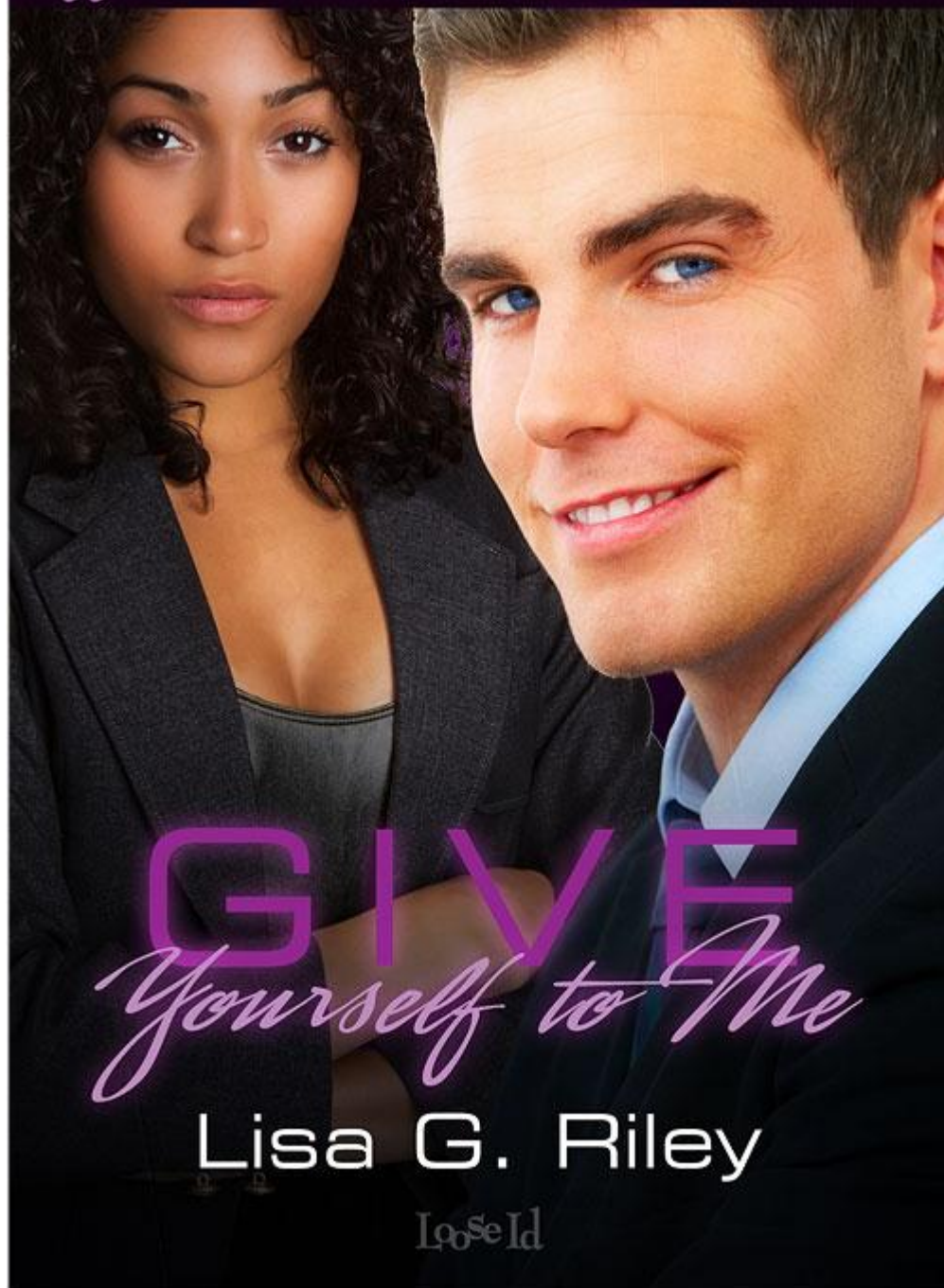


Off Like a Prom Dress



GIVE
Yourself to Me

Lisa G. Riley

Loose Id

*Off Like a Prom Dress:
Give Yourself to Me*

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Chapter One

New Orleans

April 2009

He scented her before he saw her, and shocked to his core, he stiffened in recognition. It might have been fourteen long years since he'd detected her scent, but it was one he'd never forget. Like a wolf sensing its mate, Cumberland Hilliard unerringly looked in the direction from which she came. Except for where he and the others were standing under the bright lights, it was pitch-dark, but he saw her at least a minute before anyone else did, or could have, even if they'd been paying attention. She wore black skinny jeans and a breast-hugging black T-shirt over her tall, thin frame, tying everything together at her waist with a wide red leather belt. Black ballet flats covered her feet.

Of course she still had that lazy, graceful walk that had always driven him mad with lust and made her look like she had no place special to be, and if she did, then it could wait. He narrowed his eyes. *Everyone could wait, as far as she was concerned.*

Two large dogs, one on either side, loped down the street with her. They too appeared to be in no hurry. When she was about a hundred feet from where he stood, Hill heard her give the dogs a soft command and watched as each dog obediently stopped and gazed adoringly after her as she kept walking. Finally she came into the light, and still she took her time.

"Here comes La Belle Dangereuse," Hill heard one of the men next to him say in a thick Cajun accent, and fascinatingly, as one unit, everyone—the paramedics,

the crime-scene techs, and even the damned police officers who were supposed to be watching him, *their suspect*—stopped what they were doing to turn to watch her approach. Hill refrained from shaking his head in disgust. She'd always had that effect on people.

"Not too fond of that dick of yours, are you, boy?" an older man asked the Cajun. "You'd better not let the good doctor hear you call her that, or you'll find out just how well you can get along without it."

Hill heard a deep, heartfelt sigh of longing come from the young technician next to him and had to agree with the sentiment, even as he hated himself for it.

Laughing heartily, someone slapped the sighing man on the back. "Don't even think it. Dr. Hollis Delacroix isn't even in your stratosphere, son."

Hollis Delacroix? What the fuck? Hill thought. She really *had* wanted to get away from me.

"Jesus, just look at her," a female paramedic said in a low voice about thirty feet from Hill. His sensitive ears picked up the words and the envy. "She looks gorgeous even at this time of night."

"Yeah, how dare she," the lone female cop said drily in reply. "On anyone else, what she has on would just look like an ordinary outfit, but on her, it's a freaking ensemble. What a selfish bitch. Hey! *Dangerous Beauty!*" she yelled and emphasized the nickname. "When you're done attracting helpless supplicants, you want to get your heavenly ass to work so we mortals can get out of here sometime tonight?"

Hill, who had listened to all the conversations going on around him but hadn't taken his eyes off his target once, watched as a fond smile split the doctor's face and she turned her head in the other woman's direction.

"Bite me, bitch," she said mildly, making the cop laugh.

"Not tonight, honey. I've got work to do. And besides, I wouldn't want to make anyone jealous."

Her lips twisted, and she obligingly flipped the cop the bird, but Hill could tell the doctor's attention was focused on the dead body as she gave a general greeting to everyone and pulled on latex gloves. She hadn't seen him yet, and Hill wondered what her reaction would be when she finally did notice him. He didn't have long to wait. Her searching eyes eventually came to rest on him. One elegant arched brow was the only indication of her surprise.

"Well, Cumberland Hilliard," she drawled in that same husky voice that had seductively dogged his dreams as a nineteen-year-old and still did all these years later. But now, Hill just considered the act cruel. "What on earth are you doing at my murder scene?" she asked. And then that damned familiar crooked grin appeared on her face. "You my murderer, *cher*?"

Hill ignored the question and closed his eyes as her voice rolled over him like thick syrup and took him back to the last time he'd seen her.

* * *

Tanning, Mississippi

1995

The awards assembly/pep rally had been long and boring, but at Tanning Senior High, it was one of three harbingers of the end of the school year, and Hill had been more than happy to sit through it. Immediately afterward, he'd taken advantage of the early dismissal, grabbed his girlfriend, bundled her into his tricked-out Oldsmobile, and driven hell-for-leather to his family's lake cabin, where they would be assured privacy.

Taking a deep breath, Hill ran his fingers through his russet-colored hair and tried to decide if he should reveal his secret now or wait until later, as he'd originally planned. After all, prom was a mere two nights away. He could wait, but the secret was fighting to get out of him because he hated not sharing it with the girl he loved. Keeping it from her seemed like a betrayal of everything they had together. He looked at his girlfriend, Rose Larnier, and once again thanked his

lucky stars that she'd even deigned to give him a second look when she'd first transferred to Tanning.

A tall, willowy nineteen-year-old beauty with rich brown skin and wide eyes who had a late birthday just like him, she was woefully out of his league, he knew. Oh, he did okay in the looks department, he supposed, even though he estimated that he needed at least another eight to ten pounds of muscle to fill out his tall, lanky frame. However, he'd been told so many times that he was too smart, too introspective, too intense, and too much of a loner to ever be good boyfriend material, he'd come to believe it. But Rose didn't seem to mind those things about him. He could only pray that she'd accept the secret part of him, maybe not as easily—that would be asking way too much—but as completely as she'd accepted the rest.

He looked at her again. Still in her blue and gold cheerleading uniform with its short, short skirt and bobby socks, she sat on the hood of his car, licking a vanilla ice-cream cone. She had a contented expression and a relaxed demeanor. This actually was her usual look. His mother was fond of saying that Rose was as laid-back as an easy chair. He frowned. His mother's thoughts on the idea of him sharing his secret—and therefore, the rest of the family's—could not be mistaken. She thought he should keep it locked away. "*Just in case*," she'd said. But Hill didn't agree; he absolutely would be confiding in Rose.

It just wouldn't be on such a beautiful day. Not when three little words, which were harmless on their own but explosive when strung together, could destroy everything, including the beauty of the day—of the moment, the second. No, his revelation could wait until prom night, after the actual event was over. At least that way if she wanted to dump him, she would have already enjoyed herself. He was going to make sure it was the best night of the year for her.

Relieved because he'd found a way to justify keeping the secret a little longer, he gave her a huge smile and decided it was a good idea to discuss something else that had been on his mind. "You've got to listen to me, baby," he said as he stroked

her knee. He knew she was the love of his life, and when she looked at him from beneath thick dark lashes and smiled absentmindedly before going back to her cone, he had to steel himself against the pathetic bump of his heart. She always affected him that way. He chuckled to himself, knowing full well she knew it and took advantage of the fact whenever an opportunity presented itself.

She was his destiny, and they were bound together in a way she couldn't even imagine. He'd tried to explain it to her about a month after they'd started dating. She'd said she understood and that she knew how he felt, because she felt the same way, but he knew she didn't. Oh, he didn't doubt that she loved him as much as he loved her, but there was no way she could understand when he said he knew their bond would never be broken, that their connection literally sang in his blood. He'd felt the connection from the moment she stepped into Tanning High seven months before.

He watched her tackle with delicate greed what had started out as three scoops of ice cream, and once again marveled at her appetite. She ate as much as any of the guys he knew, and the things she chose to eat would make all self-respecting mothers wince with concern. "I don't know if your famous stomach will survive this time, Roe. I mean, a hot dog, cheese curls with hot sauce, fries, and ice cream? Good Lord."

She shrugged with unconcern. "I know I'll still be hungry when I'm finished with this. Y'all got anything in the cabin, you think?"

Before he could explain that anything edible would likely be stale or in cans because of all the months the place had been shut up for the season, his car's cassette player began playing Jewel's "Who Will Save Your Soul." And knowing his chances of having her undivided attention had just plummeted to practically nil, Hill shook his head. He smiled in exasperation, watching as she began to sway to the music, her brown cheeks flushed from pleasure and the oppressive Mississippi heat. He could only blame himself for this delay, as he was the one who'd made the mixtape.

She noticed his smiling and playfully stuck her tongue out at him. “What?”

He narrowed his eyes. The bright pink of her tongue had peeked out from beneath small lumps of ice cream. And with him being nineteen and male and therefore almost unceasingly horny, the sight made him think of their first foray into oral sex a couple of nights before. He groaned and frowned. “Oh, that is *so* not fair.”

She grinned and said again, this time with studied innocence, “What?”

Hill cleared his throat and tried to clear his mind of lust while he was at it. He moved his gaze to her right ear—one of the embarrassingly few body parts of hers that didn’t turn him on. “Uh...you’re not listening to me. That’s what.”

She took another slow lick from her cone and made his toes curl in his shoes to match the heat curling in his stomach. “Course I am, cher,” she whispered huskily, and he could tell that she too was aroused. “You love me, and I *adore* you, and we’ll consummate this phenomenon on prom night.” She lifted a brow and smirked at him. “And all I can say to that is—*finally*.”

Hill grinned. “I told you why I think we should wait.”

“Because you have a secret, and you don’t think we should make love until I know everything about you,” she monotoned obediently in the vein of one who’d heard the same explanation several times.

“Exactly.”

“I understand that. Really, I do,” she said plaintively. “And you know that I have a secret to share with you as well. What I don’t understand is why we have to wait until prom night to share them and to, in the words of the great, lamented Marvin Gaye, get it on.” She wiggled enticingly.

Hill swallowed hard to wet his suddenly dry throat and tried desperately to remember what they’d been talking about. But the little wiggle proved too much for his already weak resolve, and he leaned down to take her lips in a long, wet kiss. “God, baby, will you just behave for a few minutes?” he begged against her lips.

She kissed him one last time and cupped his cheek. “All right, if you insist,” she told him, even as she widened her knees to make room for him between her legs.

His fingers automatically went to the blue and gold ribbons that were holding her hair together in the two obligatory ponytails she hated. Gently, he yanked so that her hair slid out of them, and out of habit, he combed his fingers through the hair so that it fluffed around her shoulders. “I just want to explain the rest of my reasoning for waiting, and I want to discuss our plans for that night.”

Just then, a rap song blasted its beat from the player, making him jump in surprise. Doing his best to block out the song, he said, “We should wait, because our first time together—and your first time, period—should be special, and since we won’t be getting married until I finish college and you start medical school, then prom night is the next best time. In two nights, baby, we’ll have a limo and our very own suite at a big hotel in Jackson.”

She only smiled and shrugged. “That’s all just lagniappe, cher, and I don’t need it.”

“Sorry, I’m just a Mississippi boy with four years of Spanish under his belt. So since I didn’t have the benefit of growing up in the great state of Louisiana, would you please explain what the hell lagniappe is?” He fumbled over the unfamiliar word.

“It means extra, and that’s what the limo and the suite are—extra. I don’t need those things, and I don’t want them. All I need is you.”

“Aw, that’s sweet, baby.” Hill bent and kissed her cold, sweet-tasting lips while he tried to ignore his favorite song. “Thank you, but I want everything to be perfect for you, and so we’ll have the suite and the—”

“Go ahead,” Rose interrupted with an indulgent smile. “You know it’s your favorite part of the song.”

Hill grinned sheepishly but sang out at the top of his lungs, “I love it when you call me big poppa!”

Rose chuckled and swallowed the last of her cone. Waving her arms in the air as she swayed to the beat, she yelled, "Woo-hoo! Free biiiird!"

Hill chuckled, but the laughter soon caught in his throat when she leaned forward and shimmied so that her breasts jiggled beneath her top. He moved in closer between her bent knees and slid his hands underneath her skirt and then up her thighs. Gripping her ass, he pulled her forward so that his hard-on was nestling against her cleft. Eyes half-closed, he watched as her eyes fluttered shut and her head fell back, exposing her neck as she gasped at the intimate contact. He leaned in and covered her mouth with his, his tongue voraciously finding hers. "I love it when *you* call me big poppa," he whispered.

She smiled languidly and wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips, grinding sinuously against him as she did so. "Big poppa." She obliged and pressed a fleeting kiss to his lips.

"In French," he demanded as he tightened his hold and began to rock against her.

"Ah...cher, that feels..." She buried her face in his neck and tightened her arms around him. "*Grande...ah...papa.*"

Hill lifted her from the hood and hurried around to the backseat. "Again." He laid her on the seat and then flipped her skirt up and lowered himself between her spread thighs.

"Grande papa! Ah *Jesus*, Hill," she moaned when he lightly bit her neck and thrust against her at the same time. He felt her nails bite into his shoulders and wanted to strip them both naked. "I love...I love you!"

"I love you too," he pledged before taking her mouth.

* * *

Two days later, Hill climbed from the limo in front of the Larnier house, which was completely dark. Frowning, he walked up to the porch. He rang the bell and knocked intermittently for quite a while until he finally believed what his senses

had already told him. The house was empty. The Larniers, Rose included, were gone.

* * *

New Orleans

April 2009

The noisy scene brought Hill back to the present. Eyes narrowed, he watched as Rose walked away from him to speak to an officer. He hadn't answered her question about his being the murderer. And as he let himself be led to a police car, he thought she'd have been surprised and horrified by his answer.

Chapter Two

Dressed entirely in scrubs, including a clear plastic face shield and shoe covers, Dr. Hollis Delacroix carefully removed the front part of the ribs and breastbone from the Y-shaped incision she'd made in the corpse currently occupying her examination table. She'd already examined the body's exterior and collected what little evidence she'd found from it and the clothes the dead man had been wearing.

As evidenced by the Corinne Bailey Rae playing softly in the background, she was as comfortable in the examination suite as she was in her own home. "Girl, put your records on..." she sang softly along with the music as she severed the esophagus.

The incisions she'd made earlier began under each armpit and ran underneath the breasts to join at the bottom of the breastbone, after which the line advanced down the middle of the abdomen and ended at the top of the pubis. Because it literally meant she would get her hands dirty, and was a big step in trying to determine the cause of death, Hollis saw the act of cutting into the thoracoabdominal cavity as one of the best parts of her job.

"You gonna cut his head open after you get done digging around in the chest and stomach cavity, Dr. Delacroix?"

Hollis winced slightly behind her mask at her diener's crudely put question. He almost always showed a little bit too much enthusiasm for his job, especially when it came to the possibility of exposing the brain for examination. He was a good attendant, and she knew his enthusiasm came from the love of learning, but he needed to be careful. There were cameras recording, so her answer, spoken slowly

and clearly, was meant to warn the morgue attendant to tone it down, as she had told him to in private several times before. “Claude, did I mention that you did a great job preparing the area and the body for my examination? You keep up the good work, okay?”

She’d handpicked him for the position of diener, and now she mentored him. But the office of the medical examiner was just as political as any other, and some of the powers that be didn’t like Claude because they didn’t like her, and he was hers.

Her stick-in-the-mud bosses didn’t like her because they couldn’t abide the small amount of fame she’d got after she’d testified against the murderer of a politician. It had been a particularly grisly murder case with an overabundance of media coverage, and as her testimony had helped to convict the man, residual fame had fallen on her. And because she was attractive, had an embarrassing weakness—almost obsession, really—for dressing well, *and* a winning record in the courtroom, she had been given that ridiculous moniker, which even three years later still made her want to smash someone’s face in.

She knew Claude had got her hint about toning it down when he answered, “Yes, ma’am. Thank you. I will. I do my best to be a help, and I want to thank you again for choosing me for this job. I’m learning things here that I won’t get to for years yet in school.”

“Hmm,” she murmured, her mind once again on the work. Knowing her next words would likely send him over the moon, she cautiously asked, “You ever seen the en bloc procedure, Claude?”

“No, ma’am, but I know what it is. Is there a reason why you’re going to remove the organs all at once that way?”

“Yes, there is,” Hollis said as she cut the trachea in a precise movement. “I wish I could tell you that it’s because I want to get the body to the funeral for the family, but the unfortunate yet simple truth is that it’s two in the morning, and I’m

tired of being here. If I took everything out one by one, I wouldn't get home until daylight at the earliest."

"But I understood that you wanted to work on the body tonight—right away—and that's why I was called in," Claude said.

"I did," Hollis confirmed. "But sometimes I let the desire to solve mysteries override my common sense. So after I dropped my dogs off at home, I came here. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep until I satisfied my curiosity. This is the fourth body we've found in three weeks that shows no outside signs of injury, and all the victims looked perfectly healthy. I wanted to see if my results this time would turn out the same as the other three. But that's going to have to wait, because I'm starting to feel exhaustion setting in."

"Well, the refrigerator's ready for the organs, and I guess you can't release the body yet, because we still don't know what killed this man, right?"

"Right, but if he's anything like the other three, we'll find that he has just a bit too much iron in his blood—but not enough to kill him. And there won't be anything else. Not even a trace of aspirin."

"Wow. And you said he's the fourth one?"

"Yes," she said worriedly as she absentmindedly brushed her face against her raised shoulder to wipe off the blood that had squirted onto on her mask as she removed the heart and lungs.

"Well, I bet the murderer would be shaking in his boots if he knew La Belle Dangereuse was on the case!"

Hollis gritted her teeth and reminded herself that while Claude was open-minded and creative, he was still young and therefore, needed to be educated. "Would you say you like working here a whole lot, Claude?" she asked without looking at him.

Puzzlement colored Claude's voice. "Yes, of course."

“Good. Me? I like the fact that you’re working here a whole lot too. But I tell you what,” she continued in a mild tone as she gripped the spleen in preparation for its removal. “If you call me that awful name again—a name, by the way, that by its very nature is designed to objectify and help little minds wrap themselves around the big concept that a woman can do this job—we’ll both be a whole lot of sorry, because unfortunately, you’ll be out of a job.” She turned her head to look at him so that he’d know she was serious. “Am I making myself clear?”

Claude swallowed hard but bravely maintained eye contact as he mumbled, “Yes, ma’am.”

She nodded once and flashed her best smile. “Good. I was sure I was.” And with the issue settled, she went back to her work and thinking about the mystery of the body on her table. If she weren’t a scientist who needed proof, she’d be telling the police that they had a serial killer on their hands. Either that, or there was an epidemic occurring. But what kind? All her victims were male, between nineteen and twenty-two, looked like they had been athletes, and thus were in almost perfect physical condition.

Hollis sighed. So why were they dead? And more importantly to her, what on earth had Cumberland Hilliard been doing there, in the middle of the Louisiana Superdome, with a dead body? Had he really killed the man as the police suspected?

* * *

He sat in the dark. Waiting. He should not have been there; the danger surrounding him was almost palpable. Hill sat still, trying to suppress an all-encompassing rage. The fucking police had kept him for hours. So he was guilty, but hell, they didn’t know that, and they had absolutely no proof. A long, sweaty night in the police station, coupled with discovering Rose again and realizing she had actually *changed her name* to keep him from finding her, had indeed made him dangerous to be around. But he was not going to wait until morning to see her or talk to her. That was out of the question. He’d been made to wait too long already. He was there now, and he would not be denied.

The night was quiet around him, and except for the two sentries posted on either side of him—for the house, not for him—he felt completely alone. He heard rustling in the high hedges across the street, and eyes glowing red, he turned toward it, ready to take down and eliminate any threat. A raccoon blinked at him, stiffened in horror for no more than a few seconds, and then ran for its life to the back of the house.

He growled low in his throat in disappointment and forced himself to stay seated on the porch. “That’s right. Run away, you long-tailed, fat-backed, bandit-looking coward motherfucker.” He needed a fight, and he needed it bad. Struggling to get his emotions under control, he retracted his fangs, which had begun descending when he’d heard the noise. A low growl next to him made him turn his head. It was a warning, and Hill took heed. He knew Rose’s dogs sensed his anger. The two mastiffs hadn’t exactly welcomed him when he’d approached the house, but they hadn’t mauled him either.

Absently he rubbed his fingers through thick dog fur as he thought about having seen Rose for the first time in fourteen years. From what he had seen, she hadn’t changed much. She still had that blemish-free brown skin, and of course her height was the same. Her eyes were candy brown and doelike, and though her hair had been pulled back in a ponytail, he could tell she kept the habit of wearing it straight.

“Shit, the only thing that’s changed about Rose is her name,” he muttered, residual hurt and anger flaring up as he remembered her disappearance. It had been absolute, as had been his sense of betrayal and his heartbreak and confusion. He’d wanted to search for her, but his parents’ cooler heads had prevailed, finally helping him to see that the Larnier family had most likely disappeared because they’d found out his family’s secret before he’d been able to share it.

He checked his watch and saw that it was three thirty. His mouth twisted. Where in the hell was she? He’d been sitting there for more than an hour, waiting for her. After the police had finally released him from their questioning—but not

their suspicions—he'd decided not to go home and instead had used his vampire contacts to find out where she lived.

He'd had no idea she'd been living in New Orleans. When he thought about it, however, it made sense. When her family had moved to Mississippi, they'd said they were from a small town in Louisiana. And though she'd fit in fine in Tanning, he'd always thought she seemed to belong in a more metropolitan setting.

"No matter where she is," he said to the dog on his left, "now that I've found her, I won't be losing her again."

The dog woofed, as if in full agreement, and it was loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood. Hill looked at it askance. "You're a big sonovabitch, aren't you?"

In answer, the other dog promptly licked his face.

Hill pushed its muzzle away in disgust. "Jesus! Have some dignity, will you? You're not a golden retriever; you're a mastiff, so damn it, be a mastiff."

The dogs hadn't even barked when he'd walked up the stairs to the house. Instead they'd come running around from the backyard. And they'd both stood on their hind legs to look quizzically at him over the six-feet-high wooden fence that swept out from both sides of the house to enclose the backyard. If not exactly happy to see him, they at least looked as if they'd been expecting him. It wasn't the usual response he received from animals that didn't know him. So, feeling curious about their behavior, he'd opened the latch and let them out.

"What the fuck is a Hollis anyway?" he muttered when the idea of it popped into his head.

He checked out his surroundings. From where he sat, Rose hadn't done badly for herself. The wide porch extended the length of the front of the two-story brick house, which sat smack-dab in the middle of what looked to be a bedroom community. "I guess being a medical examiner allows a person to live pretty comfortably." Mentioning her occupation made him stiffen. He wasn't worried about the police, but Rose could definitely be a thorn in his side. He frowned, wondering

what she would do when she figured out—and he had no doubt that she would—he was the murderer. He'd been careful and made sure there was no trace of him left on the body, but if anyone could catch him, it was Rose. She was not only smart, but she could be quite tenacious when the situation warranted.

“Shit.” The prudent thing for him to do would be to finish his business in New Orleans and get the hell out of town without seeing Rose again. The thought was so repugnant that he immediately rejected it. Now that fate had brought them together again, there was no way he was going to just walk away. “I’ll just have to take my chances,” he murmured into the dark, knowing even as he said it that it was one of the most foolish decisions he’d ever made. “Shit.” The word fell from his lips again, and it was filled with self-disgust. She’d hooked him again, and even with his freedom at risk, he found it impossible to leave her.

The dogs started barking, and more quickly than he could blink, they were off the porch and bounding down the stairs. Hill realized he’d been so deep in thought that he hadn’t registered Rose’s scent as he normally would have.

“What are you two doing out here?” he heard her say in surprise from the end of the lane as she greeted the dogs. “Please tell me you didn’t roam the neighborhood, scaring poor innocents. Damn it, I’ve got to get that latch fixed,” she said, and the exhaustion in her voice was clear.

He watched as she reached up and took the covered rubber band out of her hair. She ran her fingers through it so that it flowed like silk around her shoulders. The moan she released was one of relief and pleasure, making Hill’s whole body tighten with anticipation and lust long denied. In a silent flash so fast that it would have gone unseen by anyone watching, he was off the porch, down the stairs, and standing in front of her, taking her face in his hands.

Primal instinct and self-preservation kicked in a second too late for her, and she stiffened, but before she could scream, his mouth was on hers. “God, I’ve missed you,” he breathed and registered the fearful surprise on her face right before he opened his mouth over hers. He wasn’t gentle, and he wasn’t kind. What he was,

was hungry. He let his greed rule, his tongue impatiently rampaging through her mouth while his teeth clashed against hers. *Christ, she tastes good.*

He was desperately selfish, taking what he wanted over and over again and continually going back for more without allowing for breath or protest. After a series of surprised moans, she finally began to respond, moving her fingers to his wrists to hold on tightly. It was then that he gentled the kiss, suckling her lips and licking the inside of her mouth until they were both calm. And releasing her mouth, he looked down at her.

Still holding his wrists, she closed her eyes and leaned in to rest her forehead against his. "Goddamn it, Hill." The words came out as a whispered sigh and were filled with despair and resignation.

Chapter Three

"I owe you an explanation, and for a while I looked for you in order to give it to you," Hollis said candidly to Hill, who sat in her armchair, ominously quiet and looking at her as if he couldn't decide if he wanted to fuck her or strangle her. Surreptitiously, she let her gaze lovingly trace his features. *God, I missed him!* She hadn't realized how much until he'd shown up tonight. "My parents—"

"What do you mean you looked for me?"

"I mean, after we moved, and when it was safe enough, I started—"

He leaned forward. "Safe?"

"Yes, Cumberland, *safe*," she said impatiently to hide the tension she felt. This new Hill unnerved her. He seemed so...*rough*. "Now are you going to let me tell you what happened, or are you going to keep interrupting me?"

He grunted noncommittally, settled back into the chair, and nodded to indicate she should continue.

Hollis lifted a brow. Imperious bastard, she thought, and only proceeded to explain because she knew she owed him at least that much. "As I was saying, after we left the lake that night, I came home to find my parents and my sisters packing up the house. We had to leave, you see."

"Why?" Again, Hollis found it difficult to ignore his commanding tone, but she did it. "Well, this is going to sound unbelievable, but when my family and I moved to Tanning, we were in the Witness Protection Program." She paused, waited for the predictable reaction, and grinned in satisfaction when she got it. His mouth had fallen open in shock. Perhaps it was small of her to feel smug, but she didn't care. The cold, hard man sitting across from her was not the Hill she'd once known, and

she wasn't sure if she cared for him. Nevertheless, she still could not believe he was actually there. She hadn't thought she'd ever see him again.

She continued, "I don't know how much you paid attention to the news back then, but the New Orleans Police Department was in chaos. It would be putting it mildly to say that corruption was running rampant, because it was worse than that. It was almost impossible to feel safe anywhere in the city, because too many of those who were supposed to serve and protect were more criminal than the criminals. And after so many years of this, and when it was obvious that the police weren't policing themselves, the Justice Department stepped in—"

"What's all this got to do with you leaving?"

Hollis sighed and narrowed her eyes. "I'm trying to get to that! So is it *barely* possible that you could keep your big mouth shut for the next few minutes so I can, you jackass?" She waited a moment with her head cocked to the side and her brow raised in question.

"Sorry," he muttered as if the word was being wrenched from his throat. "Please finish."

She inclined her head toward him with mock graciousness. "Thank you, my liege," she chimed sarcastically. "Anyway, my mother was a cop, and she had a partner who was buried up to his neck in graft and corruption. She became an informant, which naturally evolved to her testifying against him. After that decision was made, we were put in the Witness Protection Program, and that's how we ended up in Tanning. We were to stay hidden until the trial, but as our FBI handler said when I got home that night, our position had been irreparably compromised. We had to pack up and leave, and do it immediately."

Hill was silent for a moment. Then he asked, "What do you mean you looked for me?"

Hollis frowned. "I mean I looked for you, tried to find you."

"I was easy enough to find, Rose—"

“Don’t call me that,” she interrupted, her tone mild but firm. “My name is Hollis. And no, you weren’t...easy. To find, that is. I mean, I may not have been able to try to contact you until almost a year later, because of safety concerns, but I *did* try. You didn’t go to Caltech like you’d planned, which is where I started my search, and when I called your house, your mom refused to tell me where you were. In fact, she hung up on me without even letting me explain. I called several dozen times. And remember, this was 1996, before the advent of Google and the time when you could find everyone and their mama on the Web.”

“I had to give up Caltech, and I went to community college for a year before transferring to MIT.” His parents had convinced him to stay close to home that first year because they had believed their shared secret was out. “Was that the secret you were planning to tell me on prom night?”

“Uh, yeah,” she said as if it was obvious. “It’s a pretty major one, don’t you think? I thought you deserved to know, in case my family one day had to disappear without warning, which as it turns out,” she finished with a shrug, “we did. What was your secret?”

Ignoring the question, he asked, “Why Rose?”

She was exhausted, so her brain was working slowly. And instead of dwelling on why he’d avoided answering her, she frowned in confusion, successfully distracted. “Hmm? I just told you why—Oh! You mean why did I use the name Rose?” When he nodded, she explained, “We had to change our names, of course. My given name is Hollis, and it means close to holly bush. Holly bushes are red, and since most roses are red, I decided to use it for my name. I thought it would be easy to remember that way.”

Hill frowned at the convoluted reasoning and muttered, “Christ. Easy for whom?”

Hollis folded her arms and narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Pardon me?”

“Nothing. So, where’d your family go after Tanning?”

“Would you believe Montreal? Oh, it was so lovely! I started college there, and when it was safe to come back, I enrolled at Tulane.” Her cell phone rang, and fetching it from her pocket, she said, “Excuse me a minute, will you? I’m sure it’s my mother. She probably saw the story on the news about the latest dead body—which reminds me, what were you doing at the scene?” The phone rang again, insistently, and she rolled her eyes. “Give me a minute, Hill, all right? And you’d save us both a whole lot of trouble if you kept completely quiet during this phone conversation. The last thing my mother needs to hear is a male voice in my house at four thirty in the morning.”

Hill nodded and watched as she flipped the phone open.

“Hello, Mother.”

Bless you, Mrs. Larnier or Mrs. Delacroix or whatever, for saving my skin, Hill thought with naked relief as he let his gaze follow Hollis as she moved and talked. She dropped down onto an emerald green sofa, and curled her knees into her chest like she always did when she was so tired that her body automatically found the position most conducive for rest. The times she’d cuddled up to him like that fourteen years ago were too numerous to count. He’d always gladly held her against his chest while stroking her hair and massaging her scalp. Without fail, the actions had made her sigh with pleasure and go completely boneless against him, burrowing her nose into his neck.

He wondered what her reaction would be if he joined her on the sofa and pulled her into his arms. He sighed. She’d probably scream the house down, but not before she kicked his ass. He looked at her face. She’d laid her head back on the sofa and closed her eyes, but he ignored the temptation of her long brown neck. Her delicate frame, along with the darkness tracing circles under her eyes, made her look soft, frail, and vulnerable. He snorted. “Shrewdest fucking package of deceptive advertising I’ve ever seen,” he said under his breath and thought that she needed a sign around her neck that said BUYER BEWARE or something.

He was not ready to talk to her about the murder scene, mainly because he knew the lie he'd given the police would not be enough for Rose. As for his secret, that would have to wait as well. The trust he'd had in her was gone. He sighed, wishing he didn't believe to his very marrow that she was meant to be with him, because now he was totally screwed. He didn't trust her enough to tell her he was a vampire, yet he just couldn't bring himself to make love to her without telling her first. And Jesus, he wanted to make love to her more than he wanted to breathe!

He looked over at her again and, catching her eye, silently indicated he was leaving. She threw him an irritated frown and furiously shook her head no. He frowned back and nodded yes.

She shook her head no.

He nodded again and made to exit the room.

Appearing frantic now, she began to rise from the couch, making staying motions with her free hand.

It was Hill who shook his head no now, and scowling angrily, she mouthed the words, *Cumberland Hilliard, don't you dare walk your lanky ass out that door!*

The frustration and command on her face were so complete that he could have sworn he had actually heard the yell. It surprised a smile out of him. Shaking his head in disbelief that she still held so much sway over him, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He then took one of his business cards out and held it up questioningly. She sulked for a second but seemed to realize that was the best she'd get. In any case, the card appeared to appease her somewhat, and she nodded in reluctant confirmation that she wanted it as she held out her hand.

Hill walked over, gave it to her, and then took her arm and pulled her up from the sofa. *Lock your door*, he mouthed, and she nodded and followed him. He bent his head to briefly press his mouth against hers, noted the surprise and worry in her eyes, and made his escape. After closing the door behind him, he waited to hear the locks hit home and then pulled out his phone and called a taxi, all the while

reminding himself it would *not* be a good idea to throw caution to the wind and go back inside.

Chapter Four

Hollis scowled at Hill. "What are you doing back here? I just fell asleep, only to hear you pounding on my door like some maniac." When he said nothing and only continued to look at her with a knowing grin on his face, she sighed and wished she hadn't opened the door. "You're a suspect, Hill," she said. Realizing she had to crane her neck in order to see his eyes, she stepped back to put space between them. "You shouldn't be here like this."

"Like what?" he asked, his smile quizzical and as charming as she remembered it.

"Like this," she said desperately as she waved her arms wildly to encompass the scope of her living room. "In my house in the middle of the night. In fact, we shouldn't even be together unless it's in an official capacity." When his eyes traveled downward from her face and widened in interest, she suddenly remembered she was wearing only a short silk nightie with a scooped neck underneath a matching white peignoir. She hurriedly pulled the sides together and crossed her arms over her chest to hold it in place.

"Expecting someone?" he asked in a low, dangerous voice.

She lifted a brow. "That's none of your business, Hill, and it hasn't been for some time now." She had to look away from him for a moment to gather her thoughts. He still attracted her like a moth to a flame; it had been that way from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him a lifetime ago. Unable to help it, she looked at him again and knew he was pulling out all the stops trying to...to... She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Why are you here?"

An inquiring expression on his face, he looked around the room. “I like the jewel tones,” he told her simply, as if her decorating ability had been the topic of conversation all along. “May I sit down?”

“No,” Hollis tried to say firmly and rolled her eyes when he went and sat on the sofa anyway. Now more angry than desperately worried about her self-control—thank God—she strode over to stand over him. “What are you doing here, anyway? Why did you come back?”

His gaze, full of lust and heat, made her shiver. “You know what I want,” he told her softly...knowingly. He took her hand and started kissing her fingers. One by one, he pressed them to his lips, and once finished with that, he pressed a lingering kiss to her palm. “I want exactly what you want.”

Hollis cleared her throat, tried to speak. He licked her palm; she moaned and shut her eyes in longing. He bit, she jerked. Her eyes flew open, and her gaze latched on to his. Unable to look away, she tried speaking again. “Ah...hmmm... Oh God...” A second moan was louder and longer when he pulled her finger into his mouth and began to suck. “And what is it that you think I...ah...want?” She felt her knees buckle when he bit down on the delicate skin between her thumb and forefinger.

“You want,” he said between the openmouthed tongue kisses he was slowly placing up her arm, “what I want. And that is for us”—he paused to push the light sleeve of the peignoir up to her shoulder—“to finally make love.”

He’d been pulling her closer as he talked, and she’d been willingly following his lead. He held her hand in a loose grip, and she knew the decision was hers: she could either walk away from him or join him on the sofa. “It’s been fourteen years since we’ve even seen each other, Hill,” she protested weakly, even as she climbed into his lap, lifting her nightgown out of the way so she could straddle him.

“Exactly,” he agreed, groaning when her ass filled his hands after he’d slipped them beneath the silk of her panties. “It’s been much too long.”

His palms felt hot upon her cool behind, and mewling her pleasure low in her throat at his touch, she braced herself against the back of the couch and leaned down to kiss him. She took her time sliding her tongue between his lips because she wanted to savor the pleasure. Blissfully, she explored the contours of the inside of his mouth, the pure decadence of the act making her squirm against him in sinuous wantonness. Completely caught up in the taste of him, instinctively she moved her hands to his face to hold him still while she greedily partook.

Hill's hands were busy underneath her gown, and when she felt him slip a finger inside the already drenched opening of her mound, her mouth fell open in pleasure against his. "Oh God, Hilliard, it feels so good!" she cried and took his free hand to slide it up her torso and onto her breast.

His fingers lingered for but a moment to pinch her nipple before he was sliding both hands back around to her ass. His mouth covered hers just in time to muffle the sound of disappointment she made, and he greedily slipped his tongue inside to sip at and drink every bit of moisture to be found.

Breaking away from the kiss, Hollis looked down at him. "I shouldn't be doing this, Hill. I'm seeing someone else."

"After tonight, you won't be," he said with full confidence. His blue eyes dared her to contradict him, and they were so intense, she imagined she saw the heat. His fingers kneaded her thighs, and as if satisfied that her silence meant obedience, with a lift of his chin, he beckoned her to lean down for another kiss.

She did.

She didn't feel him lift her up to undo his zipper, nor did she feel her panties being ripped asunder. All she felt was the hot heaviness of his dick thrusting into her and hitting home on the first try. She came immediately.

Screaming, she held on tight and rode the wave. When she finally came down, she heard them. Bells. "Hill? Are my ears ringing, or are those bells?" Smiling, she lifted her head from his chest to look at him. "Do you hear the bells? Where do you think they're coming from, Hill? Do you hear them? Do you?"

* * *

“Do you hear them ringing, Hill?” Hollis woke up slowly with that question on her tongue and evidence of an orgasm between her legs. Confused, she looked around and finally realized that her alarm clock was blaring. Her arm struck out from beneath the light summer blanket to pound on the clock until it eventually stopped its incessant noise.

Embarrassed and keenly aware that the orgasm was the first one she’d had in months, she got up from her four-poster bed to walk into the connecting bathroom for a shower, stripping off the silk nightie and her wet panties as she went. “Jesus, after last night, I’m not surprised I dreamed about him, but did it have to be so damned graphic? Hell, I’m still trying to catch my breath.”

As she’d prepared for bed the night before, she’d thought of nothing but Hill. As she’d showered, she’d thought of his blue, blue eyes; as she’d slathered on lotion, she’d thought of the last day they’d spent together when they were kids; as she’d chosen the nightgown and peignoir to sleep in, she’d thought of the hunger of the kiss he’d given her in front of her house; and as she’d slipped the silk over her head and it slid against her sensitive skin, she’d thought of his hands touching her—touching her *everywhere*.

Sighing, she finished drying her body and began to dress in jeans and a plain T-shirt. She wasn’t going to work, but she wanted to go over her notes from the three old cases and the one from last night to see if she was missing something that could bring her closer to figuring out what had killed the victims. As for Hill, she couldn’t afford to think of him in any other way than as a potential suspect. She’d be opening herself up to a multitude of troubles and hurt if she didn’t. She had to admit, though, what she’d dreamed was absolutely true: the attraction she’d felt for him fourteen years ago was just as strong now as it had been then, if not stronger.

Her doorbell rang, and feeling pretty sure she knew who was calling, she walked down the stairs and through the foyer to answer. “Hello, my babies,” she cooed to her dogs when they met her at the bottom of the staircase in a barking

frenzy. They'd come running from the mudroom at the sound of the bell. "How are my boys this morning, hmm?" She gave each of them a quick series of head rubs and answered the door.

"Come in, Detective Def Comedy Jam," she said to her friend Sergeant Simone Tangier. "I've been expecting you. Shut the door behind you," she told her over her shoulder as she turned to walk to the kitchen.

Simone's tinkly laughter and light tread followed Hollis and the dogs into the kitchen. "I know you aren't mad about that little incident at the crime scene last night. But just in case you can't take a joke, and you are," she said as she placed the packages she was carrying on the small oak table, "I've brought the sustenance no self-respecting N'awlins resident would start her day without: beignets and café au lait."

Hollis had opened the back door to let the dogs out and, after washing her hands, was already pulling out plates and napkins. "Of course you have; you're not a stupid woman. You're not funny, but you're not stupid."

"Ha-ha," Simone said sarcastically, but her green eyes were still filled with laughter. "I hope I didn't embarrass you, but it was the only way I could think of to break the ice and get everyone back to doing their jobs. Some of them seemed to have lost the ability to think when you appeared on the scene."

In the process of grabbing orange juice from the refrigerator for Simone, who liked her beignets with both coffee and juice, Hollis made a disgusted face. "That's so ridiculous," she said dismissively as she poured. "Anyway, how's the case going?" She pulled out her chair and sat before snatching at the plate Simone had already prepared for her. Not caring that she'd get powdered sugar all over her face, she took a huge bite of her beignet, making a sound of pure pleasure when the fried dough practically melted on her tongue.

"So far we're having no more luck on this one than we had on the others. The one break we thought we had appears to have fallen through. You know the guy who was standing around last night but looked totally apart from the scene? The

one who stood there as still as a statue, but nonetheless had such a strong presence that you'd have thought he owned the damned place?"

"Know him?" Hollis muttered as she thought about the very satisfying dream she'd awakened from a little less than an hour before. "You don't know the half of it."

Simone's eyes lit with curiosity. "What do you mean? Do tell."

"In a minute," Hollis promised. "First tell me why ya'll think he killed the victim."

"Well, he was there with the body when we got there. A security guard for the dome detained our suspect while he, the guard that is, called the police. He said that he was doing his rounds when he happened upon both the man and the body. The security guard said that Mr. Hilliard—and if you know him, you know that's his name, Cumberland Hilliard—was leaning over the body."

"And?"

"Well, we took him in for questioning, of course, but all we could get out of him was that he was visiting from out of town, and a friend of his, who just happens to be a groundskeeper, was supposed to meet him and show him around the dome. He said he had never been there before but had always wanted to see it, and thought it was a perfect opportunity."

"Well, what's he doing in New Orleans?" Hollis asked after washing some beignet down with a sip of the delicious coffee. Its chicory taste helped to soothe her frazzled soul. "Is he on vacation?"

"No," Simone said after swallowing a bite. "Business. He's a software developer, owns a company and everything. He's apparently made his money making software specifically for the hospitality industry, and he's here to meet with some of the hotels and restaurants."

Hollis mulled over the new piece of information for a moment before saying, "Guess you didn't have enough to hold him."

“No, we didn’t, though someone suggested we hold him as a material witness. But as he insisted that he saw nothing and had happened upon the body just like the security guard, we couldn’t justify it. We came to this brilliant conclusion after he mentioned something about calling a lawyer. And oh yeah, as far as we can tell, he’s only been in town for about a week. There’s no record of him being here before last Friday.”

Hollis took a sip of coffee to hide the extreme relief she felt. It flowed swiftly through her. “So that gets him off the hook for the other murders.”

“Yes, as far as we can tell. However, he’s going to be here for a while, at least a couple of months, he said. He’s got appointments with hotels and restaurants all up and down the Gulf Coast—Biloxi, Baton Rouge, Mobile. He apparently plans to make our great city his base.”

That was more information for Hollis to mull over, but she’d deal with that when she was alone and could consider if the fact he’d be so close for so long was a positive or a negative. “And where was this groundskeeper friend of his? You guys talk to him?”

“Of course. He confirmed that he was supposed to show Mr. Hilliard around the stadium, but said he’d missed their appointed time because of car trouble. Claimed that by the time he got to the stadium, the police were there and he was afraid to go in. He’s not supposed to be offering tours after hours, or at any other time, for that matter, so he was afraid of losing his job if he was found out.”

Hollis frowned in confusion. “Yes, but how’d Hill get into the dome in the first place?”

Simone’s brow rose at the show of familiarity, but she didn’t call Hollis on it. “He claims to have just walked in. He said that when he got there and his friend wasn’t where they were supposed to meet, he waited a few minutes and then decided to check inside to see if he—his friend, that is—was there. Mr. Hilliard thought that maybe he’d mistaken the meeting place.”

“There are way too many holes in that story,” Hollis murmured.

“Yes, there are, and the concern in your voice is much more than the situation warrants, so come on. Tell big sister Simmie what’s going on.”

Hollis smiled as she studied her best friend since preschool. It was a private joke between them. In kindergarten, they’d discovered they’d been born two days and two minutes apart in the same hospital, and Simone had been born first. Simone had teasingly been referring to herself as Hollis’s big sister ever since.

The Creole woman, with her light skin, green eyes, curly hair, and short, round figure was Hollis’s polar opposite, but Hollis was closer to her than she’d ever been to her two younger sisters. Except for when her family had moved to Tanning, she and Simone had been inseparable since the first day they’d met in the doll corner of Madame Corey’s classroom. “Simone is to Hollis as...” she began teasingly.

“Day is to night,” Simone said quickly with a surprised grin.

“And no matter the order, one will always follow the other,” they finished together.

After their laughter died down, Simone groaned. “God, we haven’t been that cheesy since we were twelve. I can’t believe you remembered that!”

“I just had a sudden desire for a bit of whimsy, that’s all.”

“Well, cut that shit out,” Simone warned playfully. “It just reminds me that I’m a crotchety old divorced bitch with two kids and a job. Whimsy is no longer on my radar, just like free time, privacy, and orgasms.”

Hollis chuckled. “I know what you mean.”

Simone snorted. “Yeah, sure you do. You’re single with no dependents. Now tell me, oh delusional one. What’s the deal with Mr. Gorgeous?”

“You already know about him; you’ve just forgotten. He’s the one I told you about when my family moved back, remember? I dated him when we lived in Tanning.”

Simone's eyes widened. "You mean the sexy geek? Hot teenage passions clumsily—but never quite fully—appeased in the backseat of an old Oldsmobile. He's *that* guy?"

Hollis's lips twitched at the almost accurate description, but she nodded. "Yep, he be the guy," she said in a singsong voice. And the passions were appeased, all right, she thought to herself. They were appeased just fine.

"Wow, he sure grew up good."

Hollis could only silently agree as she thought about Hill's long, thin, yet muscular frame.

Simone sat back, quiet in contemplation. "So what are you going to do about Jared now?"

Hollis's brow furrowed, showing the confusion she felt. "I don't know what you mean."

"You've been dating Jared for a couple of months, and he's a great guy, but your face doesn't brighten up even a fraction for him the way it does for this Hilliard guy, and that's just when you're talking about him. I can't imagine what you look like when you're in his actual presence."

Hollis wished she could deny it, but she did still have feelings for Hill, and she'd never even come close to feeling about anyone the way she'd felt about him at nineteen. "Well, like you said, I've only been dating Jared for a couple of months. It hasn't been long enough to really know anything yet. And that 'brightening up of my entire body,' as you called it—"

Simone chortled. "I didn't, but let's not let semantics bog us down," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Do continue." She didn't even try to hide the laughter in her eyes.

"What?" And then Hollis silently replayed what she'd just said and closed her eyes in dismay. "Oh, *mon Dieu*!"

“*Oui*,” Simone agreed. Her French was just as good as Hollis’s. “You are in deep trouble, are you not, *Fräulein Anna O.*?”

Hollis made the connection immediately and hooted with appreciative laughter. “Oh Jesus, Simmie! You’re such a smug little jerk!” she said between deep belly laughs. “It wasn’t a Freudian slip, so stop showing off. And besides, Anna O. wasn’t even Freud’s patient. She never even met him.”

Simone raised a brow. “Whatever, and who’s showing off now? And whoever’s patient she was, *she* was crazy, and *you* get my point! So, my dear, as you were saying?”

Hollis looked at her friend’s expectant, knowing smile and, narrowing her eyes, shook her head in exasperation. “God, I should have let Petey Wee-Wee have your ass all those years ago when it was time to choose a preschool buddy.”

“You couldn’t be so cruel,” Simone said dismissively. “Now quit stalling, and get on with what you’re going to do about Jared.”

Hollis sighed. “I’m not going to do anything about Jared. As I was trying to explain earlier, the so-called brightening up just came from remembering the good times. That’s all. Any feelings that I have for Hill are just lingering ones from back then. I’m sure they’ll go away.”

Simone snickered into her cup of coffee. “Yes, and I’m sure my six-year-old will start remembering to put the toilet seat down so his sometimes-not-too-bright little sister won’t keep falling in and getting her ass wet.”

Hollis laughed. “Leave my godbaby alone; she’s only four years old! And the two situations can hardly be compared, Simmie!”

Chapter Five

Dressed in his oldest, most comfortable pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and his favorite pair of boots, Hill watched as twenty-year-old Johnson Pratt walked nervously and quickly between two buildings on his college campus. Hill had been following the young vampire for the past fifteen minutes, trying to find proof that he was a member of the group of rebels who had started draining people for their blood. They were endangering themselves and vampires everywhere, and the Federation had sent him to put a stop to the madness, by whatever means necessary.

From what Hill had been able to tell, a group of college athletes from several campuses in the New Orleans area had decided they'd chuck aside hundreds of years of careful tradition and do what they wanted. The drinking of human blood was not really necessary to vampire survival. Those who did it did so because they wanted to, and the practice was to take only from those people who knew vampires really did exist and who were willing to offer their blood. Vampires had been surviving notice—and therefore, people hunting them—for centuries that way, because they didn't kill indiscriminately and gorge on blood anymore.

Word had come up the vampire pipeline, however, that this young group, composed of kids who'd never tasted blood before, was recklessly kidnapping people and draining them, putting the rest of them in danger. "Idiots," Hill murmured.

Suddenly Pratt looked nervously over his shoulder. Hill stiffened. He'd been made. "Don't you run, you little bastard. I'll just have to chase you if you do... *Don't. Run.*"

Pratt once again looked at him with fear blanketing his dark face. Hill sighed with disgust. The little fucker was going to run.

Regretfully Hill tossed aside the coffee he'd been drinking. He didn't really like it, because of the chicory New Orleanians couldn't seem to do without, but he hated to waste money. That was four whole dollars down the drain. "The jerk is going to pay," he muttered, and like the night before, he flashed forward so quickly that there was never any sign of movement. In one second, he was fifty feet ahead of his original position, waiting for Pratt to get to him.

The younger vampire had flashed forward as well, but he wasn't quite as quick as Hill. Fear and surprise registered on Pratt's face when he saw him patiently waiting. Hill reached out and grabbed him by his shirtfront. He then lifted him off his feet and stopped him in midflash. "Surprise, my blood-drinking friend."

Immediately the younger man started to deny everything. "I didn't do anything. I'm not drinking anybody's blood. Dude, that would be so disgusting! Okay, okay, so I did it. What's the BFD? It's only blood. And besides, it helps on the courts, you know?"

Pratt was on the college tennis team, and from what Hill had heard, he was a pretty good player. As Pratt continued to ramble out sentences, ranging from denial to defiant admittance to vague musings about anything and everything, Hill said nothing. He only studied the other man's eyes. He was trying to determine if Pratt could be saved or if he had descended too far into lunacy for that option to be viable.

Pratt started to weep. His eyes pleaded with Hill. "Mister, you gotta help me. Just kill me, please. I can't take this anymore." And that's when Hill saw it. The athlete's madness was complete. Thinking that stupidity and greed had brought about a monumental waste of talent, Hill reached into his pocket while still holding him aloft with his free hand. "Open," he told Pratt.

Naked relief crossed Pratt's face as he obediently and gratefully opened his mouth. Hill emptied the contents of the vial he was carrying down the tennis player's throat. Within sixty seconds, Pratt was hanging dead from Hill's hands.

Shaking his head, Hill quickly broke his neck and slung him over his shoulder before mentally preparing to flash to Pratt's parents' home. "I'm still out four dollars, damn it."

* * *

"Now, you remember what I said, Mr. Caruthers. Just stick to the story we came up with, and everything will be all right," Hill said.

The small, pale man sitting at Hill's dining-room table had been waiting on his porch for him when he'd got home from delivering Johnson Pratt's body to his parents.

Sweating profusely, Tim Caruthers nodded nervously. "Yeah, I get it."

"I'm sorry I had to bring you into this, sir, and I wouldn't have involved you if it hadn't been absolutely necessary." Hill was still kicking himself over his screwup the night before. It was supposed to have been a simple job: locate the target, make sure of his guilt, try to convince him to give up the crime, and depending on the outcome of the last effort, take him in or take him down.

But he had been way too late to steer Barnaby Cuspus away from crime. Hill had seen that the moment he looked into the other vamp's eyes. The madness had already got him, and he was a lost cause. He'd made the killing as painless as possible. The screwup had come just after he'd completed his cleanup. The security guard had shown up and found him leaning over the corpse and preparing to pick it up and leave. Hill had run out of time.

"The Federation will remember what I did, won't they, Mr. Hilliard? I mean, 'cause I don't mind so much just so long as they know that I did it for the good of the clutch. You'll tell them, right?" He looked at Hill with hopeful brown eyes. "You'll tell them how much I helped."

"Oh, I've already told them, sir," Hill assured the older vampire. "In fact, they are so grateful to you for stepping in last night just when we needed you to that they've arranged a bonus. Give me a minute, and I'll get it for you." He smiled when the man looked up with pleased surprise.

“I didn’t expect any kind of payment for helping out the clutch, Mr. Hilliard,” Mr. Caruthers called to Hill’s retreating back. “I just looked at it as doing my duty. That’s all.”

“I know you didn’t expect anything, and that makes what you did last night all the more appreciated and deserving of compensation. Here you are.” Hill gave him a check.

“Oh my,” Caruthers said in shock when he looked down at the figure. “Twenty thousand dollars just for lying to the police? You sure I’m supposed to get this much?”

Hill smiled. “Yes, sir, I’m sure.” He patted him on the back and steered him toward the door. “Now, just remember to stick to the story we told the police,” he said as he opened the door, “and everything—” The words caught in his throat when he saw Rose, flanked by mastiffs, standing on his porch and looking as if she’d come for something that she was absolutely determined she was going to get.

Well, shit.

Not taking her eyes off Hill, Hollis raised a brow and sidestepped to her left a bit so his guest could get past her. The dogs moved with her. Hill and the man’s sudden silence was heavy with tension and much too late. She’d heard what Hill said about sticking to their story. She held Hill’s gaze as she told her dogs to stay in French. “*Restez*,” she murmured before stepping inside, her eyes daring Hill to deny what she’d heard. He didn’t. “You’ve got some explaining to do,” she said and walked past him, her body lightly brushing his. She heard him shut the door.

“I smell another man on you.”

That was not the response she’d been expecting, and Hollis whipped around to stare at him in surprise. His stance was filled with tension. “I beg your pardon.”

“I said, you smell of another man.”

The way he said it was possessive and almost accusatory. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Just what are you implying?” she asked slowly through clenched teeth.

“I’m not implying anything. I’m simply stating a fact. You smell like a man’s cologne and his own unique scent, whoever he is. It isn’t your dad, because I remember what he smells like underneath that Old Spice he likes so much. Who have you been hugging?”

Hollis continued to stare at him for a moment. *What the fuck?* She had been over to see Jared before coming over to Hill’s. And she *had* hugged him, right after she broke things off with him. After her visit with Simone, she’d thought about Jared and realized it wasn’t fair to date him while thinking about and wanting another man. Whatever ended up happening between Hill and her, she couldn’t in good conscience continue to see Jared. “How in the hell do you know that?” she asked and watched as he took his hand through his hair. “You can smell someone else’s *own unique scent* on me? Not just his cologne, but his *scent*? How is that even possible?” When he remained quiet and only stared at her as if he was scared, she said uncertainly, “Cumberland? You’re scaring me.”

Hill took her by the elbow and began to lead her into his living room. “What are you doing here? How did you know where to find me?”

Hollis dug in her heels and looked at him. “Hold up!” she demanded. “Don’t try to distract me like you did this morning. As a matter of fact, in addition to clearing up this little mystery, I still want you to tell me the secret that you were going to share all those years ago, especially since you went to such pains to steer me away from the topic and then get away from me this morning. Do all these evasive tactics of yours have something to do with the murder? Didn’t I just basically hear you admit to making up a false alibi when you were showing out that pasty little man who just left?”

“Those are a lot of things you want to know, Roe. Come into the front room, and we’ll talk.”

Hollis still resisted. “If I do, do you promise to tell me everything? And don’t call me Roe. I know it will take you some time to get used to it, but Rose is not my name.”

Hill nodded impatiently, and now there was resignation in his eyes. “Yes, I promise to clear up every question you have, even though it means you might not ever want to speak to me or see me again. And as for the last, you’ll always be Rose to me—*my* Rose.”

“Oh, *please*. Get over yourself,” she said. Rolling her eyes, she stalked into the living room.

Chapter Six

“Okay, so why don’t I start with something easy?” Hill murmured and looked at Rose, who was seated next to him on a large leather sofa. Besides a huge flat-screen television, it was the only thing in the cavernous room.

“Whatever works for you,” Hollis said.

Hill heard the nerves in her voice and wished he could reassure her, but he couldn’t—not with news of this sort. “First off, yes, I and the man who just left made up a story to give the police about why I was at the dome last night.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want to get arrested.”

Hollis froze. “Are you saying you killed that man? Barnaby Cuspus?”

Hill rubbed his hands over his face before looking at her again. It was even harder to tell her than he’d thought it would be. “Yes and no. He was already dying anyway. I just helped the process along to its inevitable conclusion.” She looked so horrified that he had to turn away.

It was clear Hollis didn’t want to believe what she was hearing. She closed her eyes in dismay and, without opening them, said in a stifled voice, “Please explain yourself.”

“All your questions can actually be cleared up when I tell you the secret that I was going to tell you on prom night.” He paused to look at her.

“Go on,” she urged when he stayed silent.

Hill leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. Claspings his hands together, he let them dangle between his knees and told Hollis his story while

staring at them. "I was born to parents who have a very special condition, as did their parents before them, and their parents before them, and so on. I'm a vampire." He turned his head to look at her, figuring she had to be showing some kind of reaction now. What he saw on her face baffled him.

She was perfectly calm.

"Well?" he demanded when she remained quiet. "Say something."

"Are you related to Dracula?" she asked. "How close has Buffy come to catching you?"

Hill studied her. She looked at him with no expression, and she sat unnaturally still. "Are you all right? You're not serious?"

Hollis rolled her eyes. "Of course I'm not serious, and neither are you! Ooh, you make me want to punch you! Will you just tell me the truth, please? Did you or did you not kill my murder victim from yesterday?"

"Yes," Hill said without equivocation, and he could tell from her dazed expression that she believed him.

Hollis swallowed hard and nodded once as if she was coming to some kind of decision. "A-all right, then. Uh...will you tell me why?"

"You're not going to believe me, but I killed him because he was a vampire, and he was one of many who, if they're not careful, are going to destroy the rest of us."

With a gusty sigh, she threw her hands up. "Oh, come on, Hill! You don't have to make up some fantastical—"

"I'm not," he said calmly. "The body you autopsied last night was that of Barnaby Cuspus, a twenty-two-year-old vampire who had, along with other young vampire athletes, the stupid and reckless idea to start draining people of their blood in the mistaken belief that it would add to their athletic prowess. It's my job to get them to stop. Drinking blood is not necessary to our survival, and it can be dangerous for this particular group of vampires."

Her look was blatantly skeptical. “Um-hmm. And you do this by killing them—”

“No, I don’t have to kill them. If they haven’t gone mad by the time I catch up to them, I can hopefully get them into therapy and save them.”

“And just how many have you killed?” she challenged.

“Well, counting Barnaby, two. I had to kill a guy named Johnson Pratt today, because by the time I’d tracked him, he had lost his mind. He knew there was no hope, and he asked me to end it for him.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll play,” she began in disgust and sat back. “Just *how* did you kill them? It was dark out last night, so that eliminates the sun as an unwitting accomplice,” she said caustically. “I didn’t see any cross burns on my victim, so that lets that out. Oh yeah, and the scent of garlic? *Totally not there.*”

“Vampires don’t die by those methods; they’re just myths. The killing of a vampire is merciful and quick.” He scowled when she snorted. He was really getting sick of the snarky skepticism. “I could do without the all the smirking and other bullshit,” he said.

She snorted again. Loudly and obnoxiously. “And *I* could do without all the lying!”

Hill decided to bring things to a head. “The bodies you found all had excess iron in the blood, but not enough to actually kill anyone, or so you think. Otherwise, you found nothing else, am I right?”

Hollis stiffened. “How did you know that? The information about the iron hasn’t been released to the media. You must have a contact.”

Hill took her hand. “No, Rose, I don’t have a contact anywhere. I know because I know how to kill a vampire who has been gorging on blood. I use pure iron. Their systems can’t take it, given that they’ve swallowed iron from someone else’s blood. It usually only takes about two ounces.”

Hollis stared at Hill, knowing her eyes were wide with fear. The emotion was flowing throughout her entire body. She was thinking about Barnaby Cuspus's blood type. He had been type O positive, but she'd also found traces of AB positive in his system. But that hadn't been the cause of death. "They didn't clump," she murmured.

When Hill looked questioningly at her, she endeavored to explain through the shock. "I found AB-positive blood in Cuspus's system, but he was O positive. Because the two types aren't compatible, that could have been the cause of death, but it wasn't. His red blood cells didn't clump together, and that's what normally happens when people are given the wrong type of blood during a transfusion. The red blood cells cluster to form clots, and those block the blood vessels and cause death."

Hill nodded his comprehension. "He must have fed right before I tracked him. That's why you found the other blood type. An incompatible blood type wouldn't kill a vampire, though. It wouldn't bother him; it's all just blood. It's the iron that killed him. I killed him."

She believed him. Dear God, she really did believe him, but her brain still resisted. "Let me see your fangs."

Hill frowned. "I'm not a fucking sideshow act, Rose—"

Hollis waved her hand curtly and shook her head, mutely telling him to stop. "Just show them to me!"

He sighed in resignation. Baring his teeth, he slowly let his fangs descend.

Hollis felt as if she were dreaming. "So, you really are a vampire." It was a statement, said as calmly as she could say it.

Hill nodded cautiously. "Yes, I really am a vampire," he confirmed.

"Just to clarify, you mean vampire as in 'I want to suck your blood' vampire?" she asked in a deepened voice with a Romanian accent.

Hill's lips twitched. "Yes, that kind of vampire, but I told you we don't need blood to survive." When she said nothing else, he said, "You know Bela Lugosi never actually said that in the movie *Dracula*. People always think that, but it was used in the spoof movie *Ed Wood*."

"Uh-huh," Hollis said slowly...dazedly.

"Ummm, I should go," she said and rose from the sofa.

Hill didn't try to stop her; he only nodded as he rose as well. "When can I see you again?"

"I don't know," Hollis said candidly.

He walked her to the door. "It's dark out," he said as he opened it. "Did you drive?"

"No, I walked," she said distractedly as she pushed open the screen door and walked onto the porch. "But I'll be safe enough. I've got the boys. Come, Smile. Come, Tear," she said and paused like a startled deer when she remembered what the names would mean to Hill. She looked up into his face. He looked sad before surprise took over.

Hollis gave him a wan smile, and standing on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek to say good-bye.

Hill watched her go. He was still worried, but not as much as he'd been less than a minute before. She'd terrified him when she'd said she didn't know when she'd see him again, but when he heard the names of her dogs, he took heart. She'd be back. She'd named the dogs for his favorite poem, "A Tear and a Smile" by Kahlil Gibran, a writer she'd turned him on to when they'd first started dating fourteen years before. She'd given him *The Prophet* by the same author, and from then on, he'd read his work voraciously. In fact, sometimes he and Hollis had taken turns reading Gibran's work to each other. Hill turned to go back inside, a happy whistle on his lips for the first time in days as he thought about those long-ago readings. Oh

yes, he thought, I think she'll be back in my arms soon. Please, God, make it happen.

Chapter Seven

Lost in thought, Hollis walked home on automatic pilot. Though she was shocked to learn Hill was a vampire, she'd been born and raised in a city rich in paranormal lore, so it was not beyond her realm of belief. That wasn't her main concern. No, her biggest problem with everything she'd learned tonight was that Hill was a murderer.

Contrary to what people might believe about her because of the profession she'd chosen, life was precious to her and not to be carelessly thrown away or taken. Hill had admitted to having taken two lives already, and that was just in New Orleans. She had no idea if he'd ever had to chase down rogue vampires before and kill them. One of the dogs whined as they approached Bourbon Street, and absently she reached down to reassure him with a couple of deep strokes.

The April night was muggy and stifling as usual for New Orleans, but still a slight breeze that seemed out of place shuffled some loose hair on her nape. Hollis sighed—*close, but not enough*. That's what she felt her relationship with Hill was like: they were close to something wonderful, but they couldn't quite get there. First, she'd had to disappear; then she couldn't find him, and now there was this.

She would love to start a new relationship with Hill and see where it could go. She was sure it would take them to wonderful heights. Though now there were only rare glimpses of the boy she'd once known and loved, she thought the core was still there, and that was what she'd fallen in love with in the first place. His pull on her back then had been instantaneous and powerful. She'd almost felt helpless against it. She smiled now as she remembered how she'd made him feel just as helpless.

She wanted those feelings again with Hill, if only for a little while. She knew she couldn't go back, and she didn't want to—not really. What she wanted was to again feel that deep, abiding love they'd once shared. She hadn't felt anything like it since and had despaired of never feeling it again. But now Hill was back, and though she hadn't realized it until just that moment, a small kernel of hope had burrowed inside her the second she'd seen him.

She sighed once more. From the way Hill had kissed her the night before and the possessiveness she saw in his eyes every time he looked at her, she knew he wouldn't be averse to trying again either. But as much as she wanted to, she simply could not picture herself with someone who took the lives of others, no matter what the reason.

As she continued her walk home, Hollis began to cry. Silently, she cried for the love they'd had and for what might have been, not knowing until that moment how lonely she'd been.

* * *

Hill snapped his head up quickly and sniffed the air. His living-room window was open, and he could swear the sultry, stingy breezes were sending him snatches of the scent of his woman. Sure of it, he stood and left the dining room, where he'd been working, to walk into the living room. Wanting the full effect, he detoured through the foyer to go out the front door.

He looked in the direction of the scent and saw her. She was three blocks away, walking gracefully and single-mindedly between her two protectors. He saw she'd changed her clothes and smelled that she'd had a recent shower. The long white peasant skirt flowed loosely around and between her legs as she walked, and teased out the scent of woman and perfume. The white off-the-shoulder blouse displayed creamy brown shoulders in perfect contrast to the outfit—or like the policewoman had said, “ensemble.” He would have preferred to see her hair down and around her shoulders, but knew from experience she hated what the humidity

did to it. A smile of anticipation split his face as he thought of how much he'd enjoy loosing it from the single white ribbon holding it in place high off her neck.

He watched and waited. The few people she encountered on the street stayed clear of her and the two brutes she called pets. Whether they'd either heard about her and her habit of walking everywhere with her dogs or they'd got used to seeing her with them, no one looked twice in surprise. They did look twice in admiration. He shook his head, knowing she ignored and often disdained the attention.

He made himself wait for her to get to him, his hands gripping the wood of the porch banister so tightly that he felt it begin to strain under the pressure. He wanted to be confident about the reason he thought she was here, but with Rose, he never could assume anything. She was full of surprises in her own careless way. She finally arrived, pausing at the end of the lane that led to his house.

Saying nothing, she simply looked at him. Afraid to move, he looked back. And then she was running toward him, her face a contradictory mask of fear and hope. He met her halfway and lifted her against his body when she leaped into his arms. "I couldn't stay away," she said in an emotion-filled, muffled voice from the side of his neck.

"I'm glad you didn't," he told her. For a moment, he just stood there holding her. She was plastered against him, and he simply savored holding her again. Finally he turned to carry her up the stairs and inside the house. He looked over his shoulder at Tear and Smile, who sat patiently gazing up at them, tongues lolling in the heated mugginess. Turning back toward the stairs, he snapped his fingers. "Come, boys," he commanded, and they followed them inside.

"Put me down," Hollis told him softly. They'd been in the house for a few minutes, and after he'd sent the dogs to the kitchen and locked the door, he was still holding her.

"No, I don't want to," Hill said, his nose buried in her thick hair. The silk ribbon was already out and tangled in his fingers. "It's been too long since I've gotten to do this."

Hollis flattened her hands on his shoulders and, using them as leverage, lifted until she could wrap her legs around his waist. She kissed his neck and then just breathed in his smell. When his hands went to her behind to boost her up, she snuggled in closer. "I've missed you, Hill. Take me to bed."

"Are you sure?"

She lifted her head to look into his eyes. He knew she saw nerves and uncertainty there. He also knew she would understand he was asking more than just about sex with him tonight. He saw the exact second when she decided to commit to something that was way beyond her realm of experience and play it out. "Positive," she said, and showing him she trusted him implicitly, she put her head back down on his shoulder and let him take the lead.

Saying nothing else, Hill began the climb up the stairs to his bedroom. Like the living room, it was also sparse, with only a huge bed sitting in the middle of the room.

Hill lowered her to the bed, and she started to slide back. His hand on her ankle stopped her. She looked up with a question in her eyes.

"Please, just lie back, and then don't move," he requested in a low, gravelly tone. When she did, he began to glide his hands down the sides of her body, starting at her thighs and making his way down over her skirt until he reached her ankles. Enjoying the slight tremors she was unable to suppress, he caressed the delicate bones of each ankle before removing her sandals one by one and dropping them to the floor. After taking off his boots, he got onto the bed and lay down fully on top of her so that he covered her entire body with his.

Their bodies touched everywhere, and her grateful sigh let him know she was enjoying and had missed the contact just as much as he. After a moment, he leaned up on his forearms to look down into her face, smiling when she smiled. He lowered his head to take her mouth with his, loving it when she lifted her chin and stretched her neck to give him what he wanted. He took his time to savor and learn the taste of her again, his tongue making careful, almost detailed swaths through her mouth.

For Hollis, the kiss was slow and drugging, and she fell into it with abandon, her arms sliding under his so she could grip his shoulders to hold on to him. She licked the underside of his tongue, the slick texture of it making her want more. He sucked hard on her tongue, and a moan escaped her throat, only to get swallowed up in the caverns of his mouth.

The kiss soon grew to be too much, yet not nearly enough, and she moved her legs restlessly against the covers. Her thighs widened so that his hips anchored more firmly against her, allowing her to feel more of his ever-hardening erection against her clit.

He broke from the kiss, and she looked up at him. She missed the contact immediately when he put a hand on either side of her head and lifted his chest so that he was no longer pressed so tightly against her. Her arms were dislodged from around him, and she traced the contours of his lips with her fingers. "Hill?"

He was concentrating on sucking one of her fingers, which she'd slid between his lips. "Hmm?"

From beneath her lashes, she watched half her finger disappear into the wet pinkness of his mouth and reappear over and over again, while at the same time she felt the pressure exerted travel down her body to settle in her pussy as a gentle, insistent pulling. She saw the flash of his white, even teeth as he bit down on her sensitive flesh. A half second later, she felt the gentle nip. Her breath caught, her lips parted, and her clit contracted. "I really want you to make love to me."

Hill released her finger to look into her eyes. "I want everything, Rose. I won't accept half measures. I want all of you, and I'll want you to willingly give it."

Hollis ignored his use of her fake name in favor of hearing him clarify exactly what he meant. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying my feelings for you haven't changed one iota since high school. I knew then that you belong to me, and I know it just as much now."

Though a bit taken aback by the words and the absolute certainty with which he expressed them, Hollis still found herself unable to resist lovingly tracing his familiar features with the tip of her finger—the soft, thick eyebrows, the prominent cheekbones and nose, and finally, his lips again. “Hmm. So I suppose you belong to me too.”

Hill kissed the wayward finger. “Yes.”

“Is this some vampire thing?” she asked with a smile and wrapped one arm around his neck.

“Yes.” This was said quite firmly. “But mostly, it’s *my* thing,” he told her right before he sat up and placed one knee each on either side of her legs so that she was caged in. He slid the accommodatingly stretchy blouse down her arms to expose her breasts to his hungry gaze.

Chapter Eight

She wore no bra, so his eyes were able to take in the small brown, delicate-looking globes immediately, and he made a sound of deep appreciation. The nipples began to pucker under his stare, and he looked back at Hollis, who returned his gaze with one of her own.

“Are you really all that surprised? My body always responded to you. You know that.”

“Exactly my point,” he said as he stretched his body out flat so he could lay his head on the cool skin of her chest. “Mine,” he growled. A bounty lay within an inch of his mouth, and he stuck his tongue out to wrap around the nearest nipple and suck it gently, making her back arch slightly off the bed at the sensation. Having her soft flesh in his mouth charged his senses into overdrive, and he struggled to keep his fangs from descending.

Suddenly gentleness was overrated as he glued the nipple to the roof of his mouth, plying it roughly with his tongue. Intermittently sucking and licking the turgid little morsel, he all but ignored Hollis’s squirming and moaning. His hand found her other breast, and he cupped it in his palm, fingering the nipple between his thumb and index finger without losing focus on the prize in his mouth.

Hollis lay helplessly pinned beneath him, her arms caught at her sides inside the blouse and her legs made practically immobile under his weight. Her head thrashed from side to side on the pillow. “Hill?” He bit down on her nipple, and she shrieked, “Hill! Take off the blouse! Please!”

But he ignored her, effectively keeping her at the mercy of his ministrations. He turned his head and took the other nipple in his mouth to treat it to the same

loving. Hollis reared up but immediately fell back against the pillows from the weight of his head. He began to suck harder, and he reveled in her moans and the sounds of torment coming from the back her throat.

“Rip the blouse, Hill! Just rip it off! I want to touch you.”

Hill continued to suck her, his greed a vibrant thing. Her breasts were so sensitive that she'd always gone off like a rocket at the mere touch of his fingers. He heard her pleas and felt her bucking against him, but he couldn't help himself. He wasn't going to stop until they were both satisfied. He knew she'd get more pleasure from having no control over what he did to her. Still laving at her nipple, he slid his hand down her body and underneath his own. He felt her stiffen in anticipation. The heat of her pussy radiated like the sun through her skirt, and he ground the heel of his hand hard against her just as he bit down on one nipple while pinching the other.

Hollis screamed, coming hard and fast. It was quick and just the tip of the iceberg, she knew, but it was satisfying. She felt Hill unbutton the few buttons of her blouse and slip her arms through the sleeves. Eyes closed, she chuckled low and huskily, thinking he chose to give her freedom of movement just when she didn't really need it. And then she felt his tongue on her stomach, and the laughter stuck in her throat.

Hill wrapped his arms around her waist and held her still as he continued his sensual journey over her body. He skimmed his tongue around the rim of her navel several times before deciding he'd teased her enough and letting it glide inside to press deep and repeatedly in imitation of his dick thrusting into her sheath. He looked up at her when she moaned and widened her thighs imperceptibly. Her eyes were hazy with lust, inspiring him to continue nibbling his way down the line of her body, to heaven.

When he reached her skirt, he hooked his thumbs in the waist and tugged at it, pleased when she braced her feet against the mattress and lifted her ass so he could slide it down her long legs and off, where it landed softly on the floor. He kept her panties on, the white silk bikinis drawing him irresistibly to her scent. He bent his head, took a deep breath, and simply breathed her in. He felt her jerk in response.

His mouth watering with anticipation, he used the flat of his tongue to lick her through the silk in a slow, lazy motion. When she tensed and then jerked again, he transferred his hands to her ass and lifted her to his mouth. He tongued her through her panties, slowly, over and over again, holding her tightly when she began to squirm and push against his mouth. The smell of her essence perfumed the air around his head, and soon her juices were soaking her panties and giving him a reason to suck and swallow.

When this proved not to be enough for either of them, he merely grasped the crotch of the panties between his teeth and pulled them to the side, opened his mouth, and found her clit between her pretty pussy lips as soon as her panties were out of the way. As her thighs began to shake he supported her by squeezing her butt in his hands and rotating it in big, wide circles so that he felt all of her pussy against his mouth while his tongue continued to lick slowly around her clitoris and then up and down, lapping at any spare juice.

Even as Hollis thought she wouldn't be able to bear such exquisite pleasure much longer, she used her elbows as leverage to lift her hips to meet his greedy mouth. She pushed against his mouth, wanting and needing more as the pressure built within her, demanding release. "Harder, baby. Please," she begged and felt him grip her tighter and tongue her faster. Unable to do anything but feel now, Hollis fell back on the bed, a scream breaking from her throat as wave after wave of unadulterated pleasure rushed through her body. Mindlessly, she rode the storm, welcoming it with open arms.

Hill continued to lick her until the shudders stopped. He lowered her behind to the bed and took her panties off.

“Come inside, Hill.” Her voice was soft and drowsy, but there was no mistaking the meaning or the need behind the words. As he stripped off his clothes, he watched as she turned onto her side and curled her legs into her chest. She lay there naked and vulnerable in his bed, and he wanted to devour her. His possessive streak asserted itself. He bent and stroked her skin from butt to knee, and grasping her thigh, he turned her over until she was lying flat on her back again with her legs spread open. He wanted in. Now. And just like earlier, he lowered himself on top of her until his body completely covered hers. It felt like home, like he was meant to be there. As he’d known it would.

She looped her arms around his neck and looked at him through slitted eyes. “Mmm, that feels good,” she murmured and pursed her lips for a kiss.

Hill obliged, bussing her lips before lifting his head again. His forearms rested on either side of her head, and staring intently, he watched her eyes open wide and then go opaque as he thrust into her, his dick tunneling through the wet, hot tissues of her sheath. She closed around him like a fist, and he felt her nails claw into his shoulders and her thighs lift to wrap around his hips to pull him in farther. And as he watched, her neck arched back against the pillows.

“Oh, cher, you feel so good.” Her neck arched some more, the smooth line of it tempting him almost beyond his control.

He bent his head to kiss her instead of doing what he really wanted. And because he could drink from the well, his teeth and tongue devoured her mouth, his tongue furiously thrusting in and out to match the rhythm of their bodies. She kept pace with him, her mouth moving as enthusiastically as her hips.

Hill broke from the kiss when he felt his orgasm building. He increased his pace, desperately slamming into her for completion. When she lifted her mouth, he bent and took the offering and reveled in the moment of being with her, right where

he was supposed to have been all along. He felt her tighten around him and knew she was ready to come. The knowledge hastened his orgasm, and he grabbed onto it with wild abandon, shouting her name in his release.

* * *

Hill awoke when the arm he'd been reaching out to snag Hollis with encountered nothing but cool sheets. He sat up and looked around, wondering if she was visiting the bathroom. His eyes lit on the opened balcony doors and caught a flash of white, and he rose from the bed to join her. He stood on the threshold in his boxers and watched her as she gazed into the night. She wore one of his T-shirts and nothing else, and she lay comfortably on the wooden chaise lounge, her head cushioned on a pillow. She was eating from a big bag of cheese-covered tortilla chips. Hill smiled. It was barely four in the morning, and she was eating junk food. She was the same old Rose.

He must have made some small sound, because she turned her head. "Hi," she said.

"Hi, yourself. Share," he commanded as he walked over to her.

She held out the bag. He took it but grabbed her wrist to pull her up. "I meant the lounge and the chips," he said in answer to her startled look. He sat and pulled her down next to him.

"Got it," she said and lay so her back was to his front and her head was resting on his chest.

"Do I detect a hint of chocolate-banana ice cream on your breath?" he asked playfully.

She leaned her head toward his shoulder to raise laughing eyes to his. "So what if you do? I was hungry."

Unable to resist, he stole a kiss before saying, "You know, the fresh fruit and the fixings for a nice healthy sandwich would have satisfied your hunger just as well."

"I didn't want those things," she said and went back for more chips. "I wanted salt, and I wanted sweet, and what I chose fit the bill exactly."

"How do you stay so thin eating like that?" he asked. "I mean, your body really hasn't changed all that much since high school. Of course, maybe it's filled out a little more, but it's basically the same as I remember it."

She chuckled. "Thanks, but you're biased. Anyway, I'm lucky enough to have a high metabolism, but I work at it too. I do Pilates and yoga."

They both grew quiet, looking out into the night. After a while, Hill closed the bag of chips and put it on the floor. He got comfortable again before asking, "So what's got you up in the middle of the night when you should be in bed pleasing your man?"

She smiled and turned so that she was lying half on him, her thigh hooked across his legs and her head on his chest. "Hill?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell me more about your being a vampire."

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't know. Everything, I guess."

"That's a tall order. Pick something specific."

"All right," she said after a moment of thought. "Separate the myths from the truth for me. Wooden stakes?"

"Yes," he said with humor in his voice. "If someone stuck one through my heart, I would most likely die or be seriously injured. But most people would, whether the stake was wooden or made of something else."

"So you wouldn't disintegrate into a big pile of ash?"

"No. I'd lie on the ground, writhing in pain."

"And we cavorted underneath it often enough for me to know that the sun doesn't affect you," she mused.

"Only if I don't wear enough sunblock."

She chuckled and pinched him. "Watch the sarcasm."

"I'm sorry, but the stuff people made up is just ridiculous, and it was all because we're different."

"So your walking into a church or touching a cross won't harm you?"

He sighed. "Think about it, baby. How many times did I go to Mass with you and your family? And how many times afterward did we make our way to the backseat of my Olds to make out, with you wearing that little gold cross around your neck?"

Embarrassed laughter escaped her throat. "Oh my God, I'd forgotten about that! My parents would have killed you if they'd caught us. It was bad enough we were doing all those wicked things, but doing them on the Sabbath made it even worse."

"If you ask me, the fact that it was the Sabbath made it even better, and exciting as hell too."

"Of course it did."

"What else you got?" Hill asked as he absentmindedly stroked the soft skin of her arm.

She shivered from the contact and shifted, subconsciously pressing into him, so that her breast flattened against his chest and her thigh pressed in between his legs. "What about living forever?"

"Not an option."

"Well, really, Hill," she said. "You don't sound like much of a vampire at all. You're more like a knockoff. You know, like instead of Prada, you get some awful wannabe, like Prada or something."

Shaking his head in wonderment, Hill laughed out loud. "Christ, I even missed that smart mouth of yours!"

Hollis smiled and snuggled closer.

Hill continued, “Anyway, as I was saying, I’m a vampire. I was born, not made. In fact, I don’t know of any vampires who were quote, unquote, *made*. I’ve always thought of us as just having something a little more than the rest of the human world. You know, like your lagniappe. I have superextraordinary hearing, sight, sense of smell, and strength. I can move at a rate of speed unseen by the human eye, in what we call a flash, and I’m not susceptible to most diseases, so I am more likely to die of old age, when my body and organs just break down from plain old sheer exhaustion. Some of us are lucky enough to have something even more. Like, there are some vampires who can hypnotize people with a look, and some have psychic abilities. I have just a bit of the last, but it’s not strong enough to really make much of a difference.”

She studied him for a moment. “And you obviously eat food. I’ve seen you do it, and as we speak, your pantry is stocked with enough food to feed an entire football team.”

“Yes, I need food to survive.”

“I know you said it before, but you really don’t need to suck anybody’s blood in order to live?”

“Nope, but I won’t lie to you. We vampires do like the taste of human blood. It’s in our nature, and most of us have a powerful thirst for it and will partake if given the chance.”

“Do *you* have a thirst for it?”

He winced but answered honestly, “Yes, I do.”

Hollis cleared her throat. “Uh, do you partake?”

He hesitated. “Yes.”

Chapter Nine

Hollis sat up to look at him, her eyes searching his face.

"It's not what you think. We have blood banks, at least most of us do. The clutch here doesn't. People donate their blood to the banks, and we drink it."

"What about drinking it directly from people?"

"Yes, some vampires drink directly from people who know we exist and voluntarily give it. I don't."

"Why not?" she asked and lay back down, lifting his arm and wrapping it around her.

Relieved, Hill squeezed her against him. "Because it's an intimate act, one of the most intimate a vampire can do, and it brings about a connection between the vampire and the person he fed from. And then there's the danger of bloodlust. Bloodlust is hard to control. Anger or anything that causes extreme emotion can bring it on."

"And what exactly is bloodlust?"

"It's when we feel we have to drink blood, and it usually involves sex."

"I see," Hollis said contemplatively as she traced the thin line of hair that made a path down the center of his torso. "Tell me more about these vampire athletes. You said they were already dying before you killed them."

"Yes, there are a few clutches of vampires here in the Southeast with members that are basically allergic to drinking blood. If they drink blood, they'll go mad and will eventually die. We don't know for sure how or why the allergy developed, but it's been known about since the late 1800s. Synthetic blood was developed especially

for this group, and generations have been raised on it, never having tasted real blood.

“Most vampire families are members of what is called the Federation, and every member of that family, at one time or another, works in some capacity on behalf of the Federation. This is my first stint with them. Anyway, the organization was formed to take care of vampires. It would be fair to compare us to organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or the Irish Fellowship Club or something along those lines.

“Anyway, we take care of our own. And when word got out that there was a group of vampire athletes here in the Southeast drinking from people whether they volunteered or not, the Federation thought it best that someone come down and take care of things. Not only were they feeding from unwilling victims, but we thought that some of them could be allergic to blood and not know it. As it turns out, so far, all of them have been.”

“And how did word get out?”

“Well, in Mississippi, they drained a couple of people and actually just *left* the bodies to be found by the police. Eventually we traced the start of it back to here.”

Hollis’s finger was now following the waistband of his boxers. “But you said you didn’t kill the other three that were found. If you didn’t do it, then who did?”

“Ah yes,” Hill said as the muscles of his stomach jumped beneath her light touch. “My predecessor, the idiot. He was supposed to come down, assess the situation, and determine what needed to be done. Instead he killed those boys, even if they didn’t need it. And not only that, he left the bodies to be found, which brought it to the attention of the police. Needless to say, that hotshot was recalled, and now I’m here.”

“What were his orders?”

“If he found that it wasn’t too late to save them, he was supposed to get them to the detoxification center set up in Biloxi. But if it was too late, yes, he was to kill

them with the iron, but he was also supposed to make it look like they'd died in some sort of accident."

"How?" Her finger was now making brief forays underneath the shorts, tracing the impression left behind by the band.

Hill narrowed his eyes, wondering if she was trying to drive him crazy on purpose. "For example, yesterday, after I gave him the iron, I broke Johnson Pratt's neck, and then I delivered him to his parents."

Her finger paused. "His parents?" she asked in shock. "They were in on it? They approved?"

"Yes, they were in on it. No, they did not approve, but they knew it was necessary. Johnson was already too far gone to save, and eventually, before he died, he'd have gone crazy and done something to bring unwanted attention to himself or his family and the rest of the clutch, and whatever that would be, it would likely have opened up people's eyes to the likelihood of vampires existing."

"Huh."

When she remained quiet, Hill asked, "What are you thinking?"

She shrugged and continued her tracing. "As much as I love you, I can't ignore the fact that you've killed people. It's just so hard to believe. And I'm essentially a member of law enforcement. I should be reporting you."

"I know, baby," Hill said as he ran his hand over her hair. He sighed heavily. "I won't tell you what to do, so don't worry. There's no pressure from me."

She snorted. "Of course there is!" she exclaimed and lifted her head to look at him. "The fact that I'm even *here* with you like this is pressure. I love you!"

Hill used his thumb to wipe away a tear that was sliding down her cheek. "And I love you. What do you want me to do?"

She sighed and laid her head back down. "I don't know," she said plaintively, and then thoughtfully, "I guess I want you to help me get out of this. I want you to give me a good reason *not* to turn you in."

“Well, I already told you that I only kill them when they’ve gone mad. If they’re not stopped, the rest of us—not just the vampire community, but everyone—will be in danger. I also told you that if it were found out that we exist, then people would start hunting us again. What I didn’t say was that we’d fight back. What else could we do? I don’t like killing them, baby, and will do everything I can to make sure I don’t have to.”

Hollis nodded and wiped away more tears. “All right,” she said with another nod and absentmindedly went back to trailing her fingers down his thigh. “How many more of these rebel vampires have you got to catch?”

“Just two,” he said between clenched teeth. She now rested her hand on his thigh, but that was only after she’d caressed it a few times. “One’s the ringleader, and the Federation’s assured me that he’s pretty much taken care of. But the other one is missing. The little bastard seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth, but I’ll find him. You’ve probably heard of him. He’s a quarterback. The name’s Jackson Dumier.”

Hollis froze, tension filled her body, and her nails dug into his thigh.

Hill flinched. “Hey! Ow! Cut that shit out!”

She realized what she’d been doing and moved her hand away, briefly and absentmindedly smoothing the hurt before saying, “I tell you what, Cumberland Hilliard, you better save Jackson Dumier, if you know what’s good for you.” Her calm voice was in complete contrast to her words.

It made Hill pause in the act of rubbing away the sting on his thigh himself. “Why?”

“Why? That boy’s just about our only chance of getting to the SEC Championship; that’s why! You’d better not hurt one hair on his blood-drinking head, much more kill the boy.”

“Our?” Hill said in confusion. “You went to Tulane! It’s not even in the SEC!”

“When I say our Cumberland,” she explained patiently, “I’m speaking of the state of Louisiana. If Dumier gets to the championship, every Louisianan from here

to Shreveport will be celebrating. You oughta know the feeling; it would be the same way in Mississippi if one of your own was going.”

Hill sighed because she was right. “Well, just what is it you want me to do, sweetheart?”

Mollified, she settled back down against him. “Why, I want you to do what any self-respecting lover of football would do. I want you to take care of him. You’re from the South, Hill,” she said persuasively. “Do your duty—save him.”

Her hand had gone back to caressing his thigh, moving ever closer to the rim of the leg of his shorts. He picked up that hand, brought it to his mouth, and kissed the palm. “I’ll take care of him, if you’ll take care of me right now,” he said and grabbed her behind her knee and pulled until she was in his lap, straddling him. He slipped his hands under the T-shirt to grip her naked behind and lift her.

Hollis felt the swollen head of his dick at her opening and took him inside, inch by inch. As her sheath stretched to the point of pain to accommodate him, she let herself fall against him. She moaned into his neck, feeling absolutely primal and wanton as they coupled under the cover of darkness. Her hands went to the bottom of her borrowed T-shirt, and she lifted it up, baring her breasts and then pressing her naked flesh to his bare chest.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and lay against him again, while his big hands moved her hips sensuously in tandem with the rise and fall of his. “Don’t stop, Hill,” she begged in a whisper when a particularly forceful thrust almost sent her flying off his lap.

“You know it will be light out here soon,” he whispered in her hair.

“Hmm,” she confirmed and ground her pussy against him when she felt his fingers press deep into her ass. “And you’re fucking me outside where everyone could see if they just happened to glance over at the right time. Isn’t it romantic?”

“Let’s hope we don’t get caught.”

She chuckled huskily. "If someone is watching, I hope they're enjoying themselves as much as I am."

After a few more moments, there were no more words, only sighs and deep groans as the urge to mate took them over completely. Hollis buried her mouth in the notch under his chin to muffle her scream as she came hard, her body shaking in the aftermath. But soon Hill roughly lifted her chin and planted his mouth on hers so she could catch his shout of satisfaction as he reached his own driving climax.

Utterly relaxed and feeling as if she couldn't move if the house were on fire, Hollis opened her eyes to slits. In the burgeoning light of dawn and through the slats of the balcony fence, she saw a shocked pair of green eyes staring into hers. Quickly, she turned her head. "Oh my God, Hill," she whispered urgently, trying to stifle the insane urge to giggle. "Someone *is* watching us." Hurriedly, she began to pull at the T-shirt so that it offered her a modicum of coverage.

Hill, who was beginning to stiffen inside her again, barely seemed to understand her. "What?" he asked slowly, as if drugged.

"I said," Hollis stressed between helpless giggles, "one of your neighbors is watching us! No! Don't look," she said when he started to turn his head. "We have to get inside. Quickly!" And knees weak from satiation and laughter, she scrambled from his lap and ran on shaking legs back into the house.

She heard what sounded like Hill tripping and falling in his haste, and covered her mouth with her hand.

"Goddamn it!"

His shout and subsequent entrance with a scowl on his face caused her to fall back onto the bed with her arms holding her aching stomach.

Chapter Ten

“Aw, come on, Hill. It will just be this one time. I promise,” Hollis said that morning as they stood together in his kitchen. They’d just finished breakfast and were at the sink, rinsing their dishes before leaving for her house so she could get ready for work. He stood stiffly by her side.

“I’m not some trick pony, Roe, here to perform for your entertainment.”

Hollis suppressed a smile as she looked at him. He reminded her of a little boy who didn’t want to go to school. Every line of his body screamed his rejection of the idea. “Come on, baby,” she pleaded softly as she reached up and smoothed hair back from his face. “I just want to see it once, and I’ll never ask it of you again. And besides, I’m letting you call me Rose and I’m not complaining.”

He snorted. “The two things are hardly the same, and besides, it was your idea that I continue to call you that.”

She laughed. “That’s only because I knew you wouldn’t stop, so I figured I might as well let you and make like it was my own idea. Hell, you’ve only called me that a couple hundred times over the past few days, and I realized I might never hear ‘Hollis’ pass through those gorgeous lips of yours. And besides,” she said with a shrug, “I like it. I think it’s kinda cute that you can’t get the name out of your head.”

His lips twitched, and he looked down into her eyes. She playfully batted her lashes at him, and with a sigh, he gave in. “All right, but just this one time.”

“Just this once,” she promised and stood on her toes to press a kiss to his lips while she took his car keys from his hand.

Her smile of anticipation was so bright that it worried him, and he had to keep himself from snatching his keys back as she walked away. “Uh, Rose...”

She turned back to him with a questioning look, and then comprehension dawned. “Don’t worry. I won’t damage your precious BMW. The boys and I will be real careful, won’t we, Tear and Smile?”

The dogs, who had been waiting patiently near the back door, barked happily when they heard their names.

Hill grinned. “Where’d you get them from, anyway?”

“Oh, I’ve had them since they were newborns. Daddy gave them to me. He knows how much I like to walk the city, and he was worried about my safety, so he bought them for me.”

“How old are they?”

“They’re just three years old. They’re still pups, aren’t you, babies?” she crooned in an especially sweet voice to the dogs as she looked down at them. They responded with wagging tails and excited barks that boomed throughout the kitchen. “Yes,” she cooed and reached out to rub each dog’s heavy muzzle. “You’re my babies, aren’t you? Yes, you are. Yes, you are.”

“Your babies weigh more than you do, and if you keep playing with them, you’ll be late for work,” Hill told her as he took her elbow and led her out the door. He snapped his fingers, and the dogs followed them out.

“I know I spoil them terribly,” she admitted and waited while he locked the door. “But I just can’t help it.”

Hill walked with her to the car and watched as she opened the back door for the dogs. She whistled softly, and they obediently climbed in. “Now remember, the boys and I get a head start,” she said to Hill as she got into the car.

Hill winced, still unable to believe he’d agreed to this, but he nodded. “Yes, I remember. I’ll give you a five-block head start before I flash. You’re sure that’s all you want?”

"There are only eight blocks between here and my house. I'm sure." Hollis started the car. "Great. On your mark... Get set... Go!"

* * *

"Okay, so I'll be back in town by the time you get off work this evening, and I'll swing by and pick you up. Agreed?" Hill asked as he drove Hollis to work. He pulled over to the curb in front of the medical examiner's office. Her only response was a soft grunt of agreement, and Hill hid a smile. She was slightly perturbed that he'd beat her to her house. She'd always been competitive. "I did give you those extra blocks, you know," he said, and watched her snap her head around to look at him.

She smiled sheepishly. "Yes, I know. You'd never cheat. I'm sorry I've been acting like a sore loser." She leaned over the console to kiss his lips. "Forgive me?"

"Of course."

"I do have a question, though. Why didn't you just flash or whatever from the dome the other day? Couldn't you have got away?"

Hill's smile was full of chagrin. "Okay, you have to remember that this is my first time working for the Federation. I've never had to track rogue vamps before, and I hardly ever flash, so I sort of panicked. That security guard was right on my ass, and I didn't think I could get the body *and* flash away. Of course I could have, but that one second of uncertainty got me caught."

"Well, I'm not sorry that you got caught," she said and kissed him again. "You're going to Biloxi today, right?" she asked once she'd come up for air.

"Yeah. I have three appointments, but I'll be back in time to pick you up. Want to go to a movie tonight?"

She smiled. "Oh, I'd like that, but you know what I'd like even better? I want to go out with you when you follow up on that lead you've got on Jackson Dumier."

Hill was shaking his head before she had even finished. "Oh no. I'm not taking you on a vampire hunt."

“Why not? I’ve got a gun. My mother taught me to shoot, and I’m pretty good at it.”

“No, it won’t be safe.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve just told you that I’ve got a gun.” She kissed him good-bye.

Distracted by her tongue tracing his lips before slipping into his mouth, he put his hand behind her neck to bring her closer. When they broke apart, she was smiling into his eyes. “You’ve got lipstick on your lips,” she whispered and wiped at it gently, but then ruined her efforts by kissing him again. “I’ll see you later, cher, and don’t worry. I’ll dress appropriately for our search. I’ve got the cutest new pair of black capris. They’ll be perfect.”

“No,” he said with finality.

* * *

“Did you have to wear those pants?” he muttered in disgust later that night. “They fit you like a second skin.”

She squeezed his hand. “They do not. Stop exaggerating.” They were walking through the quad on the campus of South East Polytechnic, and just as she’d promised, she was wearing her new capris. She’d paired them with a black sleeveless blouse printed with tiny silver polka dots.

Hill had taken one look at her when she’d come out of the room after dressing, rolled his eyes, muttered that they weren’t going to “a fucking fashion show,” grabbed his keys, and hurried her out the door. She’d grinned and gladly allowed herself to be rushed.

“You said Jackson Dumier has a vampire friend who attends this school, and this friend is willing to meet with you?”

Uncomfortably aware of the stares they were getting from the few people who were out and about, Hill kept his senses alert and shushed her. “Keep your voice down, but yes, his friend, a guy he grew up with, is supposed to meet me.”

“Us,” she reminded him. “How’d you find out about this friend?”

“Word went out in the community that I was looking for Jack, and his friend’s parents convinced the kid to talk to me.”

“And we’re supposed to meet him outside of the student center, right?”

“Exactly.” Hill stopped suddenly and pulled her to his side. “Looks like he kept his word,” he said under his breath as he stared at a young man who was nervously pacing back and forth in front of a round building with dark windows. As he watched, he noticed a shadow creeping up behind the young vampire. “Watch out, Connor,” he yelled and, keeping a firm grip on Hollis’s hand, flashed across the twenty feet separating him from the boy.

“Whoa!” Hollis whispered to no one in particular. “That was...that was...exhilarating! Almost empowering!”

Hill studied her briefly to make sure she was all right before turning to Connor. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Connor, who had turned and ducked just in time, cast frightened hazel eyes on Hill. “He had a knife!”

“Who, Connor? Who had a knife?” Hill asked. “Was it Jackson?”

“No, no, it wasn’t Jackson. I didn’t recognize him.”

Hill studied Connor’s eyes carefully, grunting in satisfaction when he saw nothing but nerves. “You’re not in the same group that Jackson joined, are you?”

Connor’s lip curled in a snarl. “Dude, I’m on a full-ride academic scholarship at Polytechnic. I don’t *do* athletics.”

“So I’ll take that as a no, then.” Hill looked at Hollis, who had leaned her head on his shoulder and had a loopy smile on her face.

“Baby, my feet didn’t even touch the ground, yet here I am, standing next to you. That was awesome!”

Hill grinned. “You liked it, huh?”

“Oh yes, though I feel just a bit woozy from it.”

Connor had begun to stare at Hollis. His mouth fell open when recognition hit. “Dude! Are you La Belle Dangereuse? Oh my God!”

Hill watched Hollis’s nose wrinkle in distaste and some of the animation leave her face, to be replaced by resignation.

“Yes,” she said reluctantly. “I’ve been called that before.”

“Then you are her!” Connor said with delight. “Dude, I love your work, man. I’ve studied almost all of your cases.”

“Thank you.”

Hill decided it was time to get things moving. “Listen, you two. I’m going after the vamp who just tried to kill Connor. I want you to look out for each other until I get back.”

“Dude! You’re trusting me to watch out for La Belle? That is sooo cool, man!”

Hollis folded her arms across her chest. “I want to go with you, Hill.”

“You can’t. I’m going to have to flash to catch up with him, and you’ll slow me down. And besides, I won’t be able to focus on my job because I’ll be worrying about you if you’re there.”

“Well, all right. I’ll stay here with Connor, but if he keeps calling me that stupid name, I won’t be responsible for my actions!”

“Good girl,” he said and kissed her sulky mouth. He turned to Connor. “I’m entrusting you with the safety of my lady.” He ignored Hollis’s rude snort and her mumbled “oh, please,” and continued, “Don’t disappoint me.”

Soberly, Connor stuck out his hand. “Dude, you won’t regret it.”

Trying not to laugh, Hill shook his hand. “Uh, thanks...dude.”

Hill took off in his flash, smiling when he heard Hollis tell Connor, quite patiently, but with steel, “Don’t call me that, and we’ll get along just fine.”

He scented the other vampire within a couple of miles and smirked when he realized the guy had got cocky and taken himself out of his flash when he noticed he hadn’t been followed right away. “A rookie mistake,” Hill muttered. He knew the

flash could be exhausting, but a smart vampire who was on the run knew not to come out of it until he was safe.

This vampire was still walking along outside, and Hill was on him quickly. He tackled him from behind, the other vampire realizing a second too late that he was in trouble. Hill knew that the other vamp's fangs would descend in self-defense, and he let his descend as well. He reached down and grabbed the vampire by his shirt to slam him against the nearest wall.

He looked into the vampire's face and was shocked at what he saw. The man was at least fifty—way too old not to know better. “What the fu—” The powerful fist to his jaw knocked him senseless, and Hill found himself flying through the air and finally landing on his ass.

His surprise replaced by anger, Hill was on his feet within seconds. His movements a blur, he flashed behind the other man, wanting to catch him by surprise. He found he wasn't quick enough.

The other vampire was already facing him by the time Hill appeared, and he caught Hill by his neck and lifted him in the air. Hill watched the blood rise in his new enemy's eyes and grinned, knowing that his eyes were just as red. “Well, what do you know,” he began grimly as he peeled the man's thumb from his neck and broke it. “It looks like Dracula has come to town.” In quick succession, Hill pulled the other fingers away and broke them at the first knuckle.

The other vampire barely flinched and let his hand fall limply to his side as Hill dropped to the ground. “Rodney Du Bois, maker of champions, saver of clutches, at your service. And it's quite rude of you to mock my age.” Without warning, he used his other fist to swing at Hill's head.

Hill ducked but felt the blow glance off his head. “Aw, don't be so goddamned sensitive, grandpa,” he mocked and launched himself feet-first at Du Bois' chest. “You're too old to be causing this kind of trouble for your clutch. Someone as old as you ought to fucking know better.” He connected, and before Du Bois could rise, he followed up with a punch to the face. He heard the cracking of concrete and reached

out to grab the other man's neck, intent on breaking it. Surprise struck once again when he found himself clutching at nothing but space.

"Not this time, old boy," Du Bois said with a sly grin from a couple of feet in front of him. "I've got too much work to do yet. We vampires have defanged ourselves, so to speak, and I'm sick of it. I'm sick of hiding from humans. They should be hiding from *us*. I've decided to give us back the power."

"By killing young vampires?" Hill asked with a lifted brow and watched Du Bois take a position of defense. Realizing the other vamp was as strong as he, he reevaluated and came up with another strategy. Quickly figuring that the easiest way to defeat Du Bois was to wound his ego and get him to attack, he said snidely, "Brilliant plan, genius."

Du Bois smirked. "It's just as well I found out about their weakness. There will be no room for that kind in my new world order."

"New world order, my lily-white ass," Hill said scornfully. "Who's going to lead them? Certainly not an old fart like you."

"I can still kick your ass!"

Hill scoffed. "Bullshit. Why don't you let me give you a lift to the senior citizens' home, old boy?"

Du Bois' only response was a snarl as he rushed him.

Hill braced himself for impact and caught Du Bois in his arms and flipped him around into a bear hug. Ignoring the man's useless hand, he took him by his other arm and wrenched it up behind his back until he heard two bones snap—at the shoulder and the elbow. Hill winced when Du Bois roared with pain, but only said, "You're gonna have to give this up, Du Bois, or I'm gonna have to kill you. What's it going to be?"

Du Bois chuckled weakly through labored breathing. "You can certainly try, but this is only the beginning—"

Hill didn't wait to hear more. Releasing the broken arm, he turned Du Bois to face him, just to look into his eyes one more time to be sure. The unholy defiance and determination he saw there made him sigh regretfully before seizing Du Bois' head in his hand and ripping it from his neck.

Trying not to gag, Hill watched the headless body crumple to the ground. He looked at the grinning face he held and shook his head in disgust. "Jesus Christ, I'll be glad when this fucking assignment is over."

As he gathered the body in preparation for his flash to the nearest local Federation member, all he could think about was getting Hollis in his bed.

Chapter Eleven

Hollis lay pinned beneath Hill, glorying in his possession as he repeatedly plunged his dick into her streaming pussy. He had been unable to contain his bloodlust after his confrontation with Rodney Du Bois, and she was now the recipient of it. There had been no finesse and none of his usual wooing. There had only been a quick apology and explanation as he'd dragged her from the car, into the house, and up the stairs to his bedroom, where he'd ripped her clothes off and tossed her on the bed. He'd followed her down almost immediately, his heavy cock thrusting inside her before she could catch her breath.

She'd loved it and had come hard and long after his first plunge, her juices flowing out to coat his dick and slide underneath her ass. Her feet were braced on the bed now, and she lifted her hips to accept his thrusts, her hands gripping his ass to push him harder into her. When he lifted her up so that she straddled him while he sat on his haunches, she wrapped her arms around his neck and went willingly.

The new position was so effective, and she felt him so thoroughly that she sobbed against his mouth before biting his lip and then licking the wound. He'd been inside her for almost an hour. She'd already come twice, and still he showed no sign of stopping. No sign of slowing. Hollis thought she knew a way to relieve him of the all-consuming lust. "Hill?" She undulated against him. "I want you to feed from me."

He slowed, but by no means did he stop. "No," he growled and turned his head away from her neck, which she'd arched in offering.

"Yes. Come on, darling. You need it," she said gently as she cupped his chin and lifted his face so she could see his eyes. They were tormented. Saying nothing

else, she kissed him soothingly before biting down hard on the inside of her lip until it bled. She licked the blood, and then she kissed him again, opening her mouth wide over his and thrusting her tongue inside.

“Aw, Jesus,” he moaned hungrily, despairingly, before sucking hard on her tongue and then on her lips until every drop of blood was gone. He knew his words were barely intelligible now. “I’m sorry, but it isn’t enough, Rose.”

That was the only warning she got before she found herself flat on her stomach with him hovering over her as he lifted her leg, held it aloft, and pushed into her. His fingers tangled in her hair and pulled, forcing her neck to maximum exposure, and Hollis tensed in anticipation.

He struck—deep. She felt a sharp pain that had her eyes rolling to the back of her head and her body going completely still with unmitigated bliss. The shock of the bite began to fade, and she found herself helplessly moaning and moving in a sudden frenzy against him. Rapture filled her when he began to drink, and her clit began to throb even more forcefully with need. She felt her blood trickling down her neck and only wanted him to drink more. She tried to turn to face him, wanting to wrap herself completely around him while he possessed her in this new way. When he turned her without breaking in his feeding, she looped her legs around his waist and accepted the deep plunges of his dick gratefully. “Oh God, Hill,” she choked out, her head thrown back and digging into the mattress as her fingers clutched desperately at his waist. Ecstasy roiled through her, and the white-hot heat of it spread quickly, took over her completely, and finally shut her brain down with pleasure.

Hill continued to feed from her, the sweetness of her blood filling his mouth and flowing gloriously down his throat. Greedily, he lapped at her neck, losing himself in her taste. The perfect rightness of the act and the pure taste worked to end his temporary madness and sent him over the edge. Shouting, he began to come just as Hollis fainted.

* * *

Hill held Hollis in his arms and tried not to worry. She'd been asleep for twelve hours, and he wondered if he'd taken too much of her blood. He sighed, regretting his decision to feed from her. He knew she'd enjoyed it, but the intensity of it might have been too much. He tensed when she moaned and stretched against him. He brushed the hair from her face.

She looked at him with sleepy eyes that were barely open. "Hill," she said softly with a happiness that thrilled him to the bone and closed her eyes again. Reaching out, she put a hand behind his neck and pulled his head down for a deep kiss.

Hill kneaded the naked skin of her back and pulled her closer to greedily participate in the kiss. Her legs tangled with his, and Hill felt her slowly begin to saw one of hers between his, but needing to talk, he broke from the kiss before it could lead to anything else. "Good morning," he said.

She smiled without opening her eyes. "Mmm. G'morning."

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She still didn't open her eyes, but the smile grew bigger. "Oh yes. Will there be a scar?"

"No, there shouldn't be. I closed the wound. My saliva has a compound in it that heals wounds quickly. You'll be tired all day, though, so you'll want to stay in bed as much as possible."

She finally opened her eyes and looked at him, leaning her head back so she could do so. "Why didn't you want to feed from me?"

"I didn't want you to feel obligated to do it."

"I didn't. I wanted to, and I liked it a lot. When can we do it again?"

"Not soon. I didn't like how weak feeding from you made you, and you've slept for twelve hours."

She shrugged. "So? I'll get used to it the more you partake."

“That’s just it, sweetheart. I don’t want you to get used to it. The act can become addictive—on both sides.”

She looked at him a moment longer in silence and then put her head in the crook of his neck again. “We’ll talk about it again and decide later. So, tell me what happened with that vampire you chased last night.”

Hill grunted, knowing she thought she’d won the argument, but he didn’t take it up again. “He was a crazy older vamp with delusions of grandeur. He wanted vampires to take the power he felt we were meant to have. He wanted us out in the open.”

“Really? And he planned to make that happen by getting vampires to drink blood and eventually die?”

“Apparently he didn’t know about that particular issue.”

“Hmm. What did you do to him? I notice you keep referring to him in the past tense.”

Uncomfortable, Hill only said, “I left him with another vampire who’s a member of the Federation. She’ll take care of him. So”—he began to take her mind off the subject of killing—“would you like to finally go to the prom with me?”

She moved more fully onto his chest and rested her chin on her folded hands. Chuckling, she shook her head in confusion at him. “What?”

Hill stared and almost did a double take. Jesus, he thought. Unable to help himself, he said with wonder clear in his voice, “Christ, this has got to be the worst case of bed head I’ve ever seen.” Her hair was all over her head and sticking up and out in various places.

Hollis snorted. “Get used to it,” was all she said and laughed with him.

“Anyway,” Hill said as his chuckles wound down, “you remember what Connor said when I came back to get you last night. He said that Jackson Dumier is asking a high school senior out on her prom. He has the brilliant idea to use hypnotism to get people to let him drink.”

“Yes, I heard. He’s waited to have his first drink there because he thinks that there will be nothing so pure and fresh as blood from teenagers. Sounds stupid to me,” she said with a shrug. “I mean, the idea of *teenagers* as a group having pure blood is laughable, given the drugs available to them and statistics. But anyway, what’s it got to do with us?”

“I need to be at the prom when he gets there and before he puts his crazy plan into action. And what better way to do that than to act as a chaperone? I just have to find out if any of the New Orleans vampires have connections to get us in.”

“I have a friend on the school board who could probably get us in,” Hollis said with a glowing smile. It dimmed a bit. “If you’re really serious, that is.”

“Oh, I’m serious, all right. Rose Hollis Delacroix, I am officially inviting you out on a prom date. Do you accept?”

She only laughed. “You bet your sweet vampire ass I do!”

* * *

“Really, Hill, this limo was completely unnecessary,” Hollis said for at least the fifth time that evening as he was helping her out of said limousine. He’d waved the driver aside so he could have the honor. The way she looked, he’d make sure that he’d be the only one touching her tonight. She was wearing a strapless navy blue satin gown that gathered at the waist and fell loose to her ankles. Her hair was up in some complicated twisted fashion that he couldn’t figure out, and she wore diamond teardrop earrings with a matching necklace.

He’d surprised her when he’d shown up at her house in the limousine. He’d even got her parents and sisters to meet him there with a camera because he didn’t think it would occur to her to tell anyone she’d be attending. She’d been more than surprised—she’d been floored and somewhat embarrassed, he could tell. But ever since they’d left, she’d been acting like a teenage girl, at turns going from giddy giggles to passionate seriousness.

The white orchid corsage he’d bought her was pinned to her breast. As she swung her legs out and put her white-glove-covered hand on his arm, he felt more

like he was going to a royal ball instead of an American prom being held in the ballroom of an ordinary hotel. He'd forgotten how fancy proms could get. The teenagers dressed to the nines and streaming into the hotel around them served as a reminder of what an important social occasion this was for the average American high school senior.

"You look stunning in your tux," she told him as he escorted her inside.

"Thank you. I had a hell of a time finding one to rent on such short notice."

"You did good, grasshopper," she said teasingly. "The blue cummerbund is a nice touch as well."

He told their names to an elderly lady standing at the door to one of the ballroom's entrances. "Oh yes," she said. "We were told to expect you. Thanks for volunteering your time."

"No problem," Hill said, and they slipped inside.

The food was set up buffet-style, and they nibbled on roasted chicken and other assorted delicacies as they watched the door, waiting for Jackson to appear. After about a half hour, Hill looked at Hollis, who was watching the dancers on the dance floor. "Want to dance?" he asked her.

She turned to look at him. "Oh, but you're here to do a job. You'll be distracted if you're dancing with me."

"I'll know when he gets here," he said. He held his hand out. "May I have this dance?"

Hollis gave him her hand and let him lead her into the swarming crowd of teenagers. A slow, romantic song she did not recognize began to play, and he pulled her into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his waist and swayed to the soft beat with him. She was having the time of her life; she was getting such a kick out of the whole thing. And while she'd always carried regret that the two of them had missed their prom, it had been more because she'd stood him up, not because prom

had held huge significance for her. All she'd really cared about at the time was being in Hill's arms on the dance floor and then being in bed with him later that night.

He kissed her forehead, and she snuggled in closer. "I've also rented us a suite," he whispered in her ear.

She grinned and softly bumped his chin with her nose, mutely asking for a kiss. He obliged, gently sipping at her lips. A few catcalls erupted from the teenagers dancing in their sphere, and he broke away from the kiss. "Hey, hey, you guys. Give me a break, will ya? I just got my lady back, and so now I'm playing catch-up."

Hollis chuckled and pinched his waist. "Behave," she said, her lips moving against his neck, where she'd buried her face in embarrassment.

Hill leaned down and pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder, tonguing it in the process. She stiffened and, in a low voice, said, "*Stop it, Hill*. I told you to behave."

"I can't help it," he said. "Something about being in a place full of horny teenagers has got me riled up."

"Well, dial it back a notch, ace, before you get us kicked out of here for being bad chaperones."

"You're right," he said. "One more dance and then we'll get back to work."

"Agreed."

The evening wore on for another hour, and in that time, Hill had separated three couples who were dancing far too closely. "Hell," he muttered to Hollis. "They might as well have been naked."

She laughed. "They're horny; they can't help themselves."

A commotion coming from the front of the room had them both turning toward the sound. "Ah, so the superstar has arrived," Hollis said with a smirk as she watched the handsome Jackson pose and preen for what seemed like the hundreds of flashes suddenly going off. His date didn't seem too happy, she noticed, and she

smiled in sympathy for the sulky girl who not only was late for her prom, but who also had to stand aside while her date basked in his glory.

"I'll go get him now," Hill said.

"Don't you dare!" Hollis said forcefully, her hand gripping his arm. "That poor girl's night is already half-ruined. If you take him away now without him even dancing with her, the ruin will be complete."

Hill finally noticed the girl's face. "All right," he said on a resigned sigh. "Let's say I give them twenty minutes—" He paused when she vehemently began shaking her head no with a horrified look on her face. "Thirty? You want me to give them *forty minutes*?" he asked in disbelief when she held up four fingers. When she nodded, he said with ill temper, "All right, they've got forty damn minutes to get their groove on, and then I'm going after him."

A half hour later, Hollis watched as Jackson began to lead his date and one other girl through a door marked NO ENTRANCE.

"Uh-oh," Hollis said. Like Hill, she hadn't taken her eyes off the cocky vampire once since he'd arrived.

"Let's go," Hill said, grabbing her hand and pulling her up from the chair.

Hollis tried to keep up in her three-inch heels as he dragged her behind him. Her dress hampered her a bit as well. They went through the same door the three teenagers had gone through, and following the sound of the girls' giggles and the deep timbre of Jackson's voice, they hurried down a dank hall and around a corner, where they ended up in a boiler room.

The teens sat on a mattress, blissfully unaware of everything but Jackson and his needs, and that included Jackson himself. Jackson lay between the girls who took turns kissing him. Hill could tell from the happy but blank expressions that Jackson had already used hypnotism. "Well, shit," he said in disgust, wondering how he was going to handle the situation.

"I'll take care of the girls while you take care of Jackson," Hollis told him as she began to walk forward.

Hill had the satisfaction of seeing Jackson jump up in surprise when he noticed them coming near. Not wanting to waste any time, Hill bared his fangs. "You're in a world of trouble, boy."

Jackson tensed. "I'm not afraid of you, old man." Hunching his shoulders, he narrowed his eyes.

Hill laughed. "I'm immune to that hypnotist shit. Now settle down."

Jackson kicked out his leg in anger like a petulant child and suddenly charged at Hill. Hill was ready for him and braced his body for Jackson's slam. It barely budged him, and then he had Jackson's neck in his hand and was lifting him several feet off the floor. He heard a soft gasp and turned his head to see Hollis and the two girls staring at them with wide eyes. He grunted. At least that blank look was gone from their faces.

"Take them out of here," he told Hollis in a gravelly voice. When she rushed to do his bidding, he turned back to Jackson. "You are one monumental fuckup. Don't you know that their blood can possibly kill you? Didn't you notice that all of your friends in your little club were dying around you?"

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Jackson said and, catching Hill off guard, broke his hold, dropped to the floor, and flashed around him.

Hill grinned with pure menacing anticipation when he turned to face the other vampire. "Oh, so you want to play, do you, puppy?" When Jackson's only answer was a low, angry growl, Hill nodded. "If you think you can take me, then let's go, you stupid, goddamned wannabe bloodsucker." He motioned with his hand. "Well? What are you waitin' for?"

"Fuck you!" Jackson yelled and rushed him.

Hill caught the younger man by his shoulders, lifted him, and just for kicks, shook him until his perfect hairdo shook loose and Jackson groaned in pain. He tossed him down the hall. Before Jackson could scramble halfway up, Hill was on

him and slamming him against the wall. “Now you listen to me, you little pissant. If you’ve got a death wish, I’ll be happy to oblige. Just say the word, and it’s done. Or you can listen to me and save yourself some pain and me a dry-cleaning bill after I kick your pretty-boy ass. What’s it gonna be? You got five seconds to make your decision.”

* * *

Two minutes later, Hill walked into the ballroom with a slightly bruised but still petulant Jackson on his heels. He found Hollis at a table with Jackson’s two planned concubines. He surreptitiously searched their faces. They looked like they were okay.

Hollis saw him, and rushed over. “Hi,” she said, relief clear as a bell in her voice as she took his hand.

“Hi,” he said tiredly, and noticing the concern in her eyes, he bent down to kiss her reassuringly.

“I take it our boy Jackson had a sudden change of heart?”

“Yeah. He decided he likes living.”

* * *

Three weeks later

“And once again, ladies and gentlemen, as reported in our earlier newscast, two athletes from local universities have come forward and told the police about an alleged steroid ring. Apparently, athletes at several universities here in the Southeast had been offered a new type of steroid that leaves no trace of its use in the system but can cause the death of the user.

“Though the two athletes who went to the police claim not to have used the drug, they have linked the steroid ring to the recent string of athlete deaths in the Southeast, including here in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Mobile, Jackson, and other areas. That’s all the information we have right now, but we are told that the police

from several jurisdictions are investigating the claim. We don't know from which colleges the two reporting athletes hail, but we will share more information as it comes in."

"Which it never will," Hill crowed softly as he turned off the small television on Hollis's kitchen counter. The two reporting athletes were actually vampires who were students who had volunteered to talk to the police when the Federation had put out the word that help was needed.

Satisfied that the Federation's plan to get the police to close their cases on the vampire deaths had worked, Hill whistled happily under his breath and went back to what he'd been doing. He and Hollis had seen the story on an earlier newscast, but he hadn't been able to keep himself from watching it again. The story had made Hollis happy, and knowing that his work for the Federation was finished for now, she now had peace of mind. Hill was also thrilled to be finished with his tour of duty with the organization.

"Hill," Hollis called sweetly from the threshold of the kitchen. "Look what I found when I was making room for your stuff in the closet."

Afraid of what he'd see when he looked at her; Hill took his time storing the canned goods he'd brought. They were supposed to be working diligently to combine their households, as they'd decided to get married. She'd been trying to get him to slack off for more than an hour. The last can put away, Hill closed the cabinet door. Slowly he turned around and felt his eyes just about bug out of his head. He knew his tongue was hanging out of his mouth.

She stood there wearing the same cheerleading uniform she'd worn fourteen years before. He let his gaze travel down the length of her body, noting that her arms and legs were smooth and bare. He closed his eyes. "Oh God, you've even got the pom-poms and the bobby socks," he whispered despairingly. He heard her husky chuckle and kept his eyes closed, sure he would weaken if he looked at her again. "No, Rose. We've got work to do. I'm not stopping to make love."

"Oh no?" she challenged softly from right in front of him.

Hill swallowed hard. “No.” He knew it had come out weakly, but he was proud of the effort. And still determined to resist, he said more firmly, “We’ve got work to do.”

He felt a pom-pom brush over his dick, and a few high kicks and *rah-rah, sis-boom-bahs* later, he found himself in her bedroom, where he’d chased her after she’d got a good look at the bloodlust in his eyes, shrieked, thrown the pom-poms in his face, and run laughing from the room.

He’d caught her and, not bothering to rid her of the uniform, stripped the matching blue and gold bloomers down her legs, pushed her against one of the four posters of the bed, and unzipping his jeans, taken her forcefully from behind. They’d both come fast and explosively.

Now she was on all fours on the bed, and he was standing behind her, thrusting his dick into her and watching as if hypnotized as she ground her perfect ass against his naked loins. He felt his fangs descend and leaned over her. “You are so wrong for making me do this,” he rasped and moaned when she wiggled hard against him.

She turned her head and looked at him. Slowly, she licked his fangs, moaning hungrily as her eyes closed. “Shut up and bite me,” she teased sultrily and offered him her neck.

THE END

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Author Lisa G. Riley's work has been called “character and issue driven,” “exciting,” “passionate,” and “thought provoking.” The author of four novels and four novellas, Ms. Riley specializes in writing romantic suspense with erotic elements. She has also written paranormal pieces. She resides in Chicago where she is hard at work on her next project.

Find out more about Lisa at <http://www.lisagriley.com/> or interact with her on her blog at <http://lisagriley.wordpress.com/>.