citizens call "cop eyes." He didn't blink. "Good to know."

I hadn't thought about what this meeting might mean to Peter. Because, well, since when do I think? But, of course, Peter knew of Caballo and our brief relationship. I'd debriefed Peter after my adventures with the OMG vampire club.

"This Caballo saved your life," he said. He'd been typing a report as I spoke. God knew how he was explaining half of it. How does the PD suggest you refer to informants who were now drifting piles of ash, after all? The deceased? The redeceased?

"More than once." I nodded.

"Nice guy," Peter's face was expressionless. Nonjudgmental. It made every hair on my neck rise.

"No, not really. He was a Crip in Chicago, and he was cooperating with La Eme when I met him. For the blood, as far as I can tell."

"Wonder what he thought he could get from you."

I set down the beer bottle I'd been holding. "You want details?"

Peter turned his head and looked away from me. "No, I guess I don't."

It was only sex. I'd be lying if I said I understood his issue with it. But it had finally sunk into my thick skull that he *did* have an issue with it.

Plus, Caballo was grinning at Peter with an expression that was pure evil.

"They can't catch colds," Drew told Peter. "Though we don't have enough facts to explain why or if they are immune to more serious diseases, or if they can pass diseases to humans."

The whine and spit of another motorbike then, and we turned to see Betsy appear around the corner, keeping on a straight path with difficulty, her mufflers belching.

A few months back Betsy had scavenged a beaten old Roadster from somewhere. Caballo and I had worked on it a bit, but it was a piece of tin with a bad carburetor, and Betsy was no biker.

She managed to pull to a stop without dumping and stalled the engine. She climbed off, pulling a helmet off of her wildly big hair, her skirt hiked up and clipped, showing the black-and-red striped stockings above her boots. She looked exactly like a goth Pippi Longstocking.

And if you think that's cute, I didn't describe her sufficiently.

"Good Lord," said Nancy.

Betsy zeroed in on the one woman and stalked toward her, buckles ringing with every mincing step. She stuck out her hand, palm down, as if she meant it to be kissed and said, “You don't look like a cop.”

Nancy made that *heh* noise that I'd learned was her version of a laugh. “No, I guess I don't.”

“You look like a burnout,” said Betsy. “What's your angle anyway?”

Nancy tipped her head just slightly. “I guess I'm just sick to death of lies. What's yours?”

“I care about the kids.” Betsy regarded our little group with the haughty attitude of the queen regarding the rabble. “So, where's my guarantee that they won't be arrested, cop?”

Peter cast me a dark look, but he said to Betsy, “If they haven't committed a crime, they don't have to worry. And if they've committed murder...”

“Then we'll take care of it,” Betsy told him

Peter's eyebrows went up and his mouth opened.

“Moonlight's burning, guys,” I interrupted.

“Of course.” Nancy raised a walkie-talkie to her lips and pronounced, “Alpha alpha...” A staticky voice answered her, and after carrying on a conversation with whomever it was, she waved us to follow her to an alley some twenty yards away at the end of which a large unmarked black van waited.

It might as well have been sprayed with the letters F B I in neon paint.

Caballo brushed up against me, and his hand made fleeting contact with my ass. I would have smacked him if Peter weren't watching us. Instead I just swung out of his reach and hissed. “What's your problem, puta?”

His dark brown eyes went wide and innocent. And he stepped away from me, hands raised in surrender, then sped up next to Betsy and interlaced his arm with hers.

Nancy fell in next to Drew. “You're not”—she gestured—“like them?”

Drew's gaze seemed locked on Betsy's arm looped through Caballo's. “No.”

“Then why?”

“I'm writing a thesis,” he said.

“A thesis?” asked Nancy.

“UCLA graduate school,” said Drew, eyes still on Betsy and Caballo. “Postdoctoral paper on urban culture. Competition for grant money is intense, but I’ve been awarded enough in the past year to continue my research.”

We’d reached the van. Nancy paused with her hand half-raised toward the handle on the back door. “You’re telling me that the University of California is aware of these...creatures?”

“No, just my thesis advisor,” said Drew. “And the head of the program. And probably the grant association.”

They’d reached the van and Nancy looked down at him. Her expression was indescribable. “There’s a charitable organization studying vampirism,” she stated.

“Only in Southern California,” Drew corrected her. “The program in San Francisco is more interested in the financial impact on real estate.”

Nancy seemed to need to lean against the van. “Heh,” she said.

Chapter Nine

Nancy banged on the door of the van, and when it didn't open, she spoke into the walkie-talkie. "We're outside," she said, sounding testy. "Password? Dammit, I don't know of any..."

The feds just love that spy stuff, you know.

Then the door swung open, and a man with a heavy face and hair trimmed too short above his long ears leaned out laughing.

Nancy didn't look amused. She looked like she was used to it.

* * *

The typical van came supplied with two typical federal agents.

In matching gray shirts and black zip-up FBI jackets, they sat hunched before equipment with gigantic black headphones encasing their ears so they looked like federal Mickey Mouses.

"Richardson," said the one who had opened the door for us. He had the look of a man who had spent his life sitting in that very same chair, a roll of fat pushing out of his shirt just above his belt, and a toothpick permanently riding his lower lip. He lifted up one headphone long enough to hear all our names, then turned back to three monitors that featured a wavering, staticky field of gray.

"Selkey." He was the younger of the two, and his face had less discipline. The way he rolled his eyes at Nancy and the way both men endured her instructions with barely hidden disdain told me being assigned on a stakeout with Nancy "Mulder" Dickes was akin to being given the desk job in Ojai. Their buddies had probably been ribbing them about it all day.

They were introduced to Peter and dutifully shook his hand without flinching, so I could only assume that they didn't know Peter was on leave. Typical agency as well. The bureau's copious red tape and paranoia often led to information disconnect.

Drew sat down and immediately bonded with Selkey via a lot of tech gobblespeak. Soon they were excitedly chatting away and typing information into a computer.

While the geeks tracked down the location of the party we'd be attending, Peter and Caballo and I tried to relax on the foldout chairs provided. Caballo's long legs seemed to occupy the entire walk space, and he purposely shoved his calf against mine repeatedly.

I saw Peter's gaze go to this intersection, but a kind of firm resolve lifted his chin, and he gave Caballo a brave smile. "I've heard a lot about you."

"All bad, I'll bet." Caballo grinned and ran his tongue across his exposed canines.

"Adam tells me you hail from Chicago."

"After my brother died, I didn't have anything to keep me there," said Caballo. "I always wanted to visit Hollywood." A greenish glint lit the depths of his big brown eyes. "You want to ask me about it, don't you? About the time I spent with your boyfriend?"

Peter's brows lowered. If I were Caballo, I wouldn't be smiling quite that widely. Peter had a mean left hook. Vampiric strength or no, it would sting.

But Peter merely folded his hands together and said, "That's all in the past, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

Peter's eyes flinched. "I'm sorry to hear about your brother," he said.

"Are you? Are you *really*?"

I had no clue why Peter was keeping that polite smile pasted on his face, but I figured in about thirty seconds the veneer was going to shatter and he'd be planting his fist in Caballo's nose. So, I jumped up and grabbed Caballo's upper arm, half lifting him out of his seat. "Let's have a smoke outside," I said.

* * *

"Why are you being such a shit?" I asked Caballo.

There was a small party at the end of the alley now. Some skels had started a fire in a trash bin and thrown down various cardboard boxes to keep the wet from seeping through their blankets and bags of rags. They passed what looked to be, from this distance, a bottle.

I walked Caballo by his elbow well out of earshot of both the van and the winos.

"What's your beef with Peter?"

“Don't know what you mean, dog,” said Caballo. He flicked a spent cigarette into the gutter. “Tell me the truth. Does your friend really understand what you are now?”

“What? Of course.”

“Really? Does he know you can smell him? Does he know you dream of how he'd taste?”

I didn't deny it. Caballo knew better. “It doesn't matter.”

“Of course it does. Somebody should set him straight, man.”

“Is that some kind of threat? Do you really want to throw down with me, Caballo?”

“Damn. Cool it, dog.” Caballo rolled his shoulders and tossed his curls just a bit. “But it'll end in tears, Adam. You listen to me.”

I ground out my cigarette beneath a booted toe. “Stay the fuck out of it, Caballo.”

He sighed as he followed me back to the van. “Just seems such a waste.”

Peter's gaze went from Caballo to me and back again when we reentered. He had that flat, emotionless expression that was Peter being guarded, and it occurred to me that he might be hypothesizing whether or not Caballo and I had had time to do something besides smoke out there in that alley. The way Caballo was strutting and preening, he sure as hell wanted Peter to think that.

Betsy waved her hand in front of her face. “You stink of cigarettes,” she said.

Since Her Majesty liberally doused herself in patchouli oil, I figured she was no one to talk.

“I used to smoke,” said Richardson, drawing the toothpick from his lips. “But it was hell on stakeouts. Stuck in a van for hours with the cravings.”

“It's a filthy habit,” said Caballo, giving my whole body the once-over. “But I don't want to give it up.”

“Smoking's a hell of a habit to quit,” said Peter, trying to be sociable. He was trying so hard he creaked.

Caballo looked me up and down, and he licked his teeth. “That too.”

Peter's face shut as tight as a bank vault. “Your friend says he knows the building where the party is taking place,” he said coolly. “We'd like to put a wire on one of you and park a few blocks away.”

Drew seemed to have bonded with Selkey. They were sharing geek talk, and Drew had the agent's headset clasped to one ear. He looked up and said, "No wires. They can tell."

"Really?" Nancy looked at me.

No, but I figured Drew had his reasons for making up this little fairy tale. "We'll engage the GPS on our phones and be in constant communication anyway," I told her.

"We'll plant a bug in your phone," Peter said to Drew. "Your friend was just explaining how these parties work," he told the room. I noted that he hadn't looked directly at me yet.

"The locations are secret until the last minute. You have to follow the signs across town and then you need to have the password which you get from a friend of a friend."

"And still every dealer in town seems able to find them," said Peter drily.

"They can smell a junkie a mile off," I opined.

He glanced at me and away again. "You sure about this?" he said to Drew. Drew was a civilian and the only human involved, so Peter, naturally, was concerned about him. "We can call the whole thing off if you have second thoughts."

"I want to do this," said Drew.

"We'll expect you to phone in every hour within a couple of minutes," said Nancy. "You miss a call, we come in. Are your phones charged up?"

We suited up and Caballo and I took off to bring our bikes around, picking up Drew, who was noticeably edgy. I figured not everyone knew the little geek like I did, but Drew had traveled with vampires for a year now, and I'd never seen him as wired or on edge as he was now. And he smelled funny. A tinny fearful smell that was unfamiliar.

"You *sure* you're okay with this, man?" I asked him as he climbed on the bike behind me.

"I can't wait," he said.

Peter walked up to me as I was sorting out my helmet. I noticed that the cold still had quite a grip on him. His eyes were swollen, nose red, and he looked exhausted. "Be careful."

I pretended Drew wasn't there for the moment. "Nothing's happening with Caballo, you know."

"I didn't ask," he said.

"I wanted you to know."

He gaze dropped and he rubbed at his nose. When he looked up again the guarded expression had fallen away, and his eyes had that light in them. I swear nobody in my life has ever looked at me the way Peter does.

“We'll nail this guy in time for breakfast,” I told him. “Which you are going to serve me in bed.”

He grinned. “You got it.”

I wanted to kiss him all of a sudden, but that was just too much of a *Gone with the Wind* moment for yours truly, so I stomped on the clutch and got the beast going instead. Drew barely got his hands around me before I swung out and down the alley. I heard Caballo's Kawasaki whining like a rocket behind me as I went.

Chapter Ten

“Are you sure this is the place?”

We'd pulled into a parking lot behind what looked like a mundane and boring poured concrete two-story office building two blocks from where the surveillance van was parked. It had black glass windows and Anglo names stenciled onto the curbs of the reserved spaces. It was utterly quiet. Only the few suburbanite cars and too-healthy, too-young kids walking toward us indicated anything unusual was going on.

“This is it.” Drew checked his hair in my bike's mirrors.

I watched him enviously. “Do I have helmet hair?”

His face twisted in a rare expression of affection. “No, dude, you look great.”

Caballo came striding over. He wore a sleeveless muscle T with a logo across it that would glow in black light. His hair fell in its Jheri-curl-like ringlets to his shoulders. Square diamonds in each earlobe flashed when he shook his head. Rolling, round, brown shoulders, hands resting on a belt that was laden with chains and graffittied with a leaping tiger.

He gave me a leer. “Like what you see?”

Who wouldn't? I looked away and surprised an expression on Drew's face, directed toward Caballo, of unmasked malevolence. He spun around and waved an arm, leading us, his black duster kicking out as he walked, around the side of the building and across a parking lot.

A few people were gathered in the corners of the wide lot. Triads of men of various ethnicities sat on the fenders of pimped cars with the air and patience of drug dealers waiting for customers. At the other end of the lot, light flowed from opened fire doors, sentried on either side by two beefy guys with flashlights, badges, and guns securely holstered under their jackets. Their attitude was so distinct, I had no doubt they were off-duty LAPD hired as security.

As we approached, their gazes razed each one of us. One of them shone a flashlight directly into my face. “You carrying a weapon?”

Not if you didn't count what I hid in my mouth. "Nope."

"Drugs? Booze? You high?"

I was motioned through a metal detector, and a small stamp in the shape of a blue cloud was pressed into the top of my hand. An enormous black man with wrists as thick as my arm scanned the paper tickets Drew had acquired online.

From where I stood I could feel more than hear the music coming through the floor.

We followed hastily scribbled signs that had been pasted to the walls, and the volume of the music increased as we descended a level of metal stairs and were scanned again before being allowed through two fire doors there.

Entering the room was like immersion in the atmosphere of an alien planet.

The music didn't just assault my ears; it infused my body, the rhythm thumping from inside out. Every pore of my skin filled with sound. The light was a fractured rainbow. Yellow, pink, blue, and white beams swept the crowd, highlighting the silhouettes of heads bopping up and down. Hands, heads, and shirts glowed and left trails of neon color. Beside me, Drew did something to his collar, and a cycling circle of lights dashed around his neck.

He looked up at me and smiled, and his teeth and the whites of his eyes glowed with a bluish tinge.

I scanned the room. Thousands of people bobbed to the music, some dancing with fever, most flowing across the floor, as we did, following some invisible current. I saw the beginning of one such flow across an elevated platform, the large pink head of a cartoon mouse rhythmically bopping above the heads of people.

Drew brought out his phone and began typing madly.

he sed hed find me

I texted back a thumbs-up.

Per our sort-of plan, Caballo and I separated so we covered Drew's right and left flank, both keeping our senses honed for vampiric presence. The idea was to let Drew make contact and even solicit vampire services, then sweep in and nab the perps before they could carry out the buy, like setting up a drug bust, only a little more dangerous. With the bug in his phone we'd

be able to find him in a matter of seconds if he disappeared into the crowd, but it still made me edgy to have him walking more than an arm's length from me.

Unfortunately, unlike drug dealers, the vampires would know we were blood and be very suspicious if they perceived us to be hovering too closely to their mark, so I had to settle for watching Drew's flashing collar from ten feet away, the dot of his GPS blinking on my cell phone when I occasionally drew it from my pocket and checked.

I could smell marijuana and the sticky sweet taint of crack and heroin. The meth-heads were easy to spot, but it seemed most of the revelers were on E, the symptoms of which were unmistakable.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry." A young girl with black-light pink hair careened into me. She turned, sort of dancing, sort of just hopping up and down from foot to foot. Not quite on the music beat and a little faster. "I had an energy drink but I spilled it I know I shouldn't drink those things they're full of caffeine but I have to have my Coca-Cola for breakfast, just like my father, so maybe that's why he liked Cokes too you know Coca-Cola did you ever see that commercial the one where they say it's the real thing but then he quit it when he met... This water tastes funny." She stopped to take a breath, and then slugged another swallow of water back before saying, "Do you think someone put something in it?"

"Yes." I snatched it from her hand.

"Hey..." I heard her protesting from behind me as I kept pressing through the crowd. I couldn't see Caballo, and I feared I'd completely lost Drew until I worked my way around a group of dancing kids and saw the flashing lights of his collar. He was standing with his head bowed while a very young girl shouted up at him.

He was only a couple of inches taller than her, but there was still something mature and protective about the way he smiled down at her, his stance. I suddenly saw Drew as these children might. Many of them looked barely old enough to get into a club, and Drew was definitely in his late twenties. They were scattered and distracted and ephemeral as falling glitter, and Drew was stolid and mature and steady. He looked up. Spotted me. Gave me that cautious half smile of his. Then turned back to the girl.

Caballo appeared, bopping out of the shadows, a glow on his skin from exertion and a small train of adoring fans already fanned out behind him. He bopped by me, pretending not to look at me and shouting as if to someone else. “Anything?”

I shook my head. “Not a whiff.”

And then I felt it. Like a cold front at my left elbow. A scent of meat. A prickling up my spine and the sure sense of being surveyed by a predator, like in the big cat room at the zoo. I turned on my heel and looked into his eyes.

“Don't look now,” I said to myself. But Caballo was at my elbow and he heard me.

“Don't have to, you're losing your face, man.”

The bulging in my eyes that signaled the change in my irises. I blinked and lowered my head and brought out my cell phone, finding Caballo's number with one thumb.

tall blond smoking pipe, I typed laboriously.

Caballo was kissing a young woman when the text landed in his phone. He pulled it out, arm still slung over her shoulder, and glanced at the message, then turned his head casually to survey the room, catching the tall blond with the entourage in his visual sweep. Then he texted and a second later my phone recorded a message received. One word.

hot

It wasn't the word that had popped into my head when I'd seen the guy. I circled Caballo, watching Drew from the corner of my eye and spying on our blood brother over the heads of the dancing kids. He had a Scandinavian look, light blue eyes hooded under a heavy brow with thick white blond eyebrows. A long, hooked nose and thin lips wrapped around the stem of an old mahogany bowl pipe. He wore a navy blue knit sweater that was too long in the sleeves and at the hip for any heterosexual in Los Angeles to dare wear. Though I imagined our friend could wear anything he wanted without worrying about the slings and arrows of rumor. He stood in the midst of a milling group of about fifty kids, all of whom seemed blissfully unaware that they circled an animal that could drain any one of them in minutes.

From the midst of the kids a figure stepped up next to our friend. He wore a beige trench coat and an impossibly out-of-place white, collared shirt with a broad navy-and-red-striped tie. His balding pate shone in the lights that swept the room, and it wasn't until he looked up at his pal and smiled that I recognized him as one of us.

He was the one who seemed focused on Drew. I saw him wending his way closer, bringing out his phone as he did so.

“Contact,” I shouted into the air. Caballo didn’t look at me, but he nodded.

I’d been too avid in my scrutiny. The blond turned his head and cast me a keen look. He’d spotted me. I brought out my phone and typed.

been made, backing off

I got myself into a weaving, bopping, congalike dancing line and let myself be led further away from Drew and the smaller vampire. As the line circled round, I could see Caballo’s head, his eyes cast down as he talked to someone, his body posture canted to the right where I could see Drew’s flashing collar. He was now engaged in conversation with the small clerklike man and the tall blond.

The blond said something to his companion and moved away. I allowed myself to dance close to him again and then turn to confront him directly. He stopped and removed the pipe stem from his mouth. I saw his nostrils widen. Then a tilt of his head, considering. A starving vampire is like a live electrical cable, hopping and spitting and liable to sting anything that dares come near it. I knew I was as peaceful, plump, and sleek as a fat tick.

So was my fair-haired friend.

He removed the pipe stem from his mouth and shouted, “This is a private venue.”

“I bought my ticket like anybody else,” I yelled. “I’m Snake.”

He eyed me for a moment before saying, “Nicolas.” He stuck out his hand so I had to take it. His grip was firm and cold and he pulled me closer to say, “We don’t want to feed here.”

“We don’t?” I surveyed the mass of dancing kids. “I do.”

“No. You don’t.” His grip tightened and his smile became more a baring of teeth, fangs glowing blue in the black lights. And then just as quickly it became a smile again and he released my hand, slapped me in a friendly way on the shoulder, and said, “You want to freelance, I suggest Union Station. Plenty of free-range meals down there.”

“Got it,” I said. “I’ll give that a try.”

“Good man.” He slapped my shoulder again and inserted the pipe between his teeth. “Well, have a good time.” A smile. “Remember, this is a no-eat zone.”

And he was gone. Slipped into the crowd in that smoky, insubstantial way that makes you shake your head and blink like you aren't sure you just saw what you thought you saw.

I cast a quick look at Caballo and saw him nod with a dip and a swoop of one shoulder as he disappeared into the mob, tailing Nicolas.

The little balding guy, I saw, was still talking to Drew. I bopped my way between the teenagers and moved in close to them. Then I brought out my phone and texted a message to Peter.

Made contact.

Seconds later he responded.

Don't forget to call in. I swear, sometimes he reminds me of my mother.

I circled back to where Drew stood, his head lowered, watching me from beneath the sweep of his shaggy bangs.

The guy he was talking to looked like he would have been more at home in an office cubicle. “W-w-where do you want to talk?” he shouted in a wavery voice that barely lifted above the music and hubbub.

“Someplace quieter!” yelled Drew.

The guy nodded eagerly and gestured for Drew to follow him.

* * *

I trailed Drew and his hookup through the throbbing, bobbing, dancing bodies. A couple of times, I caught a glimpse of Caballo, who was staying fixed on Nicolas—who was obviously also trailing Drew and his buddy. If Caballo or I lost eye contact, we'd text our location and find each other again. Occasionally an anxious text would come through from Peter, and once my phone emitted the warning tones that indicated my GPS had been engaged by a distant device.

Drew and his friend worked themselves into a smaller, quieter room near the back of the club.

Black-light paper, pricked with a thousand holes that emitted bluish laser beams of light, fell loosely at one corner and I saw the circling lights of Drew's collar for a brief instant before he stepped behind the false wall.

Nicolas and Caballo were nowhere in sight.

where r u? I texted Caballo.

Big Daddy on stairs, said a text from Caballo. *made me. we r talking.*

While Caballo, hopefully, kept Nicolas occupied, I came around the other side of the partition and ducked back before Drew's little clerk could see me. They were just to the other side of the partition I stood near, and I could hear them like they were speaking to me.

"Hey, Mitchell," shouted Drew. The music was still pretty loud, and he had to yell. "Where'd you get that water?"

Mitchell's stutter rose above the sound. "C-call me M-mitch."

"Sure, Mitch. You can call me Dune."

"D-d-dune? That's not your online sig."

"No, man. It's my rave name. That's a sick tie. I dig it."

On the stairs above the two men, I saw Caballo's feet, clad in his distinctive sneakers. A text message appeared on my phone.

What's happening? It was from Peter. *Check-in time is in one minute.*

Drew engaged mark. Do not contact, I texted back.

Caballo's sneakers moved, and I saw a hand holding a cell phone swing into view.

"You party, man?" Drew was asking. I couldn't hear Mitch's reply, but Drew shouted, "Cool," and I saw him, arm around the smaller man, moving toward the steps on which Caballo stood.

Heads up, I texted Caballo. I saw the sneakers move out of my field of vision.

Drew and Mitch began ascending the stairs, and I worked my way around the dancing kids, trying to stay out of sight as much as possible.

N back on main floor said a text from Caballo. *will follow.*

By the time Drew and Mitch reached the landing, Caballo had backed off. Drew and Mitch had preceded me up the stairs, then taken a hard left and gone down an upstairs hallway.

The second floor looked more like an office. Beige carpet. Beige walls. Prints of copies of nondescript art on the walls. I followed their voices until they rounded a corner and stopped. I reached into my pocket and silenced my cell phone, then pressed myself against the wall, listening.

There was the expected silence, peppered with the sounds of plastic wrap and the *click* and *hiss* of a lighter and a pipe being lit. After a minute, Drew's voice, with the choked-back sound of a man speaking around a lungful of smoke.

"Wow, this is bubba kush, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How much did it cost you?"

"N-n-nothing. My friend has it."

Another long inhale. The *click click click* of a lighter. Somebody exhaled. "Nice friend," said Drew. "Could I meet him?"

The smell of the pot was filling the hallway.

"Are you a cop?" asked Mitch.

Drew laughed. I think in all the time I'd known him, I'd never heard the little geek laugh. "No way, man. I hate cops."

"I didn't think so," said Mitch. "You look too cool to be a cop. You've got c-c-cool hair, you know."

"Thanks, dude."

There was another pause filled with the sounds and smell of marijuana consumption. I was beginning to worry that Drew was getting too high to be careful. And then I heard him say, "Whoa, man. I like you but I don't swing that way."

A silence. I was tense and ready to jump and I heard Mitch say, "S-sorry. I thought..."

"No big. I'm just straight, man."

"Too b-bad," said Mitch.

That oddly incongruous laugh of Drew's again. "Yeah. Sometimes I wish I was gay. Seems easier."

"It isn't."

I leaned against the wall, silently willing Drew to get back to the subject at hand. See, that's the trouble with drugs.

As if he heard my silent plea, though, the little geek cleared his throat and said, "So, in the forum you said you could help me out?"

And then a bomb went off downstairs.

At least it sounded like a bomb. There was a roar, a bark of the speakers followed by a deafening silence, and then what sounded like five thousand kids screaming and yelling.

I just had time to retreat into a niche near the stairway before Mitch and Drew came around the corner at a run, both looking freaked out and stoned. They didn't even notice me, almost falling over each other going down the stairs toward the racket, me close on their heels. What we found at the bottom was a madhouse.

Thousands of kids pushed like a solid heaving entity toward each of the three exits, their arms, legs, and open mouths seeming part of one animal.

At least ten gigantic men wearing white shirts and badges and wielding clubs, trying to herd them like they were cattle, beating and throwing anyone who didn't immediately do as he or she was told. Various boys and girls sat or lay on the ground, bleeding. At each of the three entrances, children were piled like cords of wood, screaming, clawing, and stepping on each other.

I ran to the pile and began lifting kids off each other. I saw Drew about five feet away doing the same.

"What happened?" I shouted at a guard.

"Found a body in the girls' room," he yelled into my face.

"You call the cops?"

"I am the cops, douche bag. Now get out of the way."

I worked my way around to the women's restroom he had indicated. One of the security guards stood at the entrance, holding a club at the ready. He pointed it at me. "Back up."

"Sure," I said, and I put my fist in his face.

While he lay on the ground trying to figure out what mule had kicked him, I ran into the bathroom and looked around.

She was tiny, brunette. Couldn't have been more than nineteen. Wearing a tight black knit dress and black-light beads wrapped around her neck, which was a bloody mess. I spent a second checking for signs of life. Or unlife. Then I scampered the hell out of there before the man I'd punched came to.

In a stairwell I dialed Peter's number.

"What the hell is going on in there?" he yelled into the phone.

"We've got a problem," I said. "Somebody drained a kid in the bathroom."

"Dammit," said Peter. "Scrap the mission and get out of there."

I texted both Caballo and Drew with the message.

I'm lost, Drew texted back. *where r u?*

You high?

No, said the message. A minute later another appeared. *Ok. Yes. Where r u?*

I looked around. The lights were illuminating only portions of the room, and there was still quite a mob of kids pushing and clawing at every doorway.

Stay put, I texted.

NM, he replied. *M nose way out*.

NO. WAIT, I texted, looking around wildly. I hopped up on the stage so I could see better. Cables and power strips and LED lights were strewn everywhere, and I had to pick my way through the tangle as I ran its length, scanning the crowd for Drew's silky black hair and the necklace of lights. About ten yards away, in a thick of girls, I saw him, and I leaped off the stage and pushed the girls aside only to find the wearer of the lights was a tall Asian girl.

Stay put, I texted again. There was no reply from Drew.

I hopped down from the stage and went back to the stairway where I'd last seen him. A fire door there was barricaded shut but I took the stairs three at a time, hoping to find the legally required fire exit on the second floor.

The lighted EXIT signs led me to it, but there was no sign of Drew or Mitch. Through a window on the landing, I saw cruisers arriving below, a mob in the parking lot separating to allow them access. I ran back inside and began methodically opening the doors, peering inside each before running to the next one.

There was a body in the third room I entered.

"Dammit." I smelled him when I opened the door. He lay behind a couch, the area rug rucked up beneath his feet as if he'd been dragged there. With his belly dominant and black shoes pointed toward me, I didn't recognize him until I trotted around and saw his face. Ghastly white

and staring, as if into the eyes of the monster that had punctured his neck and sucked out his life's blood.

I punched Peter's number. "I've found Suits," I said. "He's dead. Bitten."

Peter swore. "Get the hell out of there. Davis and his crew have arrived."

* * *

"What the hell is going on?" I was sequestered with Nancy in the black van. She'd appeared at my elbow the instant I'd emerged from the building and shepherded me into the van. On the monitors I could see every corner of the parking lot where hundreds of kids still milled about with the lost, ashen faces of the damned, five black-and-whites in the parking lot, lights cycling, officers interviewing each child one at a time.

Above, a couple of news helicopters' lights swept the parking lot, and I could see the NBC van spewing forth a couple of reporters as we watched.

At one corner, Peter. Head down, arms crossed, feet planted. Saying nothing as Davis poured a river of what I could only assume was righteous displeasure down upon him.

"I tried to talk him into leaving before they showed up," she said. "He wouldn't budge."

A hammering at the door and Richardson said, "It's the black kid."

Caballo climbed into the back, cursing. "You fucking forget about me, dog?" The dance had lit him up. He was shining with perspiration, and his eyes were alight with that inner fire, the color in his cheeks high. "Where's the geek?" he asked me.

"I lost track of him in the chaos," I admitted.

"How could you lose him?" Caballo was in my face, eyes blazing fluorescent green, teeth exposed and expression wild.

Richardson pushed aside his headphone long enough to say, "We've got the track on his phone. He's moving down Wilshire at about thirty-five miles per hour."

"Dammit, he's left with Mitch," I told Caballo.

Caballo swore. "Betsy's gonna kill me."

"I can set you up with an earpiece and feed his location to you if you want to follow him," Richardson said.

Caballo snatched up his helmet. "Yeah, let's do that. You coming, Adam?"

“Hang on a second.”

On the monitor I saw Davis walking away from Peter, his little entourage trailing behind him. A couple of the unis nearby still stood, hands on hips, their heads down as if embarrassed by whatever they'd just witnessed happening to Peter.

Caballo cast an impatient look at the monitor. “Your boyfriend's fine, dog. Let's roll.”

“Just a minute.” I knew a few of the cops trolling the parking lot, so I couldn't go out there. I dialed Peter's phone, and he opened it up with a chagrined expression on his face.

“Guess I have that break I promised you,” he said.

“How much trouble are you in?”

A pained laugh. “Remains to be seen. I've got to head downtown and explain why I was here when a young woman and a murder suspect were killed. It'd be nice if I knew.”

“You couldn't help it, Peter.”

“Couldn't I?”

Caballo gave me a sharp punch in the shoulder. “Let's go, bitch.”

In the monitor I saw Peter's face. Grim, ashen, and exhausted. “Maybe Davis is right. My head's been screwed on all wrong for months now—”

“Davis is a stupid dick. Don't let him get to you.”

“Are all of you okay?”

The last thing Peter needed was to hear that we'd lost Drew. “Sure.”

“Great. Well, then, I'll talk to you when I get home? *If* I get home...”

“I'll see you there.” I disconnected and turned to Caballo. “Don't worry about the geek. He's tougher than he looks.”

“You better hope so,” said Caballo.

Nancy was sitting next to Richardson, following the GPS signal on the screen.

“Peter's taking the hit for you,” I said to her.

She looked up at me with those pale cold eyes, and it occurred to me that one of the reasons Nancy Dickes was friendless was her absolute willingness to use other people in the pursuit of her goals. In that way, she was like every other fed I'd ever met.

“I know.”

“You owe him.”

She compressed her lips but didn't comment.

“He may not call in the chip, but I will,” I said to her.

She jerked her chin in a nod. “Understood.”

We sorted things out with the headsets Richardson had. I figured we were going in deep enough to take precautions, so I prevailed upon Caballo to surrender his personal cell phone, as I did, and take one of the disposables the agents provided. Nothing will blow your cover faster than having a cop on speed dial.

They made us sign a voucher for the disposables and for the earpiece they gave me.

You want job security? Become an accountant for the government, boys and girls. That's the best advice I'll ever give you.

We fetched our bikes with a certain amount of stealth. The LAPD were mostly focused on the mobs of children they'd extracted from the club, but we rolled the bikes down the street before kicking them into gear.

Caballo was still raging at me for losing Drew, his whole body vibrating. “You're losing your edge, dog. Comes of drinking that fake blood.”

“What?”

But he revved his Kawasaki, slapped his visor closed, and shot down the street, his bike describing a wide arc at the corner.

Chapter Eleven

Richardson fed me the street names until he reported that Drew's phone had stopped moving at an address several miles south of the border that defined Compton, near 124th Street. It was a two-story building, the lower windows covered with white graffiti. We spotted a 2001 blue Toyota four-door that Caballo swore he'd seen in the parking lot outside the rave.

It looked like the sort of car a Mitch would drive.

We drove on until we found a lot with a leg invisible from the street where we felt we could stash our bikes.

Caballo had an alarm on his bike that could wake the proverbial dead. My security had always been my Mongol OMG membership. No meathead would steal a Mongol bike. These days, I had nothing, so we chained our bikes together.

Nobody could get the Beast started but me anyway.

Then Caballo and I shambled out onto the main sidewalk, trying to look a little like addicts. It's not a hard look for me to achieve, but Caballo glows in the dark, and in a few minutes we'd attracted a couple of admirers.

From the cloud of homeless ebbing and flowing at the edge of buildings and alleys, two ventured across the street so that they stood on the corner of our block. They shared a bottle in a paper bag back and forth, trying to pretend that they weren't watching us. As we strolled in their direction, they came toward us until they stood about twenty feet away.

"Shit," said Caballo. "We gotta toss that trash, dog."

"Don't flash your face, yet. Somebody might be watching."

"Hey man, you got a quarter?" said bum number one. Six feet away, and he had that redolent meaty smell of illness.

I tried to look high. "No, man. Sorry."

“You sure?” The two of them shambled closer. The one who addressed me was no threat to anybody, obviously ill, his skin reddened and peeling from exposure. He wiped at a running nose with the back of his arm. The other guy, though, still had good musculature, and all I smelled on him was booze.

“I told you I don't have cash, man.” We were standing just in front of the building Richardson had directed us to. I imagined I could feel a hundred eyes upon us. Or maybe it wasn't my imagination.

“We don't want any trouble,” I reminded Caballo.

In his designer jeans and artfully crafted tattoo muscle shirt, Caballo reeked of money, and both men seemed fixated on him.

“You want somefin', faggot?” He turned to face down the drunk one.

“Kin I bum a smoke?” said the guy, moving in. He had undoubtedly decided that he and his pal could take us, because he came in fast and only made the slightest sound of dismay and pain when Caballo grabbed him, whipped him around, slammed him on the ground, and planted his fangs in his neck.

His buddy jumped back as if shocked, then whipped around and in seconds was no more than a wisp of smoke and the sound of rubber soles headed away.

At my feet, Caballo was focused, both hands planted on his victim, holding the man's greasy hair back as he swallowed.

“Let him up,” I said to Caballo. The smell of the man's blood curled up from him like the smell of steak on a grill. I fought against the desire that rose in me to drop to my knees and join Caballo there on the pavement.

Peter had been very clear, though. He didn't want to see a trail of dead bodies following yours truly around Los Angeles.

Caballo's victim exhaled a gurgling sound that I feared was that of a man dying of vampire bite. I grabbed Caballo and had to shake him a few times before I pulled him off.

Of course, he turned on me. A hundred and eighty pounds of rottweiler-like fury in a lean demonic body. Plus, he had the blood hunger, and I was disinclined to kill him. So, he had a slight advantage for a minute or two. He threw me against the hurricane fencing, and I fell to the

sidewalk. When he jumped on me I rolled, but he got hold of me and his knee did its best to break my spine.

I relaxed into the hold, then bucked. Loosening his grip enough that I could roll, get him in a leg lock and, using my superior weight, roll over on top of him, my arm across his neck, struggling to hold him, while he growled and hissed and spat, clawing at my arm. It fucking stung is what it did, and I squeezed his face a little. "Stop that. Get hold of yourself, puta," I said.

Caballo, breathing hard, a kind of deep growl emanating from his chest, gradually gained control. I released him when I felt he'd had enough, and he sat up wiping his mouth with the back of his arm, leaving a long dark smear on his forearm. "Fucking trash," he said.

We hadn't eaten in hours. The smell of the man's blood was making my mouth water too. I picked up the bum and pushed him, bleeding and barely able to walk, back the way he'd come. He staggered off, whimpering and holding his neck. I figured he'd wake up the next day not remembering a thing.

When I went undercover with the Mongol motorcycle gang, it took about three months to set up my identity. And another year for the CI who was working with us to bring me into the gang. Contrary to what you see on television, the best way to break into a gang is *not* to walk into that gang's territory and start a fight.

That's just a really good way to get killed.

I felt it seconds before I heard it. And I spun around just in time to catch the first boot heel in my face.

There had to have been about five of them. I didn't stop to count. I'd been so busy trying *not* to smell the blood of the bum, I'd ignored the warnings of my own nose, and now Caballo and I were surrounded.

After a while, I noticed that Caballo was prone and only emitting the occasional pained grunt as another foot registered with his belly. I couldn't see out of one eye, and it was a good thing I didn't need air, because my nose was broken and filling with blood.

"Wait!" I heard a voice call out. I reeled and almost fell, holding my hands out more as a plea for mercy than a defensive posture, and Nicolas, from the party, grabbed my chin and raised my face so he could peer into my one good eye.

"I know you," he said.

I spat blood. "I followed your little dude," I said.

He released my chin and stepped back. "Why?"

The bleeding had stopped, and I could feel my nose beginning to heal. I swabbed at it with my shirt sleeve to give myself time to think.

"Nothing else to do. It seemed like a hoot."

He scrutinized me, then nodded at Caballo who still lay on his belly, drooling blood onto the pavement. "Your friend here spoiled it for all of us. You think that was a hoot too?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We don't feed at the club," said Nicolas. "I made that clear. It causes problems for everybody, and it spooks the new kids."

I looked at Caballo. He had bright maroon bruises on his neck, his face. The brunt of the brutality just now had definitely been directed at him.

"Your friend ate a girl in the bathroom," said Nicolas.

"You lie," said Caballo. "You're a fucking liar." He lisped a bit when he spoke, due, probably, to two of his front teeth having been knocked out.

"Bring them," Nicolas snapped at someone there. "No sense making a spectacle in the street, is there?"

"Nah, that's cool, we're just going home now—"

That's all I got out before five guys immobilized me. Caballo didn't even appear to resist.

I would have liked to memorize the route they dragged me in, the direction of doors, and how many flights of stairs we ascended, but I only swam up out of the pain on a mattress in a room, Caballo beside me.

"What happened, dog?" He rolled over and looked at me, still speaking with a lisp, though I saw that his teeth were growing back.

"This is all your fault, bastard," I said.

"I wath hungry," said Caballo. He pushed himself up, his eyes flashing to green to brown to green and back to brown. "Theriously. I'm thtarving."

A voice said from above and beyond us, "That's due to the injuries."

Both Caballo and I rolled to crouching defensive postures, looking around.

“Who thaid that?”

A knock of knuckles on glass, and then I saw the window, about six feet up the wall, a foot high and three feet wide. Smiling down from up there was Mitch from the rave.

“Can we get something to eat?” I asked him.

“Oh, that's not up to me,” said Mitch.

“Who is it up to? Can I talk to him?”

“Did you really follow me from the party? You know, I'm kind of upset about that. They've taken my car from me.”

“I'm sorry, man,” I said.

Caballo had stumbled to his feet and now leaned against the wall, wiping his nose with his arm.

“It's okay. They said they might give me a motorcycle.”

Just the thought of Mitch's damp white hands touching my baby made me growl. My hand went instinctively to the pocket where I'd kept the toss-away phone, but of course it was gone.

“Caballo, you got your cell?”

“Naw, man. They took everything.” Caballo showed me the empty ankle sheath where he usually carried a knife.

“Can we talk to whoever is in charge?” I asked Mitch. But he was gone, the window above our heads vacant.

Seconds later, a small troop of bloodsuckers came through the doors and wrestled Caballo and me down the hallway, a flight of stairs, and outside a fire door to what appeared to be a wide patio next to the river. The concrete was dirty and cracked, strands of zoysia grass reaching across random slabs. Caballo writhed and spat and tried to bite anyone he could, but it was useless. We were soon strapped down, spread-eagle, our ankles and wrists shackled.

Then they just walked away and left us there.

Caballo swore for several minutes, yanking at his shackles and heaving his torso up and down uselessly before he finally stopped, panting, and said, “This is all your fault, you fucking homo.”

I've been in a lot of bad situations in my career, and I was still calmly sifting through my options.

As soon as Richardson lost contact with us, they'd report that information to Nancy and Peter, who would climb into his old Caddie and come down here.

Except Peter was undoubtedly standing in Davis's office getting his ass reamed.

So, Nancy was my only hope. That thought settled into my chest like lead.

I could feel the sunrise creeping toward the horizon, the familiar scent of hot tar and warm earth that always presaged it, filling my nostrils.

Caballo was emitting a steady stream of curses and pleas to God. "Christ, I don't wanna go to hell, dog. Not yet."

"What makes you think that's what will happen?"

"Don't get all fucking modern on me. Drew, he said we got no souls so we gotta go to hell."

"No souls?" I didn't feel the absence of anything. Not any more than I always had. I continued to piece out our options. Nancy wouldn't raid the building because, I suspected, she was trying to keep her activities beneath the radar. It would be only her and the two techs most probably.

I figured Nancy had as much a chance of sneaking around the building housing the vampires undetected as a poodle had of sneaking through the San Bernardino Forest. She'd be breakfast. And we'd be dust.

The vise of regret started tightening in my chest, and I jerked uselessly against the restraints more as an attempt to escape my thoughts than with any hope of breaking free. Bad enough that we'd failed to rescue Drew. I could still see Peter, head bent, defeated, as Davis rained the tirade down upon him.

Guess I have that break I promised you.

Since we'd been beat cops, Peter had talked about his dream vacation. Like a lot of PD, he fantasized about sun, sand, and mai tais. Minimum physical exertion and excitement. Maximum amount of rum-induced numbness, swinging in a hammock and possibly ogling cute behinds in thongs.

“South Beach,” he said, sipping his coffee from the Styrofoam cup. We'd been in the car for three hours watching the dark windows of the El Segundo apartment. It'd been pissing down the filthy mist they call rain in So Cal for two hours, and every inch of the cruiser was damp. “Or even Jamaica.”

“I hear they walk up to you on the streets and offer pot in Jamaica.”

Peter looked scandalized. “Not to me, they wouldn't.”

I looked over at him. It was a year or so before we'd started fucking, and just the sight of Peter was enough to make me hard. In that tight-in-the-chest, aching way that came of wanting the man, not just the ass. Even after a full shift in the musty cruiser, Peter looked clean and bright and perfect as a new brass button, sitting there. I imagined some Rastafarian offering him a fat doobie and had to grin. “I think you're right.”

“Damned straight, I am.” He sipped at his coffee, then set the cup down near my hand. Our knuckles grazed, and I felt the little tingle and rush in my dick I always did when he touched me. “South Beach, then. Don't want to have to kick ass on my vacation.”

“Just chase it, huh?”

He turned his head to gaze out the side window at the apartment we were staking out. “Did you see something in the window there?”

Of course, now it would be impossible for me to go on a sand-and-sea vacation. I'd noticed that Peter had stopped talking about it, and it only occurred to me now, lying spread out on the damp ash-covered slabs of concrete, that he'd probably only done so because he couldn't take me with him.

There'd been plenty of times he'd mentioned it before, though.

“So don't you have some time off coming?”

I'd been in deep with the Mongols for weeks. Ruben was getting twitchy and paranoid, like he could feel the proverbial sword of Damocles hanging up there above him. He'd started a fight

with a group of Angels the other night, and he'd been dropping in on every officer of the club unexpectedly.

But I'd had to get away for a few hours. The whole gig was making me sweat too. So Peter and I met up in Santa Barbara at one of those swank bars that no biker would be caught dead in.

"I figured I'd wait until your case was closed," said Peter, topping off his glass of beer with the last of the liquid in his bottle.

"Why?" I was eyeing a svelte young man at the bar who had been eyeing me back for about thirty minutes or so.

It took a moment for me to notice that Peter was no longer talking, and when I pulled my gaze from the kid at the bar, I saw that Peter was counting out his money and pushing his chair back from the table.

"Don't you want some of that cheesecake, Peter?"

"Maybe I should watch it with the cheesecake. I'm getting fat." He stood. "You ready?"

I'd stepped in it for sure. My mind did a quick U-turn and swept up the tail of the last conversation. "So, what were you thinking of doing with your time off?"

His jaw clenched and relaxed like he was grinding his teeth. "Figured a couple weeks in South Beach. Catch some sun."

"I could go for that."

"Yeah?" And his gaze flicked toward me and away. "You think?"

"Absolutely," I lied.

It wouldn't have killed me, would it? A couple of weeks of my life that would have meant the world to Peter. Damn. This was exactly why I'd always hoped to go quickly. To avoid just this sort of recollection.

"Fucking pricks. Hypocrites." Caballo was still cursing. "Like they don't take it every chance they get." He swore a long string of creative adjectives. "I don't care, motherfuckers. It was worth it."

"What was worth it?" I asked. I'd rather spend my last moments hearing about Caballo's lost life than thinking about my own.

“That chick in the club. What the hell, man. That's what I am...”

It hadn't occurred to me that Nicolas might have been correct. “So you killed her?”

“What, killed? She was food, man.”

I'm no one to lecture another man on morality or ethics. So there was a certain calm acceptance when I asked. “I thought you were bagging it.”

“Fuck that shit. Who the hell we kidding? We aren't human no more. Or we weren't. I guess we'll find out in about forty-five minutes what that means, won't we, dog?”

I could smell dawn and even feel it in my bones. I closed my eyes. “I guess we will.”

And then we were both silent. The silence of the damned accepting their fate. I could hear the traffic on the 110. Perpetual as the sea. I could hear the rodents on the pavement near us. Unfortunately for them, there'd be nothing left to scavenge. From the streaks and damp around us, I guessed our ashes would be hosed into the Los Angeles river.

A certain pleased satisfaction settled into me at that thought.

“Psst,” said a voice right near my ear, and my eyes popped open.

“Drew?” Because there he was. Safe and sound. His dark eyes merry. Leaning over me and doing something to the shackles at my right wrist.

“Hurry up.” He got me loose and went to Caballo, moving fast and talking low. “I told Mitch I had to take a whiz. He's soft but he's not stupid. I figure he'll come looking for me any minute.”

Caballo got loose and hugged Drew against him. “I'm going to fucking cry,” he said.

Drew pushed him away, looking uncomfortable. “Come on, we've got to move fast. I know where they've stashed your bikes.” He gestured toward a hole in the fence near the slabs of the river.

We ran down a break between a leaning fence and a stucco building. So dark I couldn't clearly see what was so soft and squishing under my feet, though the rank smell gave me some ideas.

“Fucking rats,” said Caballo from behind me, corroborating my guess.

Drew had paused at another opening in the fence. “They eat them too,” he said, finger raised to his lips. “Shhh...”

They hadn't pulled the starters, and the keys were still in the ignition. She looked fierce and awesome down there in the dark.

"How're we going to get them out of here?" I asked Drew.

He gestured and pointed and led us, wheeling our rides as quietly as we could, to an oil-streaked ramp that led up to the street. Then he climbed on the back, wrapped his arms around me, and we got the hell out of there.

* * *

The sun was skulking just below the horizon when I slid into the parking lot of the Empress Parlor. I figured I had about twenty minutes before I was toast.

Caballo hopped off his bike and scampered straight up the side of the building without looking back. From below we heard him bang open the door to the rooftop access.

Drew slid off my bike.

"Hold on a minute." I stopped him before he could walk off. "What the hell were you doing back there?"

"Everything was fine. You guys didn't need to worry. Mitch thinks I'm his friend."

"He's a vampire, you idiot."

"So are you."

Dawn rumbled in the distance like the warning growl of a mountain lion. "I'm not done with you, you understand? But I need to check in with Peter." I kicked the clutch and shouted over the roar of the engine. "Thanks for saving my undead ass."

Drew looked pleased with himself. "Couldn't let anything happen to you two. You're my family."

I turned my head away so he wouldn't see the expression on my face. "Later."

When I rounded the corner toward the freeway onramp, I looked back and saw him watching me go, an affectionate smile on his face.

That smile was gonna haunt me.

Chapter Twelve

As it turned out, Peter hadn't even known I was missing.

He opened the door, looking no more anxious than he would if the mailman were late. "It's nearly dawn. I thought you'd decided to stay with your friends."

"We were *captured*, Peter."

"You're kidding."

Jesus. "Didn't Nancy tell you?"

He shook his head. "Get in here before the sun burns your ass," he said, gesturing me in. "Nancy and I haven't spoken. When I got out of my meeting with Davis, I heard that she was pulled in by the bureau. I figure she's had a worse night than I had. Seriously, you were captured?"

"We bungled the whole shebang. What a mess. How bad was the meeting with Davis?"

"Christ, don't get me started. You hungry?" I'd followed him to the kitchen, where he offered me a beer with one hand and a bag of blood with the other.

"Starved."

"You can tell me about it after we eat."

He had what looked like pasta on the stove.

"Little early for dinner, isn't it?"

He grunted. "You've got me on *your* schedule."

I loved the way he felt when I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around his body, that tight ass against my aching dick and his hard stomach under my hands. He smelled like cinnamon and cherry-flavored cough syrup. His skin was still warm. "You're still sick," I whispered, nuzzling the place just behind his earlobe that made him shiver from the base of his

spine to the top of his head and made him grab one of my hands and push it inside the folds of his robe.

“Step back from the stove,” he whispered after a minute. “Don’t want anything to catch on fire.”

So, we made out against the kitchen wall for awhile. I’ll admit I was a little more eager than usual. Reveling in the feel of his ass in my hands, the taste of his mouth. That sound he made when I grabbed his chin and turned it so I could deepen the kiss.

He made the sound again, but it sounded more like a pained grunt than like appreciation, and his fingers were on my face, pushing me back a bit. “I think you’d better eat something,” he said. I felt the pads of his fingers on my lips, my teeth. And I realized my lips were drawn back, exposing my canines. I dropped him so quickly he staggered. “Fuck. Fuck, I’m sorry, Peter.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m hungry too.”

I snagged a bag and took it to the bathroom. When I came back, he was sitting down to his spaghetti, tossing cold pills back like they were raisins and washing them down with a glass of milk.

“So about the Lake case,” he said. “I think we can assume Suits was involved. And I think we can assume these people you initiated contact with yesterday are involved. Question is, who is at the center of it and how do we catch them?”

“Peter, you have got to be kidding me. What did Davis say?”

“It’s no big deal. Just pending some shrink signing off on a psych eval. Nothing to stop me from asking a few questions.”

“Davis told you you could ask a few questions?”

“No. But he didn’t say I couldn’t.”

“Why does he want you to talk to the shrink?”

His stubby gold eyelashes flicked downward, and he frowned at the toast he was buttering. “Some hogwash about Stan’s death. And yours.”

I liked to avoid conversations that traversed the terrain of my death. “I thought you got signed off a year ago with the department shrink.”

“Yeah.” Now he seemed to be really, *really* fascinated by the toast he was buttering, the knife smoothing yellow into every corner and niche.

“Peter, if you're crazy, then nobody in this city is sane. What's the problem?”

“I punch one damned hole in one damned wall and suddenly I've got a damned twenty-four-year-old doctor with a bug up his ass about posttraumatic stress.” Peter shrugged and ate the toast in three bites.

Peter had made his opinion of PTSD clear to me already. Who, he reasoned, had watched SI scrape a kid off the pavement and been the same afterward? What kind of man wouldn't be traumatized by what LAPD officers did every day? Maybe a monster like yours truly could calmly step over all those innocent bodies, but men like Peter had nightmares. And they drank. And sometimes they put their fists through walls. It was a sign of their humanity, not a disorder.

So I withheld comment and watched as Peter applied himself to his meal without further conversation. For dessert, I pushed him against a wall and ground against him awhile and then, later, I had to dig my fingers into his recliner's Ultrasuede armrests while he deep throat me so hard I'd swear the top of my head popped off.

Then the bell to the condo rang.

“Cover yourself,” he said as he went to answer the intercom.

The way he leered at me when he said it made me feel disinclined to do anything of the sort, but I obediently snagged a pillow and covered my groin so that when Nancy entered all she saw was yours truly, with his pants around his ankles, spread out in the La-Z-Boy, holding a pillow to his crotch.

“Were you always like this?” was all she said, dropping two cell phones on the table. “Richardson said your contact list is an *America's Most Wanted* roster.”

“Thanks.”

She threw herself, uninvited, onto Peter's couch. “My ass has been through the meat grinder. Tell me you found something worthwhile.”

“We were just talking about it,” said Peter.

Nancy's eyes rested on my pillow. “Obviously.”

“Here.” Peter dumped a throw on me, and I wrapped it all around myself and got my act together.

“Prelim on Suits puts TOD during the rave downstairs,” said Nancy. Her flat, cynical gaze rested on me.

“We saw two bloodsuckers at the party,” I told her, zipping my pants. “I’d put my money on a tall blond dude, calls himself Nicolas.”

“I followed your suggestion and requested DNA samples from the neck wounds,” Nancy told Peter. “Richardson had something to say about that, believe me.”

“They don’t believe?”

“They didn’t actually see anything, did they? Everything else they chalk up to an elaborate fabrication on my part.” She jerked her chin at me. “Tell me about this place you followed this Drew to.”

“There’s definitely a gang of them down there,” I told her. “We had to get out before dawn, so I haven’t had a chance to debrief him, but Drew will have more information.”

Peter had gone to his liquor cabinet and brought down the seldom-opened bourbon. He poured Nancy a shot and handed it to her. She took it gratefully and tossed it back in one go that barely seemed to faze her, then held the glass up to him. “More, please. That young man is quite a resource.”

Peter poured and said to her, “I’d prefer that we keep him out of it. I don’t want to risk any more citizens. That homicide is on my head. I should have realized it was possible and covered that contingency.”

I’d almost forgotten Caballo’s admission of guilt. But all I said was, “Drew’s into it. Let me call him.” While I dialed, Peter brought out two more shot glasses. The geek wasn’t answering, though. “Call me when you’ve got a minute,” I told his voice mail. “I want to talk about what you saw down there.” I took the drink from Peter. “You sure you want to drink on top of all those cold capsules you’ve been popping?”

He shook his head. “My mother swore by a hot toddy for a cold.”

Nancy was staring miserably into the glass like she could read her own humiliating future in it. “I’ll never hear the end of this,” she said. “Richardson and Selkey had the guys in tears

when I came out of the bureau chief's office.” She held up the glass, and Peter poured another generous shot into it.

“Too bad I didn't know,” I said to her. “I'd have made them stop laughing.”

“No, you wouldn't,” said Peter sternly. “Listen, while Davis was spitting fire, I heard a piece of news from one of the grunts on the floor. He told me the ME issued her official findings on Lake. Turns out Lake had stage-three lymphoma.”

“He really did have cancer?” said Nancy.

Peter swished the bourbon in his glass thoughtfully. “They were keeping it a secret. He was the company's only asset, really. His big brain. There's a huge financial prize awarded every year. Seems like they thought it wouldn't be given to them if the word got out he was terminal.”

“So that's why he was revisiting his will.”

“That's the thing. He never made it to the appointment with his lawyer. And two days later he's got a new girlfriend and he's going to raves.”

“One last hurrah before he died,” suggested Nancy. She'd taken the bottle from Peter and was pouring into the glass and drinking so quickly she might as well have drunk straight from the bottle.

“So Suits knew Lake was dying. But he didn't expect him to change his will.”

“Nope.” Peter sat down, rolling his empty shot glass between the palms of his hands. “But the Internet is buzzing, apparently, because before Suits died, he offered a two-million-dollar reward for the location of the code. Your people,” he said to Nancy, “are pointing the finger at Davis.” Peter took the bottle from Nancy and poured himself another shot.

I saw where this was going. “And Davis is pointing at you?”

“Something like that.”

Nancy seemed to be melting into the couch. She lay her head down on one arm and closed her eyes.

“Maybe we should call her a cab,” I suggested.

“Let her sleep.” Peter picked up the throw he had tossed me and laid it over Nancy, who was now snoring. He tucked it under her feet. “I feel sorry for her,” he said.

“So what's next?” I asked, following him into his bedroom.

"I need to shut my eyes for a couple of hours," he said, removing his watch, then placing it in the dish he kept on his dresser. I've known Peter for over a decade, and he always takes off his watch and puts it in the dish. Right side up, face pointing toward him.

Peter always unbuttons the cuffs of his sleeves first, and then he always bats my hands away when I try to help him take off his shirt.

He let me feel him up a little before he wriggled out from my grasp and went down to the bathroom.

By the time he came back to the room, I'd stripped and was posed on the bed, priming the proverbial pump.

He grinned. "Wish I had a camera."

"It wouldn't work." I fondled my balls, watching his eyes darken as I did so.

"Guess I'll just have to memorize how you look."

He climbed onto the bed, and I grabbed him before his ass had hit the sheets.

His mouth tasted minty fresh when I stuck my tongue down his throat, but he pushed me back, grinning and scandalized. "We can't. Nancy's in the next room."

"She's practically in a coma," I said, sliding my hand down his belly and wiggling my fingers under the waistband of his boxers.

He captured my wrist, though I saw the wriggle of his hips and the beginnings of growth in the boxers. "It's like having sex in my mother's house," he whispered.

"You telling me you never did that?" I let my hand slide slowly down one leg of the boxers, tickling the curling hairs on his thigh and slipping fingers up under the short edge. Another wriggle of his hips and he was smiling at me.

"Of course not."

"No high school hotties spending the night? Sharing a sleeping bag in a tent in the yard?" I whispered against his ear. I slid my hand down, and this time he didn't fight me when I slid the boxers down.

I closed my mouth over his and felt the little sound he made when I closed my hand over his cock.

He put my hand on his where I'd loosely wrapped my fingers around him. I could feel him, warm and swelling slowly into my palm. Then thickening quickly. His fingers tightened around mine and helped me grip his cock. His chin tilted up, eyes dark beneath nearly closed lids.

I rolled on top of him, giving up my hand to rub my belly against him, then my cock. His hand and mine slid between us as we helped each other get off. Holding him, not sure if I held him or myself, our combined friction and all-over feeling of goodness. His lips were soft and wet, and he pushed up against me hungrily, hips moving beneath mine. One leg came around and locked itself to my leg, and then I felt his hand on the back of my head and he was kissing me hard, teeth catching against my lips.

He gasped, head back, and I felt an orgasm tickle and then crawl in a thousand tiny rivulets from my balls to my brain.

"Christ," I breathed against his neck.

He was still breathing hard. "Yeah."

"Nobody does frottage like you."

A gruff laugh. "Find a Hallmark card with *that* on it."

I pushed up onto my elbows, looking down at him, liking the feel of him warm and fitting snugly up against me inch for inch and skin to skin.

"Hey, you've got blood on you," I observed.

"Do I?" He ran his tongue around until he found the little blob on his upper lip. "Did I bite you? I'm sorry."

"You wouldn't be the first." It was a lame joke, but it made him smile.

He reached up, one finger on my face with that indescribable gentleness that always took me unaware. "It's okay, isn't it, Adam?"

"Sure." His finger had found my mouth, and I kissed it softly. I watched his eyelids slowly close and listened to his whistling breaths as he fell asleep. I rolled over next to him then, watching him as he breathed, the vein beating softly in his throat until the rhythm of it hypnotized me and I sank into the coma I call sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Sometime later I half woke up to feel Peter's hand in my hair and his lips on my forehead. It was the sort of kiss a mother gives an ill child, and I kept my eyes closed so as not to surprise him in it.

"Going to make a few calls," he whispered. I turned over, curled on my side, and dozed again.

When I woke again, the mattress next to me was cold. I stumbled from the bed and went straight to the refrigerator where I found a note taped to the blood bag there.

E. Guadalupe called with info. Will be in touch later. P

I swore mildly. The clock on the microwave reported the time to be three p.m. I was stuck in the condo for at least a few more hours.

I dialed Drew's number again. "It's me," I said. "Did you ever check out the chick in Echo Park? Call me." I disconnected and my phone rang almost immediately.

"Drew?"

"No," said Betsy. "Drew isn't here. I haven't seen him since he rode off on your bike last night."

"I left him at headquarters," I said. "I dropped him out front twenty minutes before dawn."

"I'm there, Adam. He isn't. Did you see him walk inside?"

"No, I was in a hurry."

"Well, he isn't here, and he isn't answering his phone." Her voice was rising.

"He's probably at his loft."

"He gave up the lease months ago," said Betsy, voice gaining in hysteria. "I think something's happened to him."

"He probably just decided to sleep somewhere else," I told her.

“Why? Why would he do that?”

“Maybe he got tired of listening to you and Caballo knocking boots all night,” I suggested. That silenced her for a moment.

“You're an asshole,” she said. And disconnected.

“Damned straight,” I said and tossed the phone down, feeling uncomfortably like a dick.

“For a minute there I thought I was dreaming about my ex,” said Nancy. She stood in the kitchen doorway with her hair down and the throw wrapped around her, a good four inches shorter without the heels she always wore, her face puffy and worn and her hair hanging down in tangled lumps. Her red eyes scanned me up and down, and I realized I was standing in the kitchen with a blood bag in one hand, a note in the other. Otherwise, stark naked.

I put Peter's note in front of my groin. Not to brag here, but believe me, it was not sufficient coverage.

Nancy scratched at her thatch of hair. “That man had a serious potty mouth but his other attributes more than made up for it,” she said. She turned and went back into the living room, the throw dragging on the floor behind her. “Jesus Christ, I feel like I was knocked out with a hammer last night.”

I pulled on a pair of boxers, then fetched her water, orange juice, and an aspirin and said, “Peter got a call from Eclipse's roommate. I can't help it. I think there's something hinky with that woman.”

“You don't like her because she's got all those hexes in her apartment.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Nancy rolled a considering shoulder and said, “Point taken.”

“I can't leave for hours. Do me a favor and have his back until I catch up to you.”

She shook her head, finding her shoes under the table and toeing them on. “He's a big boy.”

“You owe him.”

She blinked at me, raking her fingers through the mess of her hair. From the bowels of her briefcase, she extracted a toothbrush and a lint-covered tube of toothpaste.

“Gimme a few minutes.”

Shortly, she emerged from the bathroom with the dyed blonde hair pulled back in a crooked bun, buttoning her blouse. “You know I’ve been replaced on this case, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t have authorization to go within fifty feet of a suspect.”

“I’ve got a feeling you don’t let little things like that stop you.”

She brought a tube of lipstick out of her purse and applied it liberally without a mirror. Staying, impressively, within the lines.

“Don’t let him do anything stupid until I catch up to you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Mother.” And she let herself out, the blaze of sunlight invading the vestibule and almost obscuring her silhouette from my vantage point at the other end of the hall.

Chapter Fourteen

I tried calling Drew a few more times. Betsy kept calling me, but I ignored her and deleted the text messages she was sending me.

Suits' death was all over the news, the manner and cause, of course, cloaked in meaningless phrases. "Los Angeles county coroner said cause of death is still undetermined." For the first time, I noted, they spoke of the mysterious code. No mention was made of its potentially threatening use in cyber terrorism. Much, however, was made of its monetary value.

My phone rang for the fiftieth time, and I almost disconnected before I saw it was from Nancy.

"You hook up with Peter?" I answered.

"That's why I'm calling. It's Peter. They're transporting him to Kaiser's in Hollywood. He collapsed climbing the stairs to a house in Echo Park."

"I'll be right there." I was almost out the door before I realized the sun was still up. My watch reported the time as five thirty. Sunset was at six thirty.

There ensued the longest hour of my life or unlife. I kept calling Nancy, but she couldn't tell me anything. The hospital emergency room nurse hung up on me three times when I called demanding information. At exactly six thirty I shot from the condo like a rocket, jumped on my Harley, and rode.

* * *

Kaiser Hospital stands at the apex of Hollywood and Little Korea. A concrete-and-glass, newly refurbished monster of medical science with about five assigned parking spaces and red curbs all around its periphery.

Directly across the street was a massive parking lot servicing the Scientology Institute's headquarters. I parked there.

"This is Institute-only parking." A thin man with buttery soft skin and smooth dishwater blond hair frowned dubiously at my Harley.

"Yeah, I need to clear some shit," I told him. "It's kind of an emergency."

He didn't like my tone. I knew this because he told me, "I don't like your tone."

"Anything happens to her, it's your ass," I told him. "How's that for tone?"

He sniffed and retreated to the safety of his little glass box. "I'm calling the police."

"I am the police." I flashed my fake shield at him thinking, as I did so, that if Peter got wind that I had such a thing, he'd stake me personally.

But it seemed to work. I fled across the four-lane road and through the pneumatic doors to the emergency room.

The emergency room smelled like rubber, antiseptic, and misery. I signed in at the desk and then for five long minutes sat next to a man with a hole in his skull holding a red rag to his face before Jonathan appeared at the end of the hallway.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Is Peter okay?"

"They said it's only pneumonia, thank God." Jonathan led me around a corner, past a long Formica counter manned by several nurses in scrubs, saying over his shoulder, "It's a good thing Peter has other friends." He stopped in front of an open door.

"This is ridiculous." I heard Peter's voice coming from behind a curtain draped there, and I pushed inside.

The room was about six feet by ten and completely filled with a bed in which Peter lay looking unaccountably small swaddled in white sheets with a tube attached to his arm. A medical person, Nancy, and two many-armed blinking machines had somehow managed to cram themselves into the small space.

"Two at a time, please," the nurse said to Jonathan when he attempted to follow me. Jonathan cast me an angry look, but stepped back into the hallway, arms crossed.

"This is stupid." Peter was mad as hell and struggling for every breath. He had a tube clipped to his nose that I recognized from my own experience as an oxygen delivery system. He spotted me then. "Adam." *Wheeze*. "Tell them. I have to leave."

“What happened to him?” I asked Nancy.

“We surprised someone climbing out Emily Guadalupe's window. Peter chased him for a block and then he collapsed,” she said. “I was afraid he'd had a heart attack.”

“A heart attack?” said Peter, looking outraged. “My heart is fine.”

When Peter took a breath, it sounded like someone trying to suck air through a collapsed tube. “Emily Guadalupe could be in danger,” he said. “I've got to get out of here.” *Wheeze*. “Tell them, Adam.”

I glanced at the nurse. He was a big guy with incredibly clean white hands and surprised black eyebrows. His brow wrinkled, and he seemed to look at me more closely. I wondered if someone who spent his life battling death could feel its presence on me. “We work together,” I told him.

“Just give me a shot and release me,” Peter demanded of anyone who would listen.

“Mr. Ortiz, you need to rest,” said the nurse. He turned to me. “We've given him a sedative, but you can stay until he falls asleep.” He adjusted one of the nozzles on the tube taped to Peter's arm, then swept the curtain aside and left.

Nancy laid a hand on my arm. “The doctor said pulmonary thrombosis can lead to cardiac arrest in men his age. They want to keep him overnight for observation.”

Peter glared at her. “I'm fine.” *Wheeeze*. “I need to get out of here.” *Wheeeeeze*.

His face was flushed and his eyes were angry, but underneath it he had a pasty look. I knew Peter well enough to know that if he *could* get out of bed, he *would*. In all the years I'd known Peter, I'd never seen him weak or injured. It was doing my head in a little.

Men his age.

Peter was only thirty-nine. Of course, he worked in a profession that was considered high risk, and he was your typical type A. Pushing everything to the max, overachieving his sweet little ass off.

“Maybe you should just do what the doc says,” I told him.

This of course infuriated Peter even more, and he noticeably gritted his teeth. “There's a woman missing.” *Wheeze*.

"We don't know she's missing," Nancy said to me. "A neighbor told us he hasn't seen Ms. Guadalupe for a couple of days, and Peter seemed to think that was meaningful."

"You knew something that night," said Peter. I could tell he was trying to shout, but his voice came out thin and reedy. "You know something you aren't telling me."

"I don't know anything."

Wheeze. "You suspect something..." He tried to get up off the cot, but then sank back, closing his eyes tiredly. He looked ashen and defeated. "God fucking dammit," he said.

From where she stood in the doorway, Nancy said, "Peter, maybe you need to give this one a pass."

"I'm tired of losing people to this damned thing," said Peter, and now he sounded weak and teary.

I put my hand on his arm. "You haven't lost me."

The sedative must have been kicking in. Peter's eyelids kept fluttering closed, and his breathing was getting deeper. The red lights on the monitor behind him were pulsing at a slower rate as well.

"Nancy," he said. "Let me talk to Adam alone."

"Sure." She pulled the curtain closed and shut the door as well behind her.

"I need to tell you something," said Peter.

"Sure." I stood next to the bed, letting myself reach down and put my hand on his arm. His skin was cold.

He seemed to struggle just to breathe.

"Peter, whatever it is, it can wait."

"No, it can't," he said laboriously. "In my desk. In the upper right-hand drawer. If anything happens to me, there's papers there for you."

All I can say is it came so completely out of left field I couldn't take it in for a minute. "Papers?"

"My will. And...a set of keys to a safe deposit box. I've set up a trust with your—"

"You *what?*"

He closed his eyes as if to ride through my tantrum. Inhaled, wheezing mightily, and pronounced, “We have to think about it, Adam. What will you do after I...you know.”

Little spikes of panic beat inside me in tandem to the monitor's behind Peter's head. “Not gonna happen.”

“It will eventually. I'm not getting any younger. And you...you look younger than you did a year ago.”

“I do?”

He grinned, a sloppy, crooked grin. Even with the chapped lips and the tubes, he still looked lascivious. “Yeah. It's amazing.”

I'd give a lot for a reflection some days. “Cool.”

He inhaled noisily. The tube in his nose hissed. “I've got thirty years if I'm lucky.”

This was completely unacceptable. I guess I'd always assume he'd outlive me. Hell, he *had* outlived me, if you came down to it.

“No.” I shook my head as if I could make the idea leave the room. “No.”

“Who will take care of you?”

A smooth wash of anger relieved some of the anxiety in my chest. “I don't need taking care of.”

A deep, difficult inhale. “You need”—*wheeze*—“somebody to get you the blood.”

“Not your problem,” I said.

“Yes. You are,” he said. A deep breath. “Been my problem”—*wheeze*—“since first saw you”—*wheeze*—“at the academy.”

Fuck. I thought he was shaking beneath my hand, but then realized it was me who was trembling. “Stop it. Just go to sleep and stop...”

He chuckled, and it devolved into a cough that seemed to rattle his spine.

“Peter, just sleep,” I begged him.

“Couldn't sleep some nights”—*wheeze*—“thinking about you.” And he managed a sloppy smile.

I reached up and touched his hair. “Yeah. Me neither.”

“And those years on the beat.” *Wheeze. Wheeze.*

“Peter, we can talk about this later.”

“We wasted so much time,” he said. “I wish...”

It seemed a week for regrets, I thought. “Don't waste your breath.”

“About...Caballo,” he said slowly. “You'll need”—*wheeze*—“friends...”

“That's it,” I said, and I backed away from the bed and toward the door.

“No,” he said. “Wait.”

But I left the room before he could say anything else.

* * *

Jonathan and Nancy were waiting in the reception area. Jonathan turned on me. “This is your fault.”

I ignored him. “How serious is the pneumonia?” I asked Nancy.

“They said he's exhausted. It *is* possible to overdose on cold tablets. He was dehydrated, and his pulse was racing. He had a fever of a hundred and four a couple of hours ago, and he was raving.” She raised her eyes to mine and gave me a meaningful look. “Said a bunch of wild things about vampires.”

Jonathan made a noise, and I noted for the first time the state he was in. His hair was sticking up in the back. His T-shirt was on inside out, and he was wearing shorts that were completely inappropriate for the season and showed that he obviously had on shoes with no socks. “He's working himself to death.” He rubbed at his cheeks, and I was embarrassed to see what looked like dried tear tracks there.

Nancy frowned at Jonathan. “You should go home.”

“I want to be here when Peter wakes up.”

“He's drugged,” I told him. “He won't be coherent until morning. Go home and get some sleep.”

“What are *you* going to do?”

“Jonathan,” said Nancy in exactly the voice my mother would have used, “you aren't going to do him any good if you get sick too.”

He was shivering and his arms were covered with goose bumps. I only then noticed that in a room full of people in coats and jackets, Jonathan had on short sleeves. He rubbed at his cheek again, looking like a twelve-year-old kid all of a sudden.

“He didn't have an insurance card in his wallet,” he told me. “But I called the union and got a preacceptance from them. And his department secretary gave me his medical history, allergies and stuff.” He shivered and rubbed his arms.

“I called Jonathan, and he met the ambulance when they arrived,” Nancy explained to me.

Something I had been unable to do.

“We're lucky you were here,” Nancy told him. She cast a glance at me.

“Yes. Good job,” I forced myself to say.

Nancy waved me aside then and said, “I spoke to his union rep and Davis's assistant. They agreed they need to put all recent erratic events aside and give Peter a couple of weeks to get himself healthy again.”

I studied her. “That was very savvy of you.”

“Peter's one of those shiny stars in the department's cap,” said Nancy. “They'll be very careful not to fuck with him.”

I sighed. “Good.”

“Problem is getting him to actually take the time off,” said Nancy.

“I couldn't agree more.” I cast a look toward the door to Peter's room. “He's really taken this one personally.”

“I'm not sure it's the case,” said Nancy. She looked around the crowded reception area. “Is there someplace we can talk?”

* * *

Kaiser's new wing had a new stylish cafeteria. It wasn't nearly as depressing as the old one had been. Maybe because it hadn't yet absorbed enough despair, pain, and fear.

Nancy sipped at a cup of coffee. “You've noticed Peter's been working overtime for months now?”

“He gets sucked into cases,” I said. “He's got over a month of vacation time coming to him and he keeps promising me he's going to take it, but then another case pops up.”

"You know what he said when I asked him about it? He said he needs the bonus pay."

"Peter?" The cafeteria had stale, crusty doughnuts with pink sprinkles on them. They were solid grease and sugar, and they tasted delicious. I licked my fingers and told her, "He just doesn't want to admit that he's obsessed with his job."

"Is that it? I mean, are you sure?"

I stopped sucking on my pinkie and studied her seriously. "What do you mean?"

"Peter doesn't have a gambling issue does he, Adam? Or...or any kind of...unusual debts?"

"No," I said. *I* was the one with *issues*. "Peter is perfect."

She smiled sadly. "That's sweet."

"It's a fact. Listen, I'm not some doe-eyed innocent. I've seen a lot of good guys go bad." Myself being one of them. "There's nothing hinky about Peter."

"Then why does he think he needs money?"

I had a sudden chilling thought. "I have no idea," I told her. "But I'll find out."

"Good." She nodded and blotted her mouth carefully with a napkin. A small pink stain was left on it. "Do you mind if I ask you another question?" And without waiting for my answer, "Do you ever wonder who did this to you?"

"You mean..." I pointed to my throat.

She nodded, stirring her coffee.

"Yeah, I wonder sometimes."

"You know, Peter considers yours an unsolved homicide." She was avoiding my gaze, sipping her coffee.

"You're shitting me."

She set down her cup. "You didn't hear it from me."

I had a thought. Hey, it happens occasionally. "Funny coincidence that you were the one the agency sent down on the Lake killing."

Those expressionless gray eyes didn't blink. "Yes. Quite a coincidence."

"I'll bet Peter was surprised."

"He didn't say." She picked up her spoon and stirred her coffee. I noted that she didn't use creamer or sugar and the coffee had to be tepid by then.

"Let me ask you this, Adam. Would you even care to know who did it?"

"What?"

"How long have you been like this?"

I rubbed at my head, thinking. "Almost a year now."

"Is that all? Have you...have you noticed any changes? Besides the obvious."

"Changes?"

"I had a long conversation with your friend Drew. He almost seemed to think you were a different species. It's an interesting perspective," she said, "isn't it? I should think it would start to change the way you felt about things. About people."

"I try not to think about how I feel," I told her.

That measuring look. "Peter is a great cop."

It was an odd non sequitur. I raised my eyebrows at her.

"I admire him. A lot of us do. He deserves..."

"Better," I finished for her.

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Weren't you?" I grabbed my plate and empty cup and stood. "Listen, I think I'm going to get out of here after all. What are you going to do?"

"I've still got reports to write and a debriefing that I am *not* looking forward to," said Nancy grimly. "They said they'd release Peter in the morning if he seemed better. Who will...?"

"I guess Jonathan," I said.

She looked up at me. "That young man is devoted to Peter."

"Yeah. Yes, he is."

I didn't like whatever her expression was trying to convey. "I'll be in touch," I told her.

* * *

Jonathan was atilt and half-asleep in one of the uncomfortable plastic waiting room chairs. I roused him enough to force him to put on my leather jacket, then I went and chatted up the

male nurse with the white hands who was kind enough to find an empty bed for Jonathan to lie down on.

“Listen to me,” I told him. “When Peter wakes up he's going to want to go back to work. Don't let him leave this hospital. You got me? Call me the minute he wakes up. He'll tell you not to bother, but you ignore him and call me anyway. Those doctors won't be able to keep him here by themselves.”

He nodded, rubbing at his swollen red eyes. “Okay.”

Chapter Fifteen

I used the key to Peter's condo for the third time. While I was fitting it into the lock, an elderly woman came out of the door opposite and smiled at me.

“Good morning.”

I gave her a nod. “Mornin’.” Of course, the key was new and so stuck in the lock.

She just stood there, looking me over curiously. The frickin’ key still would not turn, and it occurred to me that she might wonder what I was doing trying to force a key into the lock of Peter's door, so I said, “I’m a friend of Peter's.”

“Oh, yes.” She nodded. “The other policeman.”

The tumblers finally turned and I opened the door. But then I heard her words. “Yes? Did he mention me?”

“Oh,” she sighed. “He talks about you all the time. He was right. You are very handsome.”

* * *

In Peter's bedroom, his low secretary desk sat beneath the window. The desk was immaculate and clean on top. Nothing but a leather blotter and a pen set that bore the LAPD sheriff's insignia and a ten-year plaque. It was where Peter sat to pay bills and write the monthly letter to his sister, but I'd never looked into it. The middle drawer held pens, paper clips, and stamps. The left drawers were file cabinets with hanging file folders labeled by hand: Taxes, Insurance (auto), Insurance (health). The drawer on the right side was locked.

After a moment I checked my key ring. The smaller key I had assumed was for Peter's mailbox fit into the drawer lock, and I opened it.

There was another group of hanging file folders. Two skinny ones and one thick one that held what I recognized immediately as an LAPD murder book.

I really didn't have to lift it out and open it. I knew what it contained. But I felt almost irresistibly compelled. The photos of the place where I'd died were there, the original report that had been, I noticed, filed by Peter's partner, Stan.

Detective Ortiz was sedated and transported to St. John's Hospital, Santa Monica. After yours truly bled out in front of him. There were quite a few additional pages of reports. Witnesses I'd never heard of. A deposition from a Mexican mafia member who was currently incarcerated in San Diego. The date was two months previously.

Peter was still investigating my murder.

I tasted bile in my throat as I closed the book and took out the files that remained. One was, as he had told me, a will. He'd left most of his worldly possessions to his sister and her kids, thank Christ.

I took out the other skinny file and opened it.

On top was an envelope with my name on it. I removed it and set it down on the blotter unopened. Underneath was a thick stack of heavy bond paper.

There were literally hundreds of municipal and city bond certificates in there. Each one in my name. I thumbed through the stack. I'm no mathematician but there were obviously some tens of thousands of dollars in value there upon maturity.

I can't describe what I felt sitting there. A multitude of emotions took turns racing through me. Anger being one of them. At myself. At Peter. At fate in general.

I eyed the envelope. It hadn't been sealed shut, and the urge to slip the single folded sheet of paper out of it was as strong as the urge to shove the whole mess back into the desk.

In the end, I chose the coward's course and did neither. I set everything down and went into the bathroom instead. I opened the medicine cabinet and looked at the prescription bottles in there one at a time.

There were the usual expired doses of antibiotics. A bottle of Tylenol plus codeine that reported twelve count and held eleven. Typical Peter, would never take drugs if he could avoid it. Whereas yours truly took them whenever they were offered.

Time was I'd have had a moment of quandary standing there with the pills in my hand, but I just dumped them back into the bottle and took down the other two. Fat, new, the dates only a

few weeks old. I didn't know the names of the drugs, so I went back into Peter's bedroom and booted up his laptop.

While waiting for the old dial-up connection to warm up, I picked up the envelope again. In a moment of blind idiocy, I slid the paper out and opened it.

Adam,

If you're reading this, I'm dead.

And you're probably drunk or well on your way to it. Maybe you're even a little high. It's okay, buddy. I get it.

Tomorrow morning you'd better get your ass to an NA meeting, though. Don't make me come down there and make you!

That was a little postmortem humor there.

I'm hoping however it happened, it was quick. And I'm hoping to hell you didn't have to see it. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Keep an eye on my sister and her kids. Find something constructive to do. We both know you're happier when you feel useful.

When I picked up my pen to write this, I had it in mind that I was going to tell you all the things I never said out loud. But as I sit here, I realize you know. You always knew.

It was worth it. Every second, buddy. I haven't one regret.

Thanks for a life that was anything but ordinary.

Love.

Peter

I barely got to that last bit. I refolded the thing hard, creasing it repeatedly, and then angrily I tore it up.

“You son of a bitch,” I told the empty envelope.

The computer had warmed up by this time, and I got my head together enough to punch the names of the prescription drugs into a search window.

Peter was on prescription blood pressure meds. And something that was given for anxiety.

My first instinct was to get the hell out of there. Jump on my bike and just ride until I'd escaped my own thoughts. I fumbled with the computer, trying to shut it down, trying, unsuccessfully, to think straight amidst the maelstrom of crap that was happening in my brain.

That's when I noticed that my mailbox had eight hundred and thirty-two new messages.

Which gave me pause, as they say. I opened one. It was in response to the blog Drew had set me up on. Then I noted that most of the other e-mails were responses to the blog as well.

Dear Mr. Vampire. Do you have pictures of Peter? Can you post them?

wantstobeavampire

Dear Mr. Vampire. I hate school. Why do I need to go to school? I want to come to Los Angeles and become a vampire! How do I do it?

vampireclub

Dear Mr. Vampire. Will you come to my house and make my stepfather to stop hitting my mother?

angeleyes

I clicked on one of the e-mails and was taken straight to the now-familiar blog page. I was able to navigate with a little less clumsiness than I had the last time, but still it was more or less a hit-or-miss operation as I tried to scroll through all the comments.

Fucking hell.

I did see that someone had responded to some of the comments. I assumed it was Drew.

Dear Mr. Vampire. I think you are probably very sweet not to kill real people and I would like to be like you when I'm a vampire.

Drew had responded. *According to our studies, approximately 98 percent of vampires do kill humans for sustenance. Those who have a choice between organic or bio-ident manufactured blood seem to prefer the organic. Some claim that the bio-ident blood has side effects.*

An anonymous blogger had responded to Drew's comment. *It is a matter of willpower, isn't it?*

And Drew had written. *Hypothetically, interesting topic. Most subjects (vampires) do not intellectualize this choice.*

The anonymous blogger had responded with a link, which I clicked, and I was taken to the Web site Drew had found the other day that had led us to the clot of bloodsuckers downtown.

A prickly intuition was crawling up my spine. I brought out my cell phone, noted the dozens of messages left by Betsy while I'd been worrying over Peter, and called her number.

It went straight to voice mail.

I called Caballo and Drew in turn, and both of those also went straight to voice mail.

I stuffed all the papers back into Peter's desk and relocked it. Then I hopped on my bike and headed to headquarters.

Chapter Sixteen

The rooms above the Empress Parlor appeared to be empty. I ran through them, noticing Caballo's electronic toys tossed around, Betsy's leather jacket, and Drew's laptop still plugged in and running.

I hit the space bar and saw the blog page again.

The biohazard bin where the empty bags were tossed was overflowing and there were actually a few bags on the floor, smeared blood and drips all around. I spotted that and backtracked a bit, listening and sniffing.

That's how I found Frank hiding in the storage closet.

“Where's Betsy?”

His face was completely demonic and smeared with blood. His fingernails might have been long when he was turned but they looked like claws now, yellow and tinged with the blood he'd been gorging on.

There was a puddle of blood near him, and blood trails all down his shirt and on his shoes. It appeared that Frank had literally fed until he'd puked. I dragged him out of the closet and shook him when he didn't respond to my question.

“Where did they go?”

Frank's eyes bulged. He bent forward and I leaped backward just in time to avoid the splash when he upchucked again all over the floor.

“She said stay here,” he moaned, head down, holding his belly.

If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn the little bloodsucker was drunk.

“Did she say where she was going?”

He shook his head.

I knew though, didn't I? I stopped long enough to check the refrigerators. They were almost empty. Frank must have consumed several gallons of blood.

Outside, I'd climbed back on the Beast and was donning my helmet when I saw the back door of the video store open, a couple of big men loading boxes from a truck into it. It was generally known that the videos the store sold were black market, but that wasn't what struck me. It was the Red Patrol officer sitting there on his bike chatting up the night clerk while they did so.

It was odd enough to stop me in my tracks for a second. The officer looked up, saw me, and hailed me with a wave of his gloved hand.

"Ola!" he called brightly and with a weirdly Asian accent. I was going to ride off anyway, but then he pointed to the Empress Parlor and said, "You live there, right?"

I put my helmet down. "No," I said. "I'm visiting a friend who works there."

He came strolling toward me, smiling widely. He wore the bicycling gear of red and white, his spandex pants clipped at one ankle, a stun gun and walkie-talkie on his belt. From a satchel he brought out a sheet of paper and proffered it toward me.

"You know this girl?"

It was a grainy school photo of a high-school girl. Bad skin, hair in braids so she looked about twelve. The collar of what I felt sure was some sort of parochial-school uniform. It had to have been at least five years old and she wasn't wearing her accustomed inch of eyeliner, but it was definitely Betsy.

"Never seen her." I passed the image back to the guy.

He gave me a canny look. "A few of the shopkeepers say they've seen her in the neighborhood."

I shrugged. "It's possible." I slid my helmet on. He seemed disinclined to walk away, but then I started up my Harley and that pretty much ended the conversation.

* * *

By the time I'd arrived at the building on 124th Street, I'd put the Red Patrol officer from my mind.

I'd circled the neighborhood, looking for Caballo's and Betsy's bikes and sussing things out a bit. I didn't see any sign of their rides, and I finally settled on an empty lot where I could sit on my bike and smoke a cigarette, considering my options and trying to think of a way into the building that wouldn't result in my being shackled to the pavement beside the Los Angeles River again.

As I sat there, I noticed the occasional bloodsucker venturing outside. He or she would stalk one of the bums and take him down. It was a little like watching a young lioness learn to kill, and it would have been entertaining if the prey weren't human beings.

The first one went down before I could consider my position, but I watched, trying to think what I could do, when the next young woman trailed an old man for about ten minutes. It's a fact that undercover work often involves turning a blind eye to illegal activities. I'd say most cops try to draw the line at ignoring incidences of assault and murder, though. I mean, if it doesn't bother you, what are you doing in the uniform, right?

When she jumped him and he fell, groaning and protesting weakly like one of the sad old water buffaloes on the Discovery Channel, I didn't even think. I tossed my cigarette, sprinted across the road, and pushed her hard enough to get the old man away from her.

I flashed into battle face and snarled at her. "He's mine."

She couldn't have been more than twenty. Slim with short hair shorn in a pixie cut. Small hands and a tiny mouth that opened in surprise and fear as she skittered away from me.

I hustled the bum a block away and down an alley, hopefully to live another day.

When I reemerged, the girl was gone, but a teenager was staggering down the sidewalk, headed my way.

His face was bloody and there was a pink stain on his shirt. He looked like he was drunk.

"Whoa, there." I caught him as he wove and almost slammed into the stucco wall of a building.

His pupils were tiny and one of his eyelids drooped more than the other.

"Whooper you?" he asked.

"Damn, you get hold of some bad blood?" I asked him. I hefted him and eased him down to the pavement gently, then squatted next to him.

“Th-th-thought he was just drunk,” said the kid blearily.

“Looks like you got hold of a junkie,” I opined. “Don't worry. It'll wear off soon. I'll just sit here with you until you can walk again.”

“Thanks, man.” He tipped his head back then, eyes rolling up, and seemed to drift for a few minutes. The cure kicked in fairly quickly, though. He blinked and seemed to see me again, held a hand out toward me. “Thanks, dude. Really. Name's Rick.”

We shook. He had soft hands and an anemic handshake. “Adam,” I said. “My friends call me Snake.”

“Snake? That's a cool name. I should get a cool name,” said Rick.

“What's wrong with Rick?”

“Oh, you know, the fellas said I should get a cool name. To...to go with...you know...” He gestured to his vampiric body. He glanced nervously down the block toward the building from which he had emerged. “They'll yell at me if I don't get back soon. We only have a half-hour break.”

“Right. You need help walking back?”

“Sure. Thanks.” He leaned heavily on me as we went. “You aren't the regular teaching staff, are you?” he said.

“Um. No. No, I'm a special tutor.”

“Really? Cool.”

“Listen, you were passed out for longer than you think. Maybe you'd better not let them see you coming in late.”

He stopped walking, still weaving a bit. “Damn.”

“You know that entrance you can sneak in at?”

“Yeah. I do. Good idea. Boy, you're so much cooler than my other teachers.”

He veered left and made his way clumsily, trying to slide through an opening in a fence and almost falling as he did so. I'd meant to tail him discreetly, but it was so much easier just to offer to help him.

A few minutes later, Rick was sneaking down a hallway and I was standing in an empty stairwell that reeked strongly of something dead of undetermined origin. And under all that the smell of fresh human blood.

I padded as quietly as I could up the stairs, using my nose as a compass. The first door smelled, incredibly, like chalk. And I assumed it was where the classrooms were situated. My curiosity about this particular facet was overwhelming, but I wanted to locate Drew before he did something foolish.

I was sniffing around the second landing when my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I opened it, hoping that the call was from Betsy. Instead, I saw an unknown caller number.

“Yeah?” I whispered into it.

“Adam? It's Jonathan.”

My old dead heart performed a little stutter in my chest. “Is Peter okay?”

“I guess. He's checked out.”

“What?”

“Checked out of the hospital. You were right. I couldn't stop him.”

I cursed. Worse things have come out of my mouth, but Jonathan snapped. “You don't have to use foul language.”

“Did he say where he was headed?”

“No, but he called that woman before he took off.”

“Nancy?” I could hear voices and feel the vibration of footsteps in the floors. “Gotta go,” I said.

“Sure, but—”

I stuffed the phone back into my pocket and crouched, ear pressed to the wall, listening.

There were voices, but there were also moans. Ululating moans as from a multitude of throats. They sounded like the voices of the dead, and the hair rose up my back. I couldn't hear the words being spoken in the hallway on the other side of the door, but the deep voices and heavy vibration of their footsteps told me the speakers were hefty men.

“...so full I could spew...” said one voice.

The footsteps stopped just outside the door.

“You complainin’?” said a different voice. They were so close I could smell them.

“They don't fucking shut up,” said the first voice. “Bullet up on the fourth, he don't have to listen to that whinin' shit.”

“You know what I heard about him, though?” And the sound of a hand on the doorknob. I ran up the stairs so I could crouch on the landing just above them. The moans were louder as they came through the fire door and proceeded, thank Christ, down the stairs.

“I should ask for a raise,” said one of the men. And the rest of the conversation was buried in the clang and thump of their boots. I heard the door below me swing open and close.

I ran back down to the door I'd been at, and listened hard for a while, but there was no choice but to take my chances and open it.

I was lucky. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the hallway. It was pitch-black, but my night vision kicked in, and in the bluish glow I could see a row of doors down either side, each with a dead-bolt lock on the outside.

As if to hold somebody in.

I tiptoed down the hallway, following, as they say, my nose, which told me injured humans were bleeding freely behind those doors.

At the end of the hallway, a window had been broken out and re-covered with thin wood, which I was able to pry back with ease to look out. Looked like a leap of about three stories down to a heap of broken wood and glass, but it was something I could do if pressed.

The unnerving moans had begun again, so I just bit the bullet and snapped the lock on the first door near the window.

I waited, tensed up and ready to spring, but the sound of the lock breaking did not bring any fanged soldiers into the hallway.

I pushed gently, and the door just swung open. I couldn't control the reaction of my body to the smell of warm blood or the sight of the woman curled on a low bed, bathed in the light of the candles around her. She rolled and looked up at me. “So soon?”

“Shh, I'm here to help you,” I whispered, crouching beside her.

Her skin was ice-cold despite the blankets piled on top of her, and her eyes had the hazy look of someone deeply drugged. The candles were set on a small bedside table that also held

framed photographs. Family stuff, kids and dogs. A rose floated in a bowl, and an MP3 player with headphones rested there as well.

"I'll take you somewhere safe," I whispered and slid my arms under her thin body to lift her. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with her, but I couldn't leave someone lying here waiting to be fed upon.

"No." She pushed at me feebly with both hands. "Leave me alone."

My eyes were bulging, and I could feel my teeth cutting into my lower lip. "It's okay," I said. "I'm not going to bite you."

Still she struggled. Enough that I had trouble standing upright with her in my arms.

"I can't get you out of here if you don't calm down," I told her.

"Out of here?" she asked. "Why? What did I do wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"This isn't fair," she said, and she seemed to rally somewhat, fighting against me in earnest.

I took hold of her chin so I could look directly into her eyes. "I'm trying to help you."

She spat at me.

Okay, this was weird.

"Don't make me leave," she begged.

I sat back on my haunches, scratching my head, so to speak. "Make you?"

"Please," she said.

"You want to die?"

"No. I want to live. That's why I'm here."

She was so white she was almost clear; her pulse under my fingers came in soft fluttery beats. "I have advanced MS. The doctor gave me maybe two more years. This organization promised I'd live forever."

That set me back hard. "Say what?" But even while she explained it, I knew.

"I was diagnosed years ago," she said. "Some people have stages of remission, but I never did. There's some treatment still in the test stages, and it costs a fortune. Just a fortune. I could die and my family would be wiped out. So..."

"This seemed like a better gamble." I could see the odds myself. I'd probably have taken them.

"I want to see my kids grow up. They need me. It was a choice between abandoning them and...and this."

I looked at the framed photograph on her bedside table. "But you know what that would mean? You know you'd have to kill people?"

She raised her wobbly chin defiantly. "I'll choose not to."

I didn't know what to do with her.

"But you *might* die," I pointed out.

"They are very clear about your odds. They make you take a seminar before signing the contract," she assured me. She was obviously too weak to stay upright for long and now sank back into the mattress. "They say they've been studying the process and the success rate is almost eighty percent."

That sounded pretty optimistic an average to me. Maybe these guys had learned something. The thought was disturbingly attractive.

"Listen, I've got a friend. Asian guy in his late twenties, about five-ten? Have you seen him?"

Her head sank again into the pillow. She shook it, eyes closed. "I don't know. Why don't you let him make his own decisions?"

Before I could reply, I heard those baritone voices again, coming down the hallway. I was figuring out my next move when the woman who lay before me suddenly opened her eyes wide. She stared straight at me, opened her mouth. "Help!" cried my damsel in distress. Loud enough to be heard.

Fuck.

The door swung open hard, and a hairy gorilla with a bloody face filled the frame. Two hanks of blond hair hung down from a balding top. His mustache was dyed with blood and his

slit-iris, pale green eyes were wild. He was about my size, with abnormally long arms. Both were smeared with blood.

“Hey, they told me to come up here. They said they had some new Asian guy. I love Chinese,” I babbled.

The gorilla just snarled, baring all those teeth.

The only way out of there was through him, so I charged. Fortunately for me, he was fat and bloated and I was hungry and motivated. I got the upper hand fairly quickly. I sidestepped, gave him a kick, and bolted through the door and down the hallway to the gaping window. I could hear big feet thundering behind me.

I kicked away the plywood and jumped.

I landed in glass, rats, and trash three stories below. Coming down hard and awkwardly, I did something vile to my leg and hobbled as fast as I could along the breezeway, where a small, partially bald man in a frumpy business suit appeared at one end.

“Um...” he said.

I ran right over him. Got three yards away before I realized who he was and spun around. “Mitch?”

He stared at me but picked himself up. “C-c-c-ome with me,” he said.

I could hear voices and feet at the end of the breezeway. They couldn't see me yet, but they seemed pretty sure they knew where I was. Ahead of me I could hear another crowd gathering.

“Sure.”

Mitch sank to the ground and seemed to disappear into the foundation. Following him, I found a narrow window that I could barely squeeze through. I dropped into a dank basement with a couple inches of water seepage on the floor. It stank like a sewer.

Barely pausing to make sure I was still with him, Mitch splashed across the room like he knew where he was going. I followed him past rows of shelves filled with bottles marked BLEACH and AMMONIA CLEANER. He found a metal ladder and climbed it, pushed at a trapdoor in the ceiling, and disappeared through the hole. I followed him and exited onto dirt. The streetlights shone down on me. I rolled over, looked around, and saw that we were in an empty lot next to the building.

“D-d-drug dealers had a tunnel here before they blew up the house cooking drugs,” said Mitch, standing and dusting dirt off his slacks.

“Why are you helping me?”

“Aren't you Drew's friend? He said you'd come looking for him.”

I wanted to grab him and shake him, but I refrained. “Do you know where he is?”

Mitch pointed to the top floor of the building we'd just escaped. “He's up there. Waiting.”

I felt a leaden knowing in my belly, but I asked anyway. “Waiting for what?”

Mitch blinked at me. “To rise.”

* * *

I handled the news in the mature adult fashion you've come to expect of me.

The destruction of the house by the meth lab had still left sufficient debris for me to throw, stomp on, and repeatedly punch until my knuckles were raw.

Then I turned on the bloodsucking cubicle worker. “YOU!” I roared.

“No, it wasn't me...” Mitch scampered backward as I stomped toward him. “I s-s-s-swear! Th-th-they d-d-d-d-on't let me...eeeeep!” I'd lifted him by that fat striped tie and held him nose to nose.

I was breathing through my nostrils like a dragon. “You set him up.”

“I didn't. He c-c-called me.”

It was what I'd suspected. “If I find out otherwise...”

“You won't,” said Mitch with enough assurance to convince me, and I let him slide from my grip and fall to the ground.

“Goddamn stupid little geek,” I wailed, launching myself into another temper tantrum.

“Keep it down,” Mitch whined, looking anxiously again toward the building.

Reason was seeping in, along with a murderous desire for revenge. I controlled myself, barely, and sat down on the crumbled remains of the former home's front steps. “I'm going to personally dust every one of those motherfuckers.”

“Why?” said Mitch. He maintained a safe distance about ten feet away from me. “He wanted it.”

“He didn't know any better,” I said.

“He did,” said Mitch. He wrung his hands anxiously, but he spoke seriously and with sincerity. “He said he did it for Betsy.”

“Stupid little geek,” I repeated quietly.

“I d-d-don't think he's stupid. I admire him.” Mitch crept toward me cautiously. “He's b-b-brilliant, you know?”

I sighed and buried my head in my hands.

“And they'll take good care of him. He's the only one who understands that code Justin Lake gave us.”

I raised my head slowly. “*What?*”

“Th-th-th...” Mitch swallowed. “He didn't tell you.”

“I'm going to kill him,” I declared.

“Yeah,” breathed Mitch, uncomfortably. “He said you'd say that.”

I stood slowly, feeling ridiculously old for an immortal being. I wanted to go home, wherever that was. I wanted Peter.

Mitch wrung his hands again. “It'll be hours, probably. You want to wait in my room?”

“Sure.”

Mitch had apparently been given a place to live a few buildings down.

We climbed a rank stairwell. That smell of rats and feces was dominant. But when he pushed open a fire door at the top, the smell of blood rolled through and made my mouth water.

Mitch inhaled deeply. “Home sweet home,” he said.

A tiny room with a bed and a sofa. No windows, but then that's a plus for the likes of me. Makes you real estate professionals raise your eyebrows and think, doesn't it? A whole new market for rooms *without* a view. It reeked of cigarette smoke and the stale smell of a man with BO. But I've smelled worse.

A refrigerator with nothing in it but water and lemons.

“Lemons?”

"I like the taste," he said, tossing magazines and other debris off the couch. "If you bite down on them really hard it feels good. Give it a try."

I'll try anything once. It's one of my faults. I took a big fat lemon out of the cooler, let my fangs drop down, and bit into it.

The tart hit my gum line at the same time the pressure on my teeth set my reflex sucking mechanism to drawing in the sour liquid. It was like those lemon drops that you can't stop sucking on. Plus, it felt really good to bite down. I hadn't realized how much I craved that sensation.

He was watching me with those washed-out brown eyes of his. "Good?"

I forced myself to release the fruit. Problem was, the sucking triggered the hunger. For blood and for other things. My dick was raging in my jeans and my mouth was salivating for blood. I eyed my host with a little more than random lust.

Mitch looked nervous.

I've resisted more luscious things than skinny stock clerks, though. And under better circumstances. So I just sat down on the couch. The Formica coffee table in front of me was covered with well-thumbed gay magazines.

Mitch fretted a bit. "It's not so bad, you know. They're a reputable organization."

"You did this on purpose too," I said.

"Yeah, I didn't just pick this up from some punk on the street. I researched them online."

"Online."

"Yes, of course." He laughed, nervously. "It's not Consumer Guide, of course, but one can find forums online if one looks."

I thought of my wantstobeavampire. "I guess you can find anything online if you look."

Another nervous laugh. "Right."

"So what made you pick these guys?"

He shrugged. "P-p-proximity. The only other group that seemed at all reputable is in Russia. These guys guarantee training and placement. They d-d-don't just drain you and d-d-dump you. And they had an end of the year special, so I f-f-figured. Why the hell n-n-not."

"They train you to kill the homeless, don't they?"

"Nobody misses them." Mitch shrugged like they were cheap toys he'd lifted from a Chinatown sidewalk vendor. "It's recommended."

"A woman in there told me they have an eighty percent effectiveness rate. That true?"

Mitch's gaze dropped from mine to the porn on his coffee table. His skin went pink.

"They lie to them, don't they Mitch?"

"M-m-most of them would die anyway."

"Were you dying?"

"Liver disease. Can you believe it? It wasn't fair, you know." He studied his soft hands. "I hadn't *done* anything with my life, yet. I was, I don't know, too scared to try. And then it was all over. I signed over my IRA and left my estate to the corporation in my will and...it was easy, actually."

"What happens with the ones who don't make it?"

He studied his cuticles. "They find places to leave their bodies. Around town."

"Lake was killed on the street, though," I pointed out. "And it looks like he tried to defend himself."

"Ah, yeah..." When Mitch attempted to feign innocence he looked guiltier than ever.

"What happened to him, Mitch?" I growled.

"Um, yeah, Nicolas said Lake changed his mind. He r-r-renegeed on the contract. You know. That's not true, is it?"

I'd been in a sort of shock, I suppose, but this brought me to my senses. I dug my phone out of my pocket and dialed Peter's number.

Chapter Seventeen

I'd almost forgotten how pissed off I was with Peter until Nancy's Buick Skylark came trundling down the cracked concrete driveway near Mitch's building.

"You sleep in that suit, don't you, Dickes?" I said, opening her door for her.

"We found Emily Guadalupe," she said. "Exsanguinated via a neck wound and dumped in Griffith Park."

Peter pulled himself out of the passenger side and leaned heavily on the door. He looked like day-old oatmeal: gray and pasty. "We could have saved her," he said.

Nancy saw my expression. "I tried to take him back to Kaiser," she said, low.

"Stop talking about me," commanded Peter, listing sideways like a leaky boat. "I'm fine."

"You're a stubborn ass," I told him. "And it looks like these people chose to die of vampire bite. Emily's death isn't on you."

He bent his head. His hair was getting long again and shone white in the streetlights. "I'm sorry about Drew."

"Yeah, me too."

"So what's our next move?" asked Nancy. "What have you got?"

I considered my words for a moment. As soon as I told them the empty factory not only contained vampires and recently murdered people hoping to become vampires, but live human beings being slowly bled out, Peter would call the SWAT squad and LAPD black vans would surround the place in a few minutes.

So why hesitate? you're asking me now. Assisted suicide is a crime, isn't it? I can't answer you, except that the image of those family photos on the woman's little bedside table were haunting me.

I want to see my kids grow up. They need me.

"I've got a witness who will tell you a vampire ordered the hit on Justin Lake. Orville Suits too, probably. Emily Guadalupe and Jessica Bramson more than likely committed assisted suicide in an attempt to become vampires."

"What pathetic fools," said Peter.

"There's more people in there right now. I don't know how many. Trying to pull off the same deal," I told them.

"Jesus Christ." Sure enough, Peter pulled out his phone and started talking to dispatch.

"What about the code?" asked Nancy.

"They've got it. I don't know what they plan on doing with it."

"We can't just rush the place. They'd have time to hide it again," said Peter. "I've called for silent backup. What about your people, Adam?"

What about them? I'd been trying to reach Betsy and Caballo for hours now. I still had Caballo's phone and wasn't surprised that he wasn't answering the toss-away the FBI had lent him. He could have lost it or even turned it off. But Betsy was like any other teenage girl with a cell phone. She carried it everywhere, decorated it with little necklaces, and would have died, in a manner of speaking, rather than lose it.

Betsy was ignoring me. I was sure of it. Which meant she was up to something. Which gave me a feeling of such foreboding it was almost nauseating.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But Mitch might be able to get me back in there if you can tell me what we should be looking for."

Now Nancy brought out her phone. "Richardson has a CITAC connection."

While they chatted away, I brought Mitch out to meet them. Introductions all around. Peter had a lot of questions for Mitch, who seemed quite happy to blab everything he knew. I strolled to the corner while they talked, and watched the building in question.

It was after moonset. The darkest hour of the night. And the young vampires were emerging from the building in tentative groups of two and three, stalking the indigents who slept in the doorways.

"Let's do this thing," I said.

* * *

Mitch appeared to have no qualms whatsoever about betraying the people with whom he had been so recently affiliated.

“D'you think I could work undercover?” he whispered to me. “I always thought I'd make a great corporate spy.”

Hell of it was, I considered unhappily, he'd make a great operative. Who would suspect a lump of a clerk of espionage?

“I wouldn't know,” I whispered to him.

Mitch had led me through a breach in the back wall to a closet that was redolent with the smell of sickness, probably coming from the mops and buckets stacked in its corners.

“You could maybe hook me up?”

I had a persistent bad taste in my mouth, and it wasn't just the result of the stench around us.

“Shut up. Somebody'll hear us,” I hissed back.

We were pressed against the door there, listening for the footsteps of the retreating guards.

“Security here is a joke,” Mitch had said. “At Microsoft you couldn't even go to the bathroom without swiping your ID.”

I'd never worked at Microsoft, so I had no basis for comparison, but I thought the security in the building was pretty damned sufficient. One hulking monster or another stomped by our closet every twenty minutes or so. Happily none of them seemed to smell Mitch and me there. Of course, even I had trouble distinguishing odors on the first floor of the building. Besides the dominant scent of chalk, there were so many unwashed undead and barrels of trash it was hard to distinguish one smell from another.

“Okay, this way,” whispered Mitch, and we eased our way out of the closet and down a hallway. Even as we approached the offices at the end of it, I could hear the hum of machines and smell the plastic gas of new computers in a warm room.

From the corner where we crouched, I could hear several individuals inside the room.

“We can't break in there,” I told Mitch.

He shook his head, a big smile on his face, and pointed upward. There, above me on the wall, was an old fuse box.

It couldn't be that simple, could it?

But it was. Per Mitch's instructions, I broke the fuses in rapid succession; a crack, snap, and groan issued from the machine room. About half a dozen male voices shouted out in dismay. A second later a big man came out of the door, an expression of serious consternation on his face, and saw me at the fuse box.

"Hey!"

He charged. From behind the door through which he had just come, Mitch slithered around behind him and into the machine room.

While I grappled with tall, bald, and stinky, confusion continued to reign in the room Mitch had entered. Another bloodsucker emerged in a state of distress and saw me battling his coworker in the hallway, but seemed unconcerned.

"What happened to the emergency backup?" he wailed to the one who came out behind him.

"I told them we needed a UPS box, but they wouldn't purchase one." He and his companion watched me throw my foe against a wall. "Who's that?"

"Some third-floor thug," sniffed the first man.

The bloodsucker double-fisted me on the back of the neck and I went down, turning so that when he jumped on top of me, I grabbed him and we rolled down the hallway, past the shined black shoes of the two techs who stood in the doorway watching us.

"Should I call this in?"

"Maybe."

The thug I battled grabbed my forearm and bit down hard. It was like getting your arm stuck in a bear trap. I screamed and punched his face repeatedly, trying to get him to let go.

The hallway was suddenly filled with the deafening sound of a fire alarm, and flashing lights. I heard thundering footsteps on the stairs. I jammed my elbow into the vampire's face, and he let go of me.

Mitch came careening out of the door of the machine room. He had a hefty silver box in his hands, his eyes were wild, and his tie was flying as he took off down the hallway. I dropped the Incredible Hulk and ran after Mitch.

We were halfway down the stairs going around the landing, and we came face-to-face with another vampire.

He was cleaner than the others. Trimmer and better dressed. His face was bloody, though, like theirs had been, and he was in full battle face.

Caballo had always had a significantly sexy vampire visage.

“Put the hard drive down,” he said.

I'd once seen a pit bull that had attacked a man. I remembered her bloody muzzle and the blood-tinged slobber on her lips. She was still wearing the collar her owner had put on her. It bore tags and a small pink bone with the name *Mitsy* engraved on it.

“Once they get the taste of human flesh, they have to be put down,” the officer had told me.

Caballo had that look about him. Like the two breeds in his blood had battled, and the stronger, wilder breed had won.

I could hear the thunder of feet above and below us. The alarms. Who knew how long until Mitch and I were overwhelmed with the vampire army? “We can't let them keep this code, Caballo.”

“What *them*? They's *us*, dog. Don't you see that?” His teeth, when he smiled, were bloody.

“You're crazy,” I said.

“You the one's crazy, dog. Playing at being a human. These boys, they got the right idea here.”

I didn't have time to argue. I fainted left, charged right, and yelled “Run!” at Mitch when Caballo jumped to meet me, leaving the passage down the stairs open. It was a needless command; the little geek was already leaping down the stairs four at a time, the hard drive tucked under one arm.

Caballo spun around to give chase, and I grabbed him from behind, holding him back. Caballo roared and reached behind himself to grasp my head, leaning over and tossing me over his shoulder. But I caught hold of him as I went and brought him down with me. We rolled, clawing at each other, each trying to gain dominance. The alarms were screaming around us, and I was just wondering, in the part of my brain not concerned with holding Caballo down, why no

more soldiers had charged us, when I heard the gunfire starting, the boom and crash of tear gas canisters going through empty windows.

Caballo got me in the vise of his legs and flipped us over so he sat astride me, holding my hands to either side with his, his face inches from mine, victorious and wild. "You've really pissed me off this time, Adam," he said.

He leaned closer. I could smell the blood on his breath. He shifted as I struggled, and I could feel his hard-on.

"Tell me you want it."

"Of course I do, puta." I got one hand twisted around so I could wrap my fingers around his wrist and twist. Bones cracked loudly. He gave in to the pain, and I leaned and bucked, and our positions were reversed.

I could hear the racket around us as the SWAT team invaded the premises. The stench of tear gas was already seeping to us, lacing the stench of the building with an acid burn. It tore at my sinuses. I stopped breathing, but it was in my tear ducts, searing my throat.

Caballo struggled under me. "You're like me, dog," he said. "Why fight it?"

My eyes were blurred with gas-induced tears. I could now smell smoke as well as the gas. A canister must have exploded near one of the many piles of trash and started a fire.

"This place is on fire," I told Caballo, holding him down.

He writhed and bucked and twisted under me. "So?"

"Drew's on the fourth floor."

He stilled under me. Just like that. He blinked.

"Shit, man."

I jumped off him, helped him stand, and we raced each other up the stairs.

* * *

My last tour in Afghanistan, there'd been a raid on a village by a trio of Russian Flankers. The villagers had countered with one antiaircraft gun that had, unfortunately, blasted a jet from the sky too close to the village center.

Afterward there'd been over fifty dead, and I had never been able to clear from my memory the vision of the row of bodies laid out on the ground.

That is what the fourth floor of the building on 124th brought to mind.

It was more an attic than a floor. Slanted, exposed-beam ceilings leaked street light at the place where the eaves met the floor. On either side of a cleared aisle in the middle, bodies lay a foot apart in neat rows.

The smell of death was heavy and inescapable, and the smoke and tear gas seeped up through the cracks in the joists and floorboards like steam escaping from a kettle.

We ran down the aisle, checking each corpse until we found Drew lying about halfway down on his own little pallet. Pale and still. I slid my arms under his shoulders and hips and lifted him. He was as light as a girl, the dark lashes fanned across his pale cheeks.

"They lie to them, you know." Caballo had a fit of coughing. The smoke in the room was thick enough to taste. "Turn about ten percent, not eighty."

I looked up and down the aisle of still bodies.

"That's still ten percent," I said.

"Fuck, dog, why you always making me think about things," said Caballo. He stooped down and scooped up the woman who lay next to Drew.

We ran down the stairs, deposited our burdens on the concrete far from the building and ran upstairs again. We'd made about five trips. As I lifted my sixth, a tiny woman, from her pallet on the floor, in addition to yells, crashing glass, and the occasional gunshot, I could now hear the sound below of men screaming. Smoke was billowing up through every crack in the floorboards, and the heat was as in an oven.

By the time we got to the bottom, fire hoses were pouring gallons of water against the side of the building. Vampires were pouring from its doors like cockroaches, SWAT personnel hopelessly attempting to intercept them as they fled.

I spotted Peter a few yards away with a couple of uniformed officers, overseeing the transport of bodies to the ME vehicles. "Mitch got the hard drive to Nancy," he told me. His watched a coroner's assistant zipping a body bag closed. "Are they going to..." He did that movement with his hand.

"Maybe."

"Drew's in the van," he said. He looked grim, his skin that oatmeal color, eyes bleak.

I couldn't think about it. "I can't..." I shook my head. Caballo had appeared in the doorway again, carrying another body. He saw me and summoned me with a wide sweep of his arm. "I've got to get the rest of them, Peter."

He rubbed at the corner of his mouth with his thumb, an action he only performs when he is, rarely, withholding his opinion.

"What?"

"Maybe they'd be better off if you left them," said Peter.

It was a pivotal moment. Later, I'd think about everything Peter had been through in the past year. What circumstances had pressed him to say that. Later, I'd forgive him.

"Not an option," I snapped. And ran back to the building.

"Adam!" he called, but I'd joined Caballo at the foot of the stairs. He was above me, those designer sneakers flashing their brightly colored soles as he ran. "I'm one ahead of you, you slow old bitch," he yelled, working his way around the bloodsuckers and police officers and firemen that crowded the stairwell.

We both jumped over a fire hose as thick as a man's leg and gained the fourth floor landing. The smoke in the room was so dense I could barely see.

Caballo dove right into it, heading toward the back of the attic, his body barely visible in the smoke. He turned and shouted. "There's this hot little number back here. Hate to waste such a fine—" And the house bumped, rocked, a muted thump and explosion and two plus two added up with the bottles I'd seen in the flooded basement and equaled four.

And then the floor beneath Caballo disappeared.

All that was left was a hole with smoke pouring up through it and the roar of fire devouring oxygen below. Within seconds the room was filled with so much smoke I couldn't see. I held my corpse close against my chest, edged around the open floor to the doorway, and fled down the stairwell.

There were bodies in the stairwell, alive and dead, and a confusion of fear and anger. In the midst of it I saw a frowzy dark head on a diminutive frame. "Betsy!"

She had a young woman over one shoulder and what looked like a boy hefted against her hip.

“Follow me,” I yelled.

I led her across the second landing, down the passage Mitch had showed me, and out into the back lot facing the LA River.

Behind us the building gushed smoke. Sirens announced the arrival of more fire trucks, and I led Betsy to the ME vehicles until we found the one where Drew's body had been stashed. Neatly zipped up in a black plastic bag.

Betsy crawled up and knelt beside him, sobbing her heart out.

Chapter Eighteen

“You sure you don't want to go with him?” asked Peter.

Dawn seemed delayed, but it could have been the smoke. Betsy and Mitch sat in the back of the ice-cream truck with me. Peter frowned in concentration as he stomped on the clutch and jerked gears back and forth.

Drew had been loaded into an ME vehicle with the other dead. I'd had to help wrestle him out of Betsy's hands. I hadn't even told her about Caballo yet. Mostly because I hadn't accepted it myself.

“Drew's got another ten hours or so,” said Mitch. “But I've seen this a bunch of times. I think he might make it.”

I didn't know if I hoped he was right. Or hoped he was wrong.

“To the morgue?”

I answered Peter's question. “No thanks, seen enough of that. He'll call if...when...he needs us.”

He turned so he could study my face. I had to look away.

We arrived at the Empress Parlor in time to see the eastern star rising. Betsy was so prostrate she didn't even object when Peter parked the truck in the underground garage and followed us into the service elevator. We stood there, silent, ash covered, and somber as the elevator shook and heaved and made its way to the top floor. The doors slid open.

Betsy screamed.

The place had been bathed in blood. At the center of it sat Frank, covered with blood and some kind of lumpy gore which, as it turned out, were the entrails of the Red Patrol officer I'd seen earlier that evening. His throat was so shredded you could see the white bones of his spine, and Mitch ran off to the corner to heave.

"I was hungry," said Frank.

"No," Betsy wailed. "Oh, Frank!"

Peter's a hardened homicide detective, but even he looked shaken. All around us, in puddles of his own blood, were the copies of Betsy's image the officer had been carrying in his satchel. Betsy knelt next to Frank, hugging him and rocking him and crying.

"We should leave them alone," I told Peter.

"What? This is a crime scene," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Betsy will take care of it," I told him. "You don't need to call it in."

He stared at me. "I can't believe you'd say that."

"What are you going to do? Call SI in here?" I waved my arm toward our row of stainless steel refrigerators. "Explain the bags of blood?"

Betsy had raised Frank to his feet and, still sobbing, was leading him to her back apartments.

"Wait," said Peter. "Where are you taking him?"

He made to follow, but I put a hand on his chest. He stilled and looked down at my hand.

"You don't want to see it," I told him.

"See what?" His eyes widened. "No. No, I can't let you do that!"

"It's like rabies, Peter. It has to be done."

"That isn't a *dog*; that's a *child*," said Peter, loudly, pushing me aside so he could follow Betsy.

"No, it isn't," I told his retreating back. "It's a monster."

* * *

In the end, reason prevailed.

By the time Peter had recovered from the sight of Betsy staking Frank, the sun had risen. He paced the floor for some time, called Nancy, and had a subdued, intense conversation with her which I could not hear, though I strained to do so.

Then he snapped his phone closed. "CITAC is pulling the code to pieces. They've put the fire out down there. Looks like they got the wounded out, but they didn't find any bodies."

“We're highly flammable,” I said.

A subtle shudder seemed to climb his back. “Nancy offered to give me a ride home.”

He hadn't looked at me since he'd emerged from Betsy's apartment.

“You'll stay and clear up this mess.” It wasn't a question. “What will you tell his family?”

“Betsy's got connections with the owner of this building,” I said. “She'll make sure everything that can possibly be done is done.”

He nodded. Head down and defeated. When he raised his hand to summon the elevator, his arm was shaking.

“Peter...”

“Call me when you hear about Drew,” he said over his shoulder, stepping into the elevator. He didn't look back at me as the doors closed.

Chapter Nineteen

I'd know that lime green beach cruiser anywhere.

It was locked in a bike rack next to more of its ilk outside a neat block of small teak-and-glass apartments just off the UCLA campus.

I leaned on the lit buzzer next to his name until he answered. "Hello?"

"It's Adam."

A long, long pause, but in the end Jonathan pressed the buzzer and let me in.

The man who answered the door looked much younger than the Jonathan I was accustomed to seeing at Peter's place. He wore loose cutoff blue jeans and old green Keds with the laces pulled out. His T-shirt proclaimed him PROPERTY OF SIMEON HIGH SCHOOL and his hair was scrubbed up into a peak at the front.

"C'mon in. To what do I owe this displeasure?" He threw an arm out at a worn navy blue futon couch and went to the refrigerator. "You want a Red Bull?"

"No thanks."

I looked around the digs. Typical student housing probably. A colorless rug, boards-on-bricks bookcases filled with hefty volumes with such intimidating titles as *Roget's Thesaurus* and *Rethinking Gender, a History*. Posters taped to the walls and a kitchen that was more an opening in the wall filled with a hot plate and a refrigerator and a single drainer sink. A leggy plant that had been trained to encircle the window, with a rainbow sticker pasted against the glass.

It occurred to me that Jonathan probably took great pains to dress and act as a sophisticate around Peter. To look older.

See, you know you're old when you stop trying to look like an adult.

"My roommate's out," said Jonathan, dropping himself into a wobbly wicker chair across from where I sat. "Too bad. I'd have hated to have you meet him."

"I don't like you, either," I said. "But we agree, don't we, that we want what's best for Peter?"

"Hah, yeah, that's right." Jonathan shook his head, a grim smile on his face.

"I mean it."

"You're a selfish prick," said Jonathan. "All you want is what's best for *you*. I've told Peter so, repeatedly. But you've got some kind of hold on him."

"Peter's loyal."

"Peter's codependent," said Jonathan. "If you really cared about him, you'd walk away."

"A word of advice," I said. I dug the envelope I was carrying out of my back pocket and threw it on the table. "Don't share your pop psychological evaluations of him with Peter. He's old school."

Jonathan eyed the envelope I'd thrown down. "What is that?"

"Just do me a favor and don't tell him where they came from."

With a look of suspicion, Jonathan picked up the envelope and extracted the tickets and itinerary. "What's in South Beach?"

"Peter wants to go," I said. "God's honest truth. And he needs to get the hell out of here."

Jonathan stuffed the tickets back into the envelope. "What's the catch?"

"Here's the deal. I'll admit that I have a slight advantage due to having known Peter half his life. So I figured, let's see who the better man really is, shall we? You'll have two weeks down there to pitch your woo, so to speak. If you can't win Peter over in paradise, then you aren't worth the trouble."

Jonathan absorbed this for a full minute. "You're serious."

"Dead serious." I rose. "So you up for it?"

He gazed up at me. I could see the calculator in his head trying to do the algorithm and come up with whatever my devious plan was, but in the end the prospect of two weeks alone with Peter won. "Yeah."

"I'll let myself out," I said.

Chapter Twenty

Those of you reading this know what happened next.

Drew's good-bye post yesterday, when he eulogized Caballo and announced that he would be shutting down this blog, pretty much told the whole story.

I can't add anything to that articulate note except an enthusiastic "fuck yeah." Immortality is not what it's cracked up to be.

Stay in school. Don't do drugs. Get a degree from an accredited university in accounting.

Avoid going out at night or only go out in groups. Especially in parts of town where the boogeyman walks. And remember: if it looks too good to be true, it probably is.

And that's all I got.

You want worldly wisdom, you should consult the *I Ching*.

I told Drew I'd add a little about what happened with Peter and Jonathan. Not that I know all the details, of course. Not that I spied on them or anything.

Okay, hell yeah, I spied on them.

I sat on the roof of the condominium opposite Peter's for the next week, and I saw Jonathan arrive that night. I waited, watching the moon describe her long arc in the sky, but he didn't reemerge.

Of course I had to leave before dawn.

Knowing what a stubborn son of bitch Peter can be, I'd turned off my phone and I spent the next few days sleeping in a different little hidey-hole. One of the temporary shelters I'd found in Hacienda Heights that Peter didn't know about.

I kept watch on the apartment until one night when he climbed into his Mustang and I followed him as far as the exit to LAX. So that, I figured, was that.

Drew kept me busy for the next few days, writing to you guys on this blog. I gotta tell you, you're like family to me now, all you whack jobs. I'm gonna miss you.

Anyway, when I figured Peter was long gone, I went back to my digs under the Motion Picture Academy building and indulged in a protracted sulk.

Nobody but Peter and Caballo had known about these particular rooms. Caballo wouldn't be telling anyone soon, and Peter was still in South Beach. So I was on my feet and pressed against the wall by the door, on my toes and listening with my little bat ears one night, when footsteps began descending beyond the first basement level.

Plink plink plink. By the second landing I knew they were high heels. *Plink plink.* By the time she'd rounded the corner, I'd recognized Nancy.

"Hello, Adam."

There was something permanently threadbare and defeated about the woman, but as she stood in the doorway looking around the room, the standard issue GLOCK held ready in two hands, I noticed she seemed rested. She'd had her hair done. Was wearing new shoes.

"Early vampire chic," she said drily. "Interesting."

"I'm not much of a homebody," I told her. "Beer?"

She raised an eyebrow when she saw me lift two cold ones from the tiny refrigerator. "You think they'll notice the additional power usage and investigate?"

"Nah. I only turn on the lights for company. You going to put away your piece, or am I going to talk to the muzzle of your gun?"

"Sorry." She disengaged and reholstered the gun. "I wasn't sure what I'd find down here."

"Guns are pretty useless, by the way." I pulled out a chair for her, and she seated herself.

"Drew said he hasn't seen you around, and I was...curious."

"So now you're working with Drew?"

"The FBI has asked me to head up a unit, and Drew is our most knowledgeable expert at the moment."

"You're jerking my chain."

"I am not."

“Huh.” I twisted off the cap of my beer and we toasted the glass bottoms. “They know what he is?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly.” She'd turned in her chair so she could take in the bed I'd made in the corner. The worn love seat with its knitted throw. Peter's sister had given it to me last Christmas.

“What are *you* doing, by the way?”

“This and that.”

“Drew tells me Betsy has decided to disband your vigilante group for the time being.”

“It was getting a little out of hand,” I said.

Nancy drew on her beer and set it down. “You looking for something to fill your time?”

“I'm not working with the FBI, Dickes. Even I have standards.”

She managed a rueful smile. “I kind of thought you'd say that, but Peter suggested—”

“When did you talk to Peter?” I hadn't meant to sound so eager, but there you were.

She blinked. “Today. At work.”

He should have been in South Beach for another week. “Those bastards made him cut his vacation short? Damn, that sucks.”

“Peter's not on vacation.” She squinted at me.

I squinted back. “He went to Florida.”

“No he didn't. He took a couple days off when his sister arrived, but he's been at work this entire—”

“Hang on.” I let my brain catch up. “You said his sister is in town?”

“She and her husband stopped over on their way to some vacation spot. They've left by now, I'm sure. Peter told me they wanted him to go along, but he didn't want to miss the Policeman's Ball, so he decided to stay here.”

Every year Peter and I stood by the refreshment table and drank from the punch bowl cups, enhanced with a little J&B from my private flask, and watched the brass and unis dance with their spouses, exes, and girlfriends.

Nancy was watching me now, and the little smile at the corner of her mouth was sly.

“What day is it?” I asked her.

“The ball starts in an hour,” she said. “I’m not invited, of course, but I’d be happy to drop you off.”

* * *

“When will you learn to stay out of the rain?”

Peter looked like he’d been standing on the back patio under a dripping fir tree for more than a few minutes. His dress blues were dark with damp, and the curls of his hair were making little humid spikes at his brow.

“You have any trouble getting past the gate?” he asked.

“Everybody’s stoned off their asses. I just kept to the shadows, and here I am.”

“Yeah, here you are.” Something about the way he looked, standing on the rain-washed steps in his pristine uniform, his cleanly shaved chin with the dimple on one side as he tried not to smile at me.

The music inside switched from “Brick House” to a slow number, and I stepped off the patio and walked through the damp grass toward the pond. “C’mere.”

Neither one of us can dance. And Peter’s initial reaction to my spreading my arms was to laugh and wave me off. But he acquiesced quickly enough that I knew he was into it.

“Who leads?” he said.

“Hell if I know.”

So we wrapped our arms around each other and swayed from foot to foot while the music played.

Peter’s skin was warm and his eyes were dark.

“I should be pissed off at you,” he said.

After all these years I’ve figured a few things out about how Peter works things. Yeah, even bricks like me get a clue eventually. “Good offensive move there, Peter. You know how much those tickets set me back?”

He let his head rest on my shoulder. Christ, it felt right there. “They didn’t go to waste. My sister and her husband needed a break from the kids.”

We rocked in place. He smelled like wet wool and Old Spice. He turned his head, and the newly trimmed ends of his hair tickled my nose.

Hand on a Bible, that's what made my eyes water.

The music inside had ended, and I heard the smattering of applause. I could imagine it, having been to so many of those functions. The crepe paper and balloons. The stiff cardboard signs. Cops aren't comfortable with decorating, and they'd have purposely kept it sparse.

Peter and I, in our little clearing of moonlight, the lake beyond, and all the stars around us, definitely had the better venue. We'd stopped swaying back and forth but still stood with our arms around each other. Beyond the stand of firs a truck drove by, its tires hissing against the asphalt. Peter raised his head and listened to it, then he looked back at me, and I could see light shining brightly in his eyes.

"I love you," he said. Just like that.

A year ago, I'd have, I don't know, wished for a hole in the ground to drop through, fallen over my own feet trying to get away. Or worse. Laughed at him.

"I know," I said.

We smiled into each other's eyes, and I wasn't even a little bit tempted to bolt and run.

Okay, I was maybe 3 percent tempted. On a sliding scale, maybe 10 percent.

Then Peter's phone rang.

He stepped out of my arms to answer it, looking worried. Nobody wants to get called away from a romantic interlude to stare at a dead body, you know.

"Yes, I got your message. I'm sorry I didn't call you back. I've been busy...yes?"

"Who is it?" I whispered. I followed him as he backed away, and I got my hands around his hips again.

Peter covered the receiver and admitted, "It's Jonathan."

"Hang up on him."

"What? No."

I tried, uselessly, to wrestle the phone from Peter. My physical strength was no match for the strength of the glare he leveled on me as he twisted away. But I did take the opportunity to

get a good grope in. He slapped at me. “Stop that. No, not you, Jonathan. It's...never mind.” Peter covered the receiver and hissed. “Stop it.”

I grinned and went to my knees. Right there in the wet grass.

Peter's eyes were hot as he watched me work the placket of his wool pants open. “N-no. Nothing's wrong. My sister and b-brother-in-law...” His voice hitched as he tried to catch his breath.

“Hold on a minute, Jonathan.” His hand landed in my hair, and he tried to shove me. It was a pathetic attempt. No sane healthy male purposely pushes a mouth off his dick. Whether he knows he should or not.

I reached up and wrestled the phone from his hand. This time he gave in to me easily. “Good-bye, Jonathan,” I said. Then I snapped it closed, turned it off, and threw it hard in the direction of the lake. We heard the *thunk thunk sploosh* as it landed somewhere over there. Then I went back to my task.

“Christ,” Peter protested feebly. But he tipped back his head and let me go for it.

His cock was hot, and he got hard fast and came even faster, a sure sign that we had more to take care of once I'd gotten him into a bed. His cum tasted sweet to me. Like home.

“You okay?” He looked down at me with dazed eyes while I buttoned him up.

“They're gonna have to reseed the grass here,” I said. “I think I killed it.”

He was still chuckling when I stood up and said, “Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“Me too.”

 THE END 

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