

The book cover features a dark, moody background with a large, pale full moon in the upper left corner. In the center, a man and a woman are shown in a close embrace, their faces partially obscured by shadows. The man is in the foreground, looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. The woman is behind him, her face softly lit. The overall tone is mysterious and romantic.

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Night
Huntress

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NIGHT HUNTRESS

Yvette A. Lynn

FANTASY ROMANCE

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IMPRINT: Romance

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E-book ISBN: 1-60601-069-7

First E-book Publication: August 2008

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

www.BookStrand.com

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Prologue

I spent my days sleeping and my nights looking for unsuspecting victims. Not that I wanted to hurt them on purpose or that I tried to kill them, but I must follow where hunger leads. When it came to nightly filling my belly with the blood of an innocent, I had no choice. I had to do it, or die.

And like any other night, I traveled almost faster than the ability of the human eye to see me. I visited the beach, where the homeless spent their nights sleeping on the warm sand. When I stood at the edge, not in the sand but still on the paved road leading back to the city, I waited to overcome my fear.

On many nights, there was so much moisture in the air, and anyone knowledgeable about my kind knows, water is very painful. Even a drop can cause third-degree burns. So I stood having inched forward to the edge of the small patch of grass and gravel separating me from what can hurt me.

It never lasted for long, because the hunger, the thing that kept driving me, forced me to take the chance to reach my meal.

On this night, like any other, I looked around with a nocturnal creature's excellent vision. Even when the moon was hidden, I could see them, lying still, beneath newspapers and boxes. In some ways, they were worse off than I was. None lay near another. None enjoyed the warm embrace of someone who cared.

After I finally overcame my fear and strolled forward, I scanned each figure, sniffing the air around them. My dead body resists disease, but sickly blood doesn't taste as sweet, so I am discerning of whom I choose. In an effort to avoid waking them, my step was light, careful. They knew me on sight. Not me, but my kind. We were all pale like death, lean, with wide, lonely eyes filled with the hunger of a thousand years.

I stooped to lean over one, bracing myself against the stench of an unwashed body. I hoped that he would not fight too much. There was always guilt at what I must do, and they could understand, allow a coexistence that was amiable for us both. I did my best to protect them from harm, from those that would rob the little they had or kill them. I know, it was foolish of me to wish such a thing, but I did.

I pulled back his faded and worn shirt collar to reveal a wisp of a neck, stained with dirt. I grimaced, swallowed, and leaned in to feed, but something stopped me. A sound. To my left, a half mile down the beach, three people struggled together. That they would dare invade what I considered my domain—when I was nearly mad with hunger and jumping each time the waves crashed against the shore—angered me. How *dare* they?

I moved swiftly, almost gliding atop the grains of sand. When I drew closer, I saw a man, as tall and broad-shouldered as any I'd ever seen. I cried out when I saw another jab inward to his stomach while another held him. The man drew back and plunged again and again.

When I reached them, my hunger had made me mad. I ripped into them, beating them and tossing them like so much baggage. When I would attack, they stood and ran, yelling, "Vampire, vampire!"

I would have pursued except I heard the injured man groan, and I turned back to him. I was beyond thinking of his wound and of who he might be. I couldn't take him to a hospital to be sure his injuries would be taken care of. I must feed. It is necessary.

So I latched onto his smooth white throat, sinking my sharp fangs deep. The blood ran thick and warm, soothing to my empty stomach and my chilled body. Even as I drew from his life source, the heat spread over my arms and legs, my fingers and feet.

It was so good that I couldn't stop. I wouldn't. If I could have every drop, I would have it. He was flat on his back, his eyes closed, so I could not

see their color or see the fear that must be there. I laid myself out on top of him, pretending while I drank that he loved me, that he would want me to have all of him.

One word, in his death, is what he whispered to me, still with his eyes shut, “Why?”

I would have cried if I could, would have pleaded for his forgiveness. But my guilt didn’t allow words beyond the lump in my throat. I lifted myself from him then, fat with blood and unable to move swiftly as I did before. You may think that my sustenance makes me strong, and it does, but not when I’ve overindulged as I did tonight.

Refusing to look back at him, I moved away from the place of my greatest fear and headed back to the city, to walk among the mortals and pretend at least for a little while that I belonged among them. Just for a little while, my skin glowed with the health of my victim’s blood, and I was not so clammy, should anyone happen to come in contact with my skin.

* * * *

I don’t know who she was. I saw only the flap of black material snapping in the air because she moved so swiftly, at some points I couldn’t see her clearly at all. The men, Gunther’s boys, were tossed about like they weighed nothing. She couldn’t be human, but what was she? An alien? A robot? I know it sounds crazy, what I was thinking, but remember that at this point I’d lost a lot of blood. My head was spinning, and I felt faint every few seconds. Just breathing was an effort of torment.

“Vampire, vampire!”

I couldn’t have heard right. I shut my eyes, struggling to hold on to life until she sent for an ambulance or the police—any kind of help. It was good that she was here to help, and it had been foolish of me to think I could outsmart Gunther. I was an accountant for Pete’s sake, not some street-smart gangster. Certainly not like her.

At any moment she would help me, staunch the flow of blood from my gut. She would...I knew something was wrong when she lay fully atop me. Even in my state, I was aware of her small breasts pressing against my chest and the softness of her legs rubbing against me until I grew hard.

Then all of that was forgotten when she sank what felt like a double-edged knife into my neck. The pull I felt, the numbing like I'd been injected with paralyzing venom brought home to me all too soon what my situation was. She would kill me, without remorse.

Hating her, I whispered, "Why?"

Chapter 1

“Zach, come on. How long do you plan to live like this?” Jerry sighed, no doubt fed up with me. He was risking everything, nightly.

I faced the mirror, wiping my mouth clean with a handkerchief and then straightening my tie. “Apparently, forever. Thanks to her.”

“Her,” he repeated. “Have you found out who she is?”

“She’s a demon who preys on the weak. That’s who she is,” I affirmed for the umpteenth time. “One who I will make it my duty to destroy.”

“And after that?”

I dropped my hands to my sides and watched my friend through the reflective surface before me. Continuing as I had been for the last few weeks, pretending I was not some demon was foolish. Thanks to her, blood was on my mind at least half of my waking hours. Even after I’d eaten for the night, I judged every person I came into contact with according to how that thick red liquid would taste sliding down my throat.

Until now, I had resisted sticking my newly developed canines into anyone. That my best friend, Jerry, had full access to blood was fortunate for me. He had also knowledge of the undead—something I had been painfully ignorant of before now.

Still watching him pack his supplies he brought to me each night, I felt again guilt about risking my friend’s career and freedom should anyone find out what he was doing. For sure, I owed him everything. That first horrific night, when Jerry had cut into his own blood supply to feed me when I refused to suck his neck, would stay with me forever. I would do what I had to, to protect him.

“After that, I don’t know. Maybe I will kill myself. Walk into the sunrise.” I gave a half-hearted chuckle at my proposed dramatic finale.

Jerry wasn’t impressed, “That’s not funny. And why do you continue to look in that mirror when you don’t have a reflection?”

I shrugged, “I imagine that I can see myself. I remember my life as it was, before—”

Jerry stood and placed a hand on my shoulder. “You can’t live in bitterness forever. She’s not coming back to that beach. She knows you’re looking for her if she has any sense at all.”

“What I don’t understand is why she would turn me in the first place. Those articles you showed me of the attacks on the homeless, your own experiences at the hospital, tell me that she feeds on them, but doesn’t turn them. So why me? Why now?”

I knew Jerry didn’t have the answers I needed. We’d discussed it damn near every day since that night, and nothing helped me to understand. Nothing cooled my hatred of her or my vow to end her existence once and for all. She’d taken everything and given nothing in return but a horrid curse. She would die by my hands.

* * * *

Through the French doors, I watched him dancing with a beautiful woman. She laughed up at him with her cute, little nose, her sparkling eyes, and pursed pink mouth. Jealousy ate at me. I wanted to be held like that, in the strong arms of the man I’d killed.

It was impossible to take my gaze away from him for more than a moment. His shoulders were broader than that first night, puzzling as that was. His skin glowed with warmth. It was inconceivable that his hair, hanging down his back in a thick black ponytail, was even darker than it had been the last time I saw him. And those eyes were like a midnight sky, mysterious and full of sexual promises not directed at me.

He wanted her, maybe loved her. Tonight, he might lay with her and fulfill her sensual fantasies. Longing for it, needing it almost as much as I craved blood, I closed my eyes and dreamed it could be me.

“Please,” I begged into the night air.

Then I froze with fear. His head had turned toward me. As he saw me through the doors, his eyes, so caressing a second ago, were filled with hatred now. I moved backward, hoping it was just my imagination. The curtains were heavy, the light bright. He couldn’t see out into the dark night. *Fool!* Of course, he could. He was a vampire. Like me.

I turned and fled through the night, away from the music and dancing. I'd risked too much coming to see him. But I had wanted to understand how he could still live among them. Why hadn't his body thinned, his skin become pale from death? Yes, I could look like the living too when I'd just fed. And for a few hours, I could walk among them and not be recognized as the walking dead.

But he stayed among them, every night. I'd visited him regularly, under cover of darkness, always on the outside looking in. Careful to remain hidden, I watched him laugh while he visited his friends, attended the theater, and escorted his lady. How I hated her. Never in the near century that I lived had I wanted to kill anyone more.

No doubt there had been others I'd lusted after. I'd had lovers—few. The last had been how long ago? Forty, fifty years? I tried not to remember, but all of it—every word exchanged—was locked inside my unaging brain to torment me night after night. The last had died of natural causes. Knowing what I was, he had been faithful to stay with me. More than once he'd begged me to turn him so that we could be together forever. But I was honorable then. He would not like this life, would resent me eventually. So I refused, and now he was gone.

Motion in my peripheral vision alerted me to his presence just before he hurtled toward me, his hand connecting with my neck and slamming me against the pavement. The pressure was great. I hadn't often felt pain and didn't relish it now.

"L-let me go," I gasped.

In answer, his eyes narrowed and darkened to a storm of anger. His mouth grew straight, biting away words that I knew would be barbs set to hurt me further. I wiggled beneath him, fighting to free myself. He pressed a leg between mine to still me, but it only managed to light a fire of need within me. I fought the urge to lift my hips to meet his invasion, but he pulled back.

My eyes closed, and my lips parted. How I wanted him. When I looked again, his gaze was on my lips, then dropped to my breasts. At some point during our struggle, the strings that tied my blouse together at my cleavage had come undone. Now the swell of one breast was bare. I was not so fearful of him to miss the stiffening against my leg.

His fangs lengthened and he hissed. I thought he might kiss me, bite me, or simply rip off my clothes. I hoped for all three. But he pulled back as if I disgusted him and disappeared into the night. My bitter disappointment brought a pitiful howl to my lips.

Chapter 2

"I'm ashamed of my reaction," I lamented again to Jerry while we strolled along the city streets at midnight. "I wanted her."

Jerry shrugged. "She's a woman. You're a man, and it's been a while for you."

I shook my head. He didn't get it at all. "You don't understand, Jerry. She's a filthy vampire."

Jerry laughed without humor. "So are you, my friend. Well, vampire at least. Maybe if you had talked with her rather than running off..."

"Ah! Drop it, will you? I feel like a fool." Not fully attending to my friend's words, I was riveted upon a shadow in an alleyway just ahead. A man, tall and thin, led another out of my line of sight. I had become attuned to their activities. I knew where all the vampires were. I'd learned their names, their faces, even their hangouts. All that is, except hers. Just like Jerry said, she no longer fed at the beach. I knew she would not be alive long if she didn't replenish her blood, but where was she getting it? And where did she sleep?

At the thought of her sleeping, I began to fantasize about what she would look like naked. She was thin, just like the others, but being almost as tall as me, she was curvy with a tiny waist and rounded bottom. Her incredible little breasts drove me to excitement every time I came into contact with her.

It didn't matter, I told myself. I would still kill her. I'd just have to do it without allowing our bodies to touch. The absence of sex had clouded my mind. Somehow, I had to overcome my fear of coupling with a human woman. None of the other female vampires appealed to me—except her, I admitted grudgingly.

"It's called sexual frustration, my friend," Jerry continued, reading my mind. "You need to get over your hang-ups. From what I've seen, being a

vampire has its upside. Your sexual stamina is increased. Your anatomy,” he cleared his throat, reddening, “is improved.”

I turned back to him, incredulous, “From what you’ve seen? What does that mean?”

“I...ah...”

I raised an eyebrow at him, determined to stare him down if necessary. After a moment, his eyes became glassy and he stopped walking. Self-loathing washed over me. I realized what I’d done. I snapped my fingers in front of his face and then grabbed his arms to shake him.

“Jerry!”

He blinked, and I decided to pretend I didn’t just hypnotize my friend, who’d been with me since we were prank-pulling ten year olds, twenty years ago. I nudged him and nodded toward the ice cream parlor. His grin told me he wouldn’t turn the offer down.

I loved ice cream, especially fudge ripple. While I couldn’t eat it anymore, I gained a sort of sick pleasure in watching others enjoy it. Once, days after I’d been turned, I tried it, hoping for the loved experienced of chocolate and vanilla dancing on my tongue. Instead, I thought I’d vomit the lining of my stomach. Apparently, nothing but blood could ever enter me again. And I had *her* to thank for it.

When we entered the ice cream parlor, I stopped abruptly in the doorway, taking in the small crowd so late at night. A group of noisy teenagers occupied two booths in the back. An old man sat downing a banana split, and a couple occupied another. I was sure the woman was a vampire. She sat with hungry eyes, wide and staring at each bite the man took. Concentrating my hearing, I noted her demands for him to describe the taste.

When I would have followed Jerry to the counter while he placed his order, I noticed the only additional occupant other than the night-shift workers. It was her, crouched in a booth not fifty feet from where I stood. Her luminous eyes were rapt on me, fear evident.

You should be afraid. I moved as if in my own trance to sit across from her. I knew I should have my hands around her slender white neck, but instead I just sat watching her as she watched me. For the moment, Jerry was forgotten.

“I plan to kill you,” I told her.

“Yes.”

What did that mean? “I...Why do you say that?” Clearly, I was in full possession of my faculties.

Although I wasn’t aware of her using any hypnotic powers on me, her mesmerizing grey eyes were hidden when she dropped her chin to her chest. “It means I know you will kill me and I know it’s for the best. Had I had the courage or common sense, I would have done it myself long ago. Maybe I would have walked into the sun.”

“Don’t be melodramatic.” I had not forgotten that I’d said nearly the same thing previously to Jerry. Coming from someone else, I saw it for the stupid statement it was. “Who are you? What’s your name? No one seems to have any information about you. Though there are other female vampires, you seem to have been given the name of Night Huntress. Why is that?”

I rambled. Although we hadn’t touched, my body sang with a need to feel her beneath me. Except her pale face and hands, her skin was covered in black. The somberness of it made me feel like a freak in my maroon jogging suit. Despite that, I wanted to see her naked. I wanted to taste her lips and drink her blood. What would it be like?

Faith, Faith. I had to keep my mind on my girlfriend, though I’d denied her since becoming a vampire.

“My name is Raven,” she whispered simply.

I nodded. “Of course, the short-cropped black hair, black clothes. What else would you be called?”

She smiled. It looked out of place in her pale face with her wide, lonely eyes. I don’t think she used it much before, but when she showed it to me, I was drawn to it. My desire for her increased, and I found myself wanting to make her smile more often.

I pushed back and flared my nostrils as if I smelled something bad. It was a deliberate insult to her, and she recognized it. It was clear in the flinch, the dropped gaze, and the faded smile.

Her voice was ghostly, like she’d already begun to disappear from the room though she didn’t move. “It’s a name I chose. Not my original. I wanted to forget all that I had lost. It is easier to continue that way.”

“Are you trying to make me feel sorry for you? Because I won’t. You had a choice. You took away all that I had, my life.” I dug deep for my

hatred of her. It angered me that I had to dig at all. I should not have allowed a couple of pouty vampire lips to deter me from my vengeance.

Her grey eyes widened. “A choice? You must be joking. You know by now how the hunger drives you. And losing everything? From where I sit, you have lost nothing. You, in your fancy clothes, your friends.” She indicated Jerry with a jerk of her head. “You never left the warm fold of the living. I saw you dancing with that beautiful woman, laughing.”

I sprung up, nearly splitting the table between us, to grasp her pretty throat. “Don’t you ever speak about Faith again. Ever!”

“Hey now! None of that in here!” the owner shouted.

“Zach, calm down.” Jerry grabbed my arm.

I looked around and was surprised to see that every one of the teens in the back had bared their fangs. Damn. So that’s why it was no big deal that the female vampire sat watching her lover eat. This man accepted vampires. This was a place where they weren’t shunned, at least after midnight. It was why Raven had come here, too.

Before I could decide where to wipe the floor with her for daring to mention Faith, I noted the grey of her eyes had gone pale, nearly white. It was freaky. Almost in slow motion, her hand came up to grasp my wrist. Not realizing her intent or fathoming her strength, I found myself hurtling through the door of ice cream parlor with enough speed to smash the glass. And the little she-devil was coming after me with an intent to kill in her eyes.

Chapter 3

I don't know what made me attack him. Maybe it was the fact that he wanted her and not me, that in his eyes, I was so beneath him that I needed to strike back. Anger surged within me and I tore his hand from my neck. If I couldn't have him...It was foolish. I couldn't control my passions.

I landed atop him and bit hard into his shoulder, tasting the fuzzy material of his clothes. By vampire standards, I should have been stronger, being more than a century his senior, but he was all sinewy muscle, cut to perfection. He lifted me and tossed me away, and I bounced against the hood of a car.

Unfazed, I attacked again, and our fight raged on and on. I ran, he chased. I attacked, he countered. Remembering my special abilities and hoping he would be at a disadvantage, I sprang from the ground and hovered above him, out of reach.

"How?" he demanded.

I gloated, casting him a look of disdain. "You learn as you get older. It took me a few years to master. Now, it's late. I must find my place of rest."

"No!" he shouted, angry and annoyed that I had bested him.

I didn't expect that he could do a thing about it, and since my body was on fire, I needed to find somewhere to cool down. It seemed that our fighting had only increased my desire for him. Floating higher, I turned and began flying toward the south side of the city, where there were more abandoned houses, a place to sleep until night fell again.

So distracted was I in my heartache that I didn't notice he was following me, nor did I realize I was losing altitude. While flying was effortless, it did require some part of my mind to will it. Depression seemed to turn that off, and I had to concentrate harder.

I came into reach, and he snatched me down to the ground. His arms encircling me and he yanked me against his hard body from behind. All of

the fight had gone out of me, so I didn't resist him. Instead of trying to hurt me again, he caught my chin and turned it toward him. Before I knew what was happening, he covered my mouth with his.

Sixty! It had been sixty years. I melted against him, my lips parting to give his tongue access. He grew hard against my bottom and I rubbed against it, while he stroked and kneaded my breasts. His sweet kisses trailed across my cheek and down to my neck, and he bit me.

Ecstasy had me floating and taking him with me. *Let him not stop*, I pleaded silently. But he did and I thought I would die all over again. We descended. He landed unsteadily, staring at me like I had bewitched him.

"Why should I?" he growled.

Why should he what? Make love to me? Because if he didn't, I'd explode in a million pieces or I'd be left to drift alone as I'd done for so long. Not another day. I couldn't spend another alone with absolutely no one to care about me. And like a fool, I'd become attached to him, ached to be near him. How could I feel such a thing when he hated me so?

But hate wasn't what I saw in his eyes now. "Why should I make love to you when you deserve death? How can I want you so much? I have Faith."

I took a step backward out of his arms, but he pulled me close again. I struggled with the emotions roiling inside. "You say you have F—" I hesitated to say her name for fear of setting him off again. "You have someone. I have no one. A century ago, someone invaded my home and killed my husband, my child, and turned me to what I am now. I hunted him down and killed him. That's why I'm called the Night Huntress. I traveled the world to find him. And I did."

He stared at me as if I had two heads.

"Normally, a vampire feels at least some affinity for the person who turns them. I did, but I fought against it. The pain of my loss drove me when the hunger didn't. I wanted retribution just as you do. I don't begrudge you of getting it."

And then an idea occurred to me. I couldn't imagine he would go for it. The thing was too good to imagine. With all the darkness in my life, I didn't lay hope that it could be. But I had to try.

"A vampire is different from a human in that all senses and emotions are heightened," I instructed him, while still held me close to his body, aware of his desire. "You have found, I'm sure, that your sexual appetite has

increased tenfold. And by the tension in you always, I'm guessing you're afraid to...be intimate with a human."

I dared not mention her. He remained silent, listening.

"It's not impossible. Some of them can match it, almost. Some understand your need and allow you to have several lovers. However, most vampires simply choose another vampire to mate with. The problem with that is they're stuck with that one for a life cycle."

He frowned. "Life cycle?"

I shrugged. "On average seventy years. So if it gets stale and all that..."

He nodded. "So what does that have to do with me and you?"

I bit my lip. The action caught his attention. I thought he might kiss me again, and I swayed toward him, ready to plead for it. He released me and turned away.

I felt rejected, but I forged ahead. "If you and I had sex—"

"I'd be stuck to you!"

"You don't have to sound so disgusted," I yelled back. "I meant if you intend to kill me anyway, then why not enjoy a night of sex. No one has to know." By that, I meant *her*. "And who knows, maybe you'd get it out of your system enough to do the deed."

"Why should you offer yourself to me? And even encourage me to kill you? As you said, you're older, wiser. Why not fight me and kill *me*?"

I held up hands to indicate my surrender. "I am weary of this. Living on the outskirts doesn't appeal. I remember everything, though I pretend to forget. As if changing my name would let me forget their faces, my husband and my daughter. I miss them every night I'm awake, and I dream of them every day I sleep. Until you, I refused to ever turn a human, to curse them to this eternal loneliness. And even though I did it to you, you still seem to be a part of them. I don't understand. She still stands by you, knowing what you are. Your friend loves you. My friend...drove me away...with...Never mind. I just feel it's time to end it."

He was angry again. "I will not be your suicide tool. If you want to kill yourself, walk into the day as you said. You want to curse me further, to make me live with your blood on my hands for centuries to come."

"Then make love to me and be done with it!" It was an absurd thing to yell out in the night. I would have laughed, another rusty ability since I hadn't used that in a long time either. When had I become so morbid?

Maybe on the night they died. The lightening sky caught my attention. Panic rose in my chest even while weakness stole over my limbs.

A screech of tires sounded on the street. We both turned toward it. It was his friend.

“Zach, get in here. It’s almost daylight.”

It was the love of a friend, and Zach did get into the car, though he could have moved faster than that car ever could. But not with the morning coming. We were weaker and slower. I turned toward the coming dawn, knowing it was my time to die, never having experienced him. In my present state, I would never make it to the south side.

“Come on!”

I turned to face the human. “What?”

“Get in. Wherever you live, you’ll never make it. I have a safe place for you. It’s dark.” His eyes were kind, willing me to trust him.

Zach hadn’t turned back to me. He sat slumped on the passenger side, his eyes closed. Coming to a decision, I eased inside vehicle, and we were off. Minutes later, we drew up to an old building with black windows. I stared up at it while Jerry, as he’d introduced himself to me, clicked a button to open the garage door. We drove inside, and when the door closed, all was dark.

A door at the opposite end swung in and I watched a large man come out. He opened my door and lifted me. I tried to fight against him, but was too weak. I was falling asleep. How could we be so invincible one minute and be vulnerable like kittens the next?

I was placed on a stiff bed with fresh sheets, hoping that I would wake up tomorrow night. Just seeing Zach one more time before I died would be good. Zach. I liked his name.

Chapter 4

She was nuts, thinking I'd sleep with her and then kill her. I wasn't doing either. She disgusted me and I hated her for what she did. I...Who was I kidding? I wanted her like I'd never wanted another. Raven. She was so sexy, so hot. I had dreamed of her from the first moment I set eyes on her when she attacked the men on the beach.

For as long as I could remember, I'd been attracted to a gentler woman, sweet with a touch of innocence, like Faith. Never at any time—at least I couldn't remember it happening—did I stray even in thought to the wild temptress type that was Raven, the Night Huntress.

But there was no doubt, even with the whisper of her name, I grew erect and, for the death of me, couldn't bring Faith's features to mind.

She was wrong of course. I hadn't revealed to Faith what I was. I took the coward's way out, always blaming my injuries for not being intimate with her. What woman would believe that a knife wound would keep a man from sex for months? I didn't buy it himself, let alone Faith, although, she never voiced her doubts. It just went to show how little I deserved her now, especially after I'd kissed Raven.

I closed my eyes, remembering. Her lips had been so soft, so intoxicating. Drinking her blood and pinching her nipples nearly had me releasing in my pants. How could I handle this predicament, this insatiable lust I had for the woman who'd turned me into a monster?

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed, before glancing around the simple, yet comfortably styled room. A full-canopied bed occupied much of the space, with a tall armoire on the opposite wall. A hope chest was positioned at the foot of the bed, and a couple of landscapes adorned the walls. It had been a shock to find out that Jerry actually ran a hostel for vampires in trouble or caught out away from their rest places. I'd

known the guy most of our lives, yet I had no clue about his sympathy for vampires. It disconcerted me, made me question all that I thought I knew.

My stomach growled painfully just as the door opened and a man carrying a tray stepped. It was the same burly, plain-faced human I remembered carrying Raven into the building the night before. I watched him move to flip on the light. The room had been in total darkness before. He moved to the bed and sat down the tray beside me.

I glanced down at the small pouch in the middle of it, frowning in disgust. Vampires enjoyed sinking fangs into human skin, the impact and sound of the skin breaking. I was no different, but I steadfastly resisted it still. Jerry, knowing this desire, had somehow discovered or invented a way to make a small pouch that gave that craved impression when a vamp sunk their teeth into it. This tan, thin, leather like pouch is what was lying on the tray for me. I could smell the blood that filled it and longed to eat. But Jerry knew better than to serve it like this.

With effort, I stood and moved away from the offending object. "I don't want this. Where is Jerry?"

The man looked at me in confusion but remained silent. I began to wonder if he could speak. He pointed to the pouch and then tapped his neck. My fangs extended, my stomach flopped. I licked my lips, riveted to each tap of his finger. The preference for biting the guy's neck was strong. *Oh God, help me!*

The door opened, and Raven stepped inside. She was still dressed in her customary black, yet she was even more appealing than she'd been the night before. More so. Her long swan's neck called to me when she dipped her head to the side. *Damn woman.* She knew what she was doing. She knew I hated eating from a human. She was tempting me.

"I came to see if you'd like to hunt with me. I can show you where to get it from those who won't tell." She splayed her hands, a silent question in her eyes.

"We are still enemies," I told her. "Why should I want to hunt with you or have you show me how to do anything? Because we discussed se..." I stopped, not wanting to speak in front of this man. I didn't know if he really could speak or if he'd report to someone else and it would somehow get back to Faith.

But she knew what I meant. “Yes, well. I didn’t figure you wanted to eat from that.” She indicated the pouch with her thumb. “I want the real thing. My hunger demands it. Seems the older I get, the more I hunger. Blood is on my mind so often...”

She trailed off when I still didn’t respond to her. I was not going to give in. I still mustered hate for her. I wouldn’t sleep with her or kiss her again. So what her lips were soft and full. So what her breasts were the perfect size and I fit so perfectly on her backside. I could shove myself deep in—“No!”

She jumped. “Okay. Then forget it. I don’t need a rookie with me anyway. You pretend you’re still alive, that you can eat food with the humans. Pretend that everything is the same.”

“Do you really want to provoke me?” I growled, narrowing my eyes and hoping she took it to mean I was two seconds off from biting out her throat. She paled more, if possible, and turned away.

When I thought she’d leave, defeated, she stopped at the door and then came back. I thought she was about to force herself on me. Instead, she turned toward the silent man. She placed a small hand up on his shoulder and stood on her tip toes. It was the first time I noticed that she was barefoot. Seeing her as feminine and soft, I hardened.

She stuck out her tongue and ran it along the server’s throat, a low moan escaping her mouth. Her lips parted farther so that I could see her fangs extending as if in slow motion, ready for feeding. Jealousy—whether it was for her getting to drink what I wanted or that she was about to suck from another man, I wasn’t sure—overtook me. I lunged forward, snatched her back, and shoved the man with too much force against the wall.

“Get out!” My voice was thick and heavy with the promise of death. The man’s eyes widened in terror, and he moved faster than a man his size should have been able to move. He tore open the door and fled, slamming it behind him.

After he was gone, I turned back to Raven. I was aware that the weakness and pain from hunger in my own body was reflected on her face. While I still hated her, I found I couldn’t torment her.

“You can either feed from this sack or go out to find your food, but you will not do what you intended to do just now in front of me.” I had no claims on her, but there I was commanding her. “Is that clear?”

The defiance was clear, but she didn’t voice it. “Yes, that’s clear.”

Thinking I was the one in control because of sheer strength was an underestimation of this century-old vampire. As willowy as she was, she knew how to wield a power I could only dream of. She had perfected womanly wiles, or was she a natural? Either way, I was sinking beneath the impact of those eyes of a summer storm.

She reached for the pouch and sunk her teeth into it. I heard the sound of the puncture and could have wept like a child for it. The slurping of her draining the sack had me panting. My stomach growled, twisting painfully. I licked my lips and swayed toward her. She turned seducing eyes on me while the last drops skittered down her throat. I couldn't believe my luck when she tilted back her head and offered her sweet throat to me. Hatred could not keep me from it.

Chapter 5

I was playing a dangerous game. But for the first time in so long, real joy welled inside me with every moment I spent in his presence. I know he hated me, but there was no denying he wanted me. He stared transfixed while I drank from the pouch. It wasn't just hunger bringing that look in his eyes.

A dribble of blood running down my chin brought him to me. He lapped it up, his thick tongue following its trail into my mouth. We stood kissing for a while, and then with a rough movement, he tilted my head back again.

The pinch, the numbing of the skin around the bite, sent shivers of delight racing along my veins. I gasped and whimpered with desire. He drank slowly, pulled open my jacket and fumbled for the catch on my pants. After yanking it open, he slid his hand inside my panties and found my moist folds with little effort.

By the time he slid two fingers inside me, I was practically climbing his body, wanting satisfaction. He pulled back, releasing my neck to lift me and place me on the bed. *Now, now, now!* I screamed in my mind. My satisfaction was delayed by him removing my pants, panties, jacket, and shirt, and tossing them on the floor. He stood above me, taking in my pale naked form. I had no illusions about how thin I was, probably looked like death lying there. I could have laughed at that if I weren't so scared that he wouldn't like what he saw, now that it was uncovered.

I could have saved my fear. Zach's eyes narrowed on the patch of hair between my legs. He licked his lips, and I knew right then he would bite me down there. Oh, a thrill leaped throughout my body. I parted and lifted my legs in anticipation. *Yes, do it now,* I screamed silently.

He preferred to tease me. Grasping my ankle, he snaked out his tongue and curled it against my quivering flesh, making me squirm and pull away. He would not be denied. The points of his teeth imprinted the skin just

above the curved of my foot, and he drank some more of my blood. I whined and pleaded. Finally, he had mercy and pushed two fingers again inside me. He stroked in and out, his eyes never leaving my face as he pleased me.

Not allowing himself to take too much, he pulled back. “What do you want?”

I hissed at him, rolling my eyes and bucking against his fingers. “You know what I want.”

“Tell me.”

I wanted to tell him no, to demand that he satisfy me. I had lived a stealthy existence on the outside of society for years. Yet, there were many who feared and respected me. Humans and vampires alike, knowing what and who I was, steered clear and didn’t cross me. They knew the vengeance that I wielded when I hunted my maker, decapitating and castrating him before my anger cooled. Maybe, after that, I’d cast myself into exile to atone for what I had become. Still, in that instant, there didn’t exist the will on earth to tell Zach no. I had to give him what he wanted of me.

“I-I want you to bite me.” I pointed between my legs. “Here.”

His eyes darkened dangerously, and he smiled. I wondered if at this moment, he would suck all of my blood and let me die. Maybe he, too, would cut off my head afterward. But if he did, I think I would have enjoyed it more than all the years spent with all of my previous lovers.

Arrogance filled his low laughter. He was confident that I was his. An ache began in my chest. All the loneliness returned. He didn’t care for me at all. He preferred *her*, the sweet, little innocent who was often seen draped on his arm. Hot anger rose in my chest, remembering her. In an instant, I rolled away from him and stood.

I reached for my clothes. “On second thought, I need to go.” After slipping on my shirt, I bent for my pants. I had every intention of hunting for her—Faith—and killing her. Not turning her, but ending her existence.

Before I could get dressed anymore, his fingers tangled in my hair, and he pulled me back down on the bed, pressing me face down into its softness. He climbed atop me, naked though I don’t know when he’d removed his clothes.

In my ear, he whispered, “No, we started this. We’ll finish it.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Really?” One hand slid down between us to squeeze my rear, then eased forward, and slipped inside me again.

I was panting, craving more. I arched my back and pushed against him. “Don’t tease me.”

“You like it.”

“No! I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” His desire for me was driving his anger. Every jolt of passion raging inside him, seemed to make him blame me for what his body couldn’t deny. We were sexually matched. “What will you do?” he whispered.

I couldn’t answer, for he’d shoved himself, erect and hard, inside me. I screamed at his forceful, angry thrusts. When he released my hair, I laid my head against the bed and arched back against him. If I could get every wonderful inch deep inside me, I could die a happy vampire.

Soon our bodies fell into a perfect rhythm of thrusts together and apart. Deep in our throats, we moaned in unison, our tongues curling together before hunger drove him to suck at my blood once more. The pleasure and pain was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. I wanted to stay with him the rest of the night and sleep with him inside me throughout the day. For once, I didn’t think of where my next meal would come from. I was full of Zach in so many ways.

When I reached my peak for the fifth—or was it sixth time?—we curled together on the bed. Zach spooned me, encircling me with his arms while I rested my head against his shoulder. The weakness in my body let me know that he’d drunk too much and that I still needed to feed again. But right then I didn’t care. Just a little longer in his arms, before he changed his mind.

He nuzzled my neck, planting tiny kisses along the column. My fantasy of him loving me ignited and contentment crept over me—until his phone rang.

He went stiff, and then he rolled away to sit on the side of the bed while digging for his cell. I lay flat, watching him. I shivered. Looking down at my skin, already the warm pink tone was fading. I was the living dead.

“Hey, sweetie,” he smiled into the phone.

A knife pierced my heart. I staggered off the bed and dressed quickly. Before I could hear any more of his loving conversation with her, I blew from the room, using my reserve energy to get far away from his words.

Chapter 6

“Take it. It’s okay. I won’t hurt you.” I held out the pouch, attempting to be as nonthreatening as possible. She was a new vampire and terrified of what her life would consist of from this moment on. All I wanted was her to feel safe, something she hadn’t experienced in the last seconds of her life. “You will get used to it after a while. But it’s necessary for your life.”

“No!” Defiant green eyes flashed at me, fangs distended despite her words. “I’m not drinking that disgusting stuff. You’re crazy. All of you are crazy.”

I sat the pouch on a tray before her and moved away. She’d drink it when she was ready, and like a newborn baby, she’d eventually graduate to feeding from humans. My one and only goal was to help her to accept her fate and to choose her victims wisely. I’d been doing this for years now. It was my life’s work. Jenna was not the first eighteen-year-old that I had encountered, and she wouldn’t be the last. Rogue vampires blew through Andover periodically not caring who they attacked to feed their hunger. This girl had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I busied myself with my donor records while she came to the inevitable decision. But before I could update my files on the latest human offerings, I heard the telltale pop and slurp of Jenna feeding. If only I could get Zach to conform that easily. He’d nearly gone unconscious before I could get him to drink my blood from a glass on that first night. Had he not given in, I would have force feed him. Zach and I had been friends since we were kids and I wasn’t losing him to this when it wasn’t necessary.

I moved to the locked refrigerator where I kept my experimental drugs. I hadn’t shared it yet with Zach, but he was already benefiting from my research. Content, I smiled at the unassuming black bottle. Agent X. It alone was the reason Zach was able to stay among the living. The potent mixture of amino acids and other ingredients gave his body the living glow it

needed, even when he hadn't fed for a while. When I could isolate a more necessary use for it, I'd reveal it. Not until then.

"What's that?"

I jumped at his voice behind me, still not used to my hulking friend moving almost on air. "Nothing special. What are you doing here?" I replaced the bottle and locked the door. "And where's the girl?"

"What girl?" Zach's eyes didn't meet mine.

Suspicion rose within me. "You know the girl I mean. What did you say her name was? Ah. Raven."

He shrugged. "What do I care? She ran off as soon as it was night. She didn't prefer your homemade blood bottle."

I chuckled. Leave it to Zach to insult my invention to get the heat off him. I wasn't fooled. "Is that right? Why do I have the feeling you're leaving something out?"

"Because you're nosy!" The irritation was plain on the man's face, in the drawn brows, the tight lips. "Damn it, Jerry. I screwed up."

I had to admit, I was curious. It didn't take a chemistry professor to see the elemental bond between those two. "What happened?"

Instead of speaking, Zach strode away from me toward the examining table. He pounded the sheets Jenna had vacated moments ago and then stalked the bookshelves as if he were searching out a particular text. Alternately, he raked his fingers his hair, unraveling his braid, and tugged the goatee at his chin. I waited for him to confess what was on his mind, though I could hazard a guess.

Finally, he spoke. "I had sex with her. I should have killed her, but I was too busy ramming myself inside her while I sucked her blood. I can't believe I did that."

My eyes bugged, and I twitched on my chair. I had to admit that his words drew an interesting picture that turned me on. I wondered if I'd be too obvious if I asked him to describe more of what they did together. With effort, I kept my mouth shut.

"The worse thing about it is that I still want her. I could have taken her all night long. I could have held myself inside her all day while we slept." He choked on his words. "I didn't think of Faith at all until she called me on my cell."

"And then?"

“And then I remembered how much I love her. How I long to make her my wife.” He turned back toward me, defeat clouding his features. “But how can I have the woman of my dreams if I’m lusting after this damn Night Huntress?”

“Possibly, Faith isn’t the woman of your dreams. It could be Raven. I assume she enjoyed you taking her?”

The anger flared again. “Forget her, Jerry. I’m not going to see her again. If I can’t ignore my body’s cravings long enough to put her out of my misery, then I won’t lay eyes on her again. And I will tell Faith the truth about what I am. Hopefully, she’ll love me enough to stay with me.”

I stood, gathering my things in preparation of going home. I may not be a vampire, but I did work the night shift at the hospital. The less people around, the better for my research and my activities. “That’s good about Faith, Zach. I’ve been saying for a while that you should come clean with her. But there’s one little detail you’ve forgotten.”

My friend froze in the act of walking toward the door. “What’s that?”

“You mated with her. Your body will be on fire if you don’t satisfy it with hers. It will be a whole new torment, not unlike what you feel when you refuse to feed.”

“What the hell?” Zach sped across the floor, almost floating, and grasped me by the neck to lift me a foot off the floor. “What are you telling me, Jerry? I’m stuck with her?”

I wanted to be honest with him, to tell him he could break the bond by either killing Raven or having sex with another woman, but I didn’t want him to do either. Even if Zach couldn’t see it, I could. Raven, the Night Huntress, was his perfect match. Not once in all of his devotion to the sweet innocent whom he claimed held his heart did he become so alive—even before becoming a vampire. Raven was good for him. And from the heavy loneliness I’d glimpsed in her eyes, he was good for her, too.

Chapter 7

“Hear that?” I crouched closer to the door, trying to look like I belonged, despite the fact that the lab coat I’d swiped was a size too small. The thin polyester material pulled at my biceps and pinched under my arms. The sooner I got some info the boss could use, the better. “He’s still wanting that chick he was datin’ before the...ah...change. The boss’ll want to know that. She’d be good leverage. And we need some good news after botching that job on the beach.”

Mox nodded. “Yeah, you’re right, Charles. He still sniffing around humans. Like he ain’t the living dead, sucking blood.” My partner in crime straightened. “Better get out of here. They have good hearing, too. Besides, this place is filled with blood. I wouldn’t be surprised if there weren’t others looking for their next meal in this joint.”

“Right.” I straightened. Mox was right. Most vampires that we knew of steered clear of the hospital, too much of a spotlight. But some of the newer ones didn’t know any better. They sought out places where they knew there was fresh blood. And Mox and I were sitting ducks, warm and alive. I didn’t count on being turned any time soon. I had a slight fear of the stuff, though I wasn’t admitting it to Mox...or to the boss. It was another thing he’d hold over my head.

“What are you doing?”

I stiffened. Flashing green eyes and long white fangs were suddenly threatening us. My stomach dropped, and if I thought I wouldn’t be teased the rest of my days, I’d have pissed my pants. She was beautiful with that wild red hair and tiny stature. But she could rip us apart in two shakes. I backed up, dragging Mox with me. We didn’t take our eyes off her.

“Nothin,” Mox whimpered. “We ain’t doin’ nothin’, lady.”

We got four feet between us and her, and then she let out a wail fit to wake the rest of the dead bodies out there at Kane’s Cemetery. The

vibrations tore at our eardrums and shattered the glass in a door to the left of us. Not waiting for any more confirmation of what she was capable of, Mox and I fled.

I know vampires can move faster than humans. She could have caught us before we hit the street door, but I think she must have already fed and wanted to scare us, maybe show off her new fangs. But they were vengeful creatures, angry at the world for the loss of their life. I wasn't taking chances. A long time ago, me and Mox started carrying around holy water.

When we neared the car, I squeezed my fingers around the small spray bottle in my pocket. Someone had told me that the water need not be holy, but I didn't like to leave things to chance. I didn't want to die before I found a way to free myself from the boss. When that happened, I'd leave Andover behind. Maybe I'd take Mox with me, maybe not.

Mox's breaths were coming in bursts as he eased his belly behind the steering wheel. "Oh man, that was close. I hate those things. I hate that we have to be out at night."

"It's our job. Now get going. I know it'll be daylight in a couple hours, but I don't know who hasn't eaten. I'm not taking any chances."

"Right. Gotcha."

Mox threw the car in gear, and we sped toward home. Late afternoon was soon enough to report to the boss.

* * * *

"Still sweet on her, ay, Charles?" The boss's greasy smile always made me feel ill at ease. "Good. It was unfortunate that my old accountant had to get turned into a vampire. Not easy to get close to him, with the veritable undead army his friend keeps around him. But *her*. Now that's a different story all together. Zach Lincoln will pay for double-crossing me, and he'll do it through his sweet little girlfriend."

"What you want us to do, boss."

I rolled my eyes. Mox was ever the faithful servant.

The boss slapped the rotund man on the back of the head. "Use your brain, stupid. I want you to get the girl. When the vampire comes looking for her, we'll have something for him. Maybe I'll make him watch while I do her and then kill her."

The nasty laugh he emitted grated, and I turned away heading for the door.

“Where you going, Charles?” he growled behind me.

I stopped. “To take care of business, sir.”

He called me back. Lately, I’d found it harder to hide my hatred of him. I detested everything he stood for. I believed I could run his empire a lot better and make more money doing it. Besides, I couldn’t like a person who held the life of my son in his hands. At any time, the boss could kill him in that prison up north. He just had to give the word. That held me in check, and he knew it. But I was working on it. Soon I’d have enough money from my side ventures to buy my son’s freedom. And when I did, look out. I’d get my son and leave Andover and the boss for good. Mox could come with me, be my underling.

The boss patted my shoulder, though I kept my back to him. “So how’s your son, Charles? Doin’ good? Get that care packet I sent last week?”

I cringed. Yeah, care packet. It was nothing more than a display of his power. I clenched my fists at my sides, holding my anger and hatred in check. *Soon, boss. Very soon.*

Chapter 8

“Zach, what’s wrong? Why don’t you tell me all about it?”

Faith’s musical voice was less than soothing. Normally, she was a balm to my churning emotions, but tonight, it wasn’t helping. Jerry had been right. The fire burning inside me wasn’t being denied. Four days of not seeing Raven had me feeling like someone had taken a blowtorch to my nether regions. I could barely stand, let alone enjoy Faith’s favorite pastime—dancing.

“Nothing, Faith. I am just not in the mood to dance. That’s all. I’m sorry.” I escorted her to Jerry. “Dance with Jerry, won’t you?”

She pouted. So pretty with her flushed cheeks and clear blue eyes, she was certainly different from Raven, like night and day. Faith was soft and sweet, could never hurt anyone on purpose. The Night Huntress had no qualms in putting me through a plate glass window. Still, I wanted her in my bed right now. No, I wanted her beneath me, in the middle of this dance hall while I rammed every inch—

“Hey, Zach. You okay, man?” Jerry frowned, slapping a hand on my shoulder.

I winced. “Fine. Just peachy.”

The frown dissolved into amusement as it seemed to occur to him what my problem was. Jerry had warned me days ago the extent to which I would suffer. The only consolation was that Raven was somewhere feeling the same thing. And she deserved every last pain of need for getting me into this mess. She couldn’t be satisfied with just killing me. Now she held my balls over a fire, too. *Damn it!*

While Jerry led Faith away, I had a sudden impression of being watched. I scanned the room and its occupants. No eyes turned my way. I still didn’t know why I was able to live comfortably among the living as if I belonged. I hadn’t lost muscle tone or skin color. I figured it had something

to do with Jerry's concoctions, but so far, he hadn't owned up to anything. He'd given his blood pouches to many other vampires, so I learned recently, but none of them was as "alive" as I was. I'd have to question him further on it later. The eyes were still on me.

When I perked up my hearing, I heard it. A whimper of pain, of aching. My attention was drawn immediately to the doors. Nothing. I examined each window. No figure stood outside the bright lights of the windows. Then where was it coming from?

Heading toward the hallway, I continued my stealthy search, hoping no one noticed me. More than one business associate questioned my new schedule of only showing my face at night. Not everyone believed in vampires, so it was still unthinkable that I could have joined their ranks. I'd heard that some believed I'd joined the underbelly of society, having worked for Gunther at one point. That little error in judgment had landed me on a beach with a knife to my gut. Being approached by investigators to set up a sting hadn't seemed that dangerous—at first.

It was in the hall that I noticed the sky light, more like a glass ceiling, which extended down the middle of the room from one end until the other. Whoever was atop the building could move from room to room, watching those in attendance at the Banker's Ball. Something told me that I already knew who it was.

I sprang toward the stairs leading to the second floor and then sequestered myself in the bathroom. A wiggle of the stiff window had it open. I removed my shoes, left on my socks, and then scaled the wall outside the building. Another little plus of being a vampire. Like bugs, we could cling to vertical surfaces. I was still smarting over my inability to fly. I'd been practicing every chance I got, without success.

I crawled up to the roof and found her still bent over the skylight, her back to me. The reaction of my body just at the sight of her had me gritting my teeth to keep from calling to her. I stood silently watching. She moved to different positions, searching for me. Little murmurs of pain emanated from her pursed lips, followed by strokes of her belly. Was she hungry or horny?

"What's wrong, Raven? Feeling pain?" I reminded myself that I hated her.

She jumped up and flew to me, stopping only a hairs breath from impact with my body. I almost dragged her against me. She stared up at me, black eyes wide. “I-I. Yes, I am in pain. I know this pain. It means...”

“It means you tricked me. You seduced me into becoming your lover. Now we both suffer unless...”

Guilt was obvious in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen. It’s impossible for me to stay away from you.”

I opted for lying to her. “Really? Because I was doing just fine down there with my girlfriend until I realized I was being spied on.”

It was too much. I saw how I hurt her. It was too much for me to bear. I was hurting myself at the same time. Is this what came of two vampires bonding? Who made the rules on this lifestyle? I needed a do-over.

I reached out a hand, grasped her just below her jaw, and tilted up her chin. I covered her mouth with my own, enjoying her scent, her taste. While trailing kisses down her throat to the place where her pulse used to beat, I struggled to recall the other woman’s name. And then the word *woman* wasn’t in my vocabulary. After stripping myself bare, I relieved Raven of her clothes and lifted her onto my erection.

Her cries of pleasure sent me into overdrive. I gripped her buttocks to barrow deeper inside her. “Raven.”

Her name should not have been honey on my tongue. But it was. I found her pert breasts and guided the taut nipples to my lips, suckling until I felt the build-up in my groin. On legs that hadn’t been steady all night, I stood firm enough to stroke fully inside her again and again. I smacked her left buttock, causing her to scream just as she released with me in a flurry of wonderful satisfaction. How...how had I lasted four days without this? *Beautiful, Raven. Perfect.*

It was some time before I came to my senses. I’d carried Raven all over that rooftop, laying her beneath me, snatching up her legs so I could stroke long and deep. Now, after the intense sensations began to subside, I was ashamed of my behavior. I’d abandoned Faith yet again for this murderess who didn’t deserve the time of day.

I stood and put her down, away from me. “I shouldn’t have done this again.”

“It was necessary. We had no choice. Nothing has changed.” She didn’t meet my gaze. It was obvious she knew how I still felt about her. Yet, did

she know that even while I erected the walls, her scent, her face, scaled those walls, leaving me defenseless? I didn't understand this hold. I felt like a prisoner. I wondered if she had felt the same for her maker. Had he—had he raped her? I didn't want to face such a thought. She was mine. *Damn it.* She was mine.

Chapter 9

The second time had been light years beyond the first in enjoyment. Making love with Zach was good, maybe better, than sucking blood. He was so big and so skilled. Chills rocked my body at the memory alone. I ached for more though we'd been at it for a couple of hours. When he left me naked and quivering on the roof, my desires only partially sated, I could have wept. If I still could produce tears. I knew he was returning to her. It was always the woman who came between us. I didn't understand his devotion to her. Why was her innocence so appealing?

I had lived so long, experienced so much. I could not go back and feign the level of innocence she portrayed. Some imp made me wonder if she was faking. Could a woman be sweet and unassuming as Faith appeared to be? I wanted to know for sure. I had to know. Something told me she wasn't aware that Zach was a vampire. I was curious to learn whether she knew of the existence of our kind. Maybe a closer look, even a conversation would help me to understand why the man I ached to be with, would not fully commit to me, knowing our sexual accordance.

Preferring not to confront her with the risk of Zach finding out, I waited for a more opportune time. I learned that she worked at the hospital where Jerry was employed. It didn't seem likely that she knew what he'd dipped his hands in, so I figured it was some type of coincidence or maybe that how she'd met him or Zach. Andover was a small town after all, having only one hospital and two clinics to serve its community.

When the sun was fully down, I left my abandoned house, which I'd returned to after my sexual escapades with Zach. It was a mere ten-minute flight through the shadows to arrive at the entrance before her shift started. So many worked at night here, one wondered if the entire population were not creatures of the dark.

I did not have to wait long before she arrived, escorted by Zach. Pain twisted my insides when he kissed her and handed her gently from the car. My nails dug into the legs of my pants, and I was wishing that the rough material was her skin, that I could rake it like a cat scratching its post. Knowing Zach had a keen eye and a strong sense of smell almost like a dog's, I made sure to stand upwind and to remain out of sight.

When Zach was gone, I stepped out from my hiding place and moved swiftly toward the diminutive woman dressed in a white nurse's uniform and sensible shoes. Her normally flowing red hair was pinned atop her head, though not covered with a cap. I felt the difference in us. She was sunshine. I was darkness.

Clear blue eyes focused on me just as I realized I had not prepared an excuse for accosting her on the sidewalk.

"I—I was going to..." I began.

She smiled, friendly and open. "Hello there. Did you need something?"

No excuse presented itself. I stood foolishly before her, taking in the complete absence of guile, the attentive manner, born to serve. This was the one he whirled about the dance floor at least two times a week. She would be his wife. Possibly my existence stood in the way of it. On one hand I wanted her dead. On the other, I longed for his happiness. I'd been alone for so long, only my own joy should come first. But it wasn't an easy decision.

"Oh, I see." She leaned forward and winked. "Girl trouble, huh? Come inside. We'll find a doctor to take a look."

Girl trouble? Ah yes. That. I wasn't aware of ever having that. My husband had been faithful to me. I'd married him at sixteen. He was my first love, the only man I'd been intimate with before the incident.

"Yes," I said unashamedly. "Girl trouble."

She hooked an arm through mine and led me inside. I shrunk somewhat away from her, thinking she was odd. Surely she'd heard of bad things happening at night to people around here, of the attacks from the rogue vamps passing through the area? In retrospect, it had been foolish of Zach to leave her before she'd entered the hospital. Maybe he had other things on his mind. I had an errant hope that it was me who distracted him.

"Here we are, sweetie." Her voice was singsongy as we entered a small examining room in the short hall to the right of the entrance. "I believe Dr. Daniels is on duty. Let me page him for you."

“No, wait.” I grabbed her arm with a little too much force.

Her eyes widened, and a hint of fear crept into them. Mentally, I cooled my emotions and held my strength in check. It wouldn’t due to rip off the arm of Zach’s love, especially when I hadn’t decided on whether or not to kill her.

I released her. “I’m sorry. I-I was just nervous. I’m not used to men looking at me there.”

Relief flooded her features. “Oh, of course you aren’t. Silly me.” She tapped a finger to her perfect white teeth. “Couldn’t it wait until tomorrow then, when the clinic is open? There are female doctors on duty then.”

I considered telling her I had a terrible itch that couldn’t wait until the morning, but the story was already getting out of hand. I needed to spend some time with her, get her talking. Possibly, the truth would help, or some of it.

“Truth is, I have male trouble. I’m a loner, and I did not expect to fall for a man who is not normally my type.” That was a start. She seemed like the kind of woman who would revel in the chance to offer her “wise” advice on relationships. “I do not have girlfriends, and while I was walking along in, um...dispair, I saw you and thought you looked like a person who would be willing to help me.”

I peeked up at her after having made this speech to the walls around her, knowing I had infused not one ounce of emotion in my words. I tended to speak in a monotone. It helped maintain the anger I sometimes had trouble with.

Faith was as gullible as she appeared to be. “Oh, sweetie, of course I understand. Let’s see. I can tell you all you need to know.”

By the end of an hour, I reluctantly had empathy for her. She’d confessed to feeling unsure of her own relationship with Zach, why he refused to be intimate with her or broach marriage. She felt he was hiding something, afraid to share. *Only the fact that he’s now the undead*, I told her silently.

By the end of our time together, there was only one thing I was sure of. Ms. Faith Gibson would not be able to handle her boyfriend should he share her bed. The happy little peacock was just what she appeared to be—a virgin. At *her* age. Although, I did feel sorry for her, even guilty. The ache

still present in my gut would never allow me to willingly give up my lover.
For he was indeed *all* mine.

Chapter 10

“Why have you invited me here? I don’t belong.” It irritated me that my voice shook, being unused to this company, the somewhat snooty of the living crowd. I’d been on the outskirts for so long that shadows seemed more inviting than the cold faces and colder shoulders that I was experiencing. What made me give in to Jerry’s prodding I don’t know. Perhaps it was the fact that he’d ventured out into the dark places to find me, risking his own life. I had not been happy to find him at my feeding ground. Since Zach had delayed his threats to kill me, I felt it safe to return to the beach, and Jerry had counted on it.

He took my arm. “You just got here. Give it time. They’ll warm up to you.”

I frowned. “They are already warm to me. I smell the sweetness of their life source. Maybe I didn’t get enough earlier.”

He only chuckled at my threat. “From the pink in your cheeks, I’d say you’re full. Now, while there’s time. Enjoy yourself.”

That was easier said than done. I hadn’t danced in many years either. While I had enjoyed watching Zach move gracefully about the polished surface, I didn’t feel confident that I could imitate it. And what was this party without my lover present? The moment I’d stepped through the door, I sought him, only to be disappointed.

Jerry had surmised that too. “Don’t worry. He’ll be here. I have no doubt of that.”

“Why are you reaching out to me? Your charity vampires are not enough to satisfy that heart made for service?” It was a low blow, but irritation plagued me. I didn’t have the patience for polite conversation. Another reason I should not have come.

The kind smile faltered before falling into place again. Nothing riled the man. “I always help vampires when I can. It’s what I do.”

“Why? What’s so special about us?”

He took my arm and led me reluctantly onto the dance floor. A slow song began. “Does it matter? Everyone has a lot in life. I happen to be one of the lucky ones who learn early what that is.”

I studied his face to keep from seeing the sneers around me. “I don’t believe you. No one is that good. Well, maybe no one except *her*.”

He didn’t ask me who I meant.

“And it’s unlikely that there are two such selfless souls in a small town like Andover. So, I surmise that you are nursing a broken heart.”

He flinched. I think he did. The smile remained in place. The eyes still held kindness, no dark secrets, no tormenting pain of loss. Still, I didn’t swallow his story. Maybe I had a sixth sense, though I wasn’t aware of a special ability in that area being a vampire. Other gifts yes, but not psychic ability.

I would have pondered it more while I stumbled about the floor with him, stepping often on his toes, except his whole bearing changed. It threw me off balance. The hand he’d been lightly holding at my waist, slipped around to my back. He pressed me close, our bodies now touching. A muscled leg pressed just between mine, and his expression transformed to one of passion.

“What are you doing?” I growled, battling my anger. “I won’t mate with you.”

He chuckled, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I could fling him across the room or snap his spine with no great force. “Don’t worry, beautiful. I know you won’t kill me. What would Zach say to you murdering his best friend?”

I was bewildered. I didn’t think he was fully telling me the truth when he claimed to do all from the goodness of his beating heart. But I didn’t expect this. Surely he understood what it meant for me to be mated to Zach. I had no desire at all for another male. In fact, the thought was repulsive. His leg between mine was disgusting. But what should I do short of lifting and tossing him about by his neck?

A second later, I had no need to decide. We were interrupted by a growl more threatening than my own. “Jerry, what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Jerry drew back, surprised. I was beginning to see his ploy. He'd known when Zach arrived. Relief flooded me when I realized he wasn't actually interested in me. "Oh, Zach. I-I...uh..."

The guilt seemed forced, but Zach couldn't see it. He released the delicate hand in his and marched forward, dragging Jerry some feet away. I avoided making eye contact with Faith, but she noticed me anyway.

"Oh, it's you. Raven, right? So good to see you, sweetie." Her laugh was musical and made me want to attack something. "Wow, so it's Jerry you're interested in? He's a good guy, though I've never seen him with anyone before."

I shrugged, noncommittal. It might be better to let her think I was interested in Jerry. Take the suspicion off Zach and I. Of course, it didn't help that I'd been drinking in the sight of him since he arrived. I wanted to touch him, to be closer to his side.

Tonight he wore a button down sky blue shirt with grey slacks. The shirt was open at the neck, revealing little wisps of curly black hair. I remembered tangling my fingers in it when I'd ridden—

"Well, since our boyfriends are best friends, I don't see why we can't be also." She took my arm and began to drag me across the floor. "Come, I'll introduce you to some people."

I held back, looking over my shoulder for my lover. His attention was riveted on me, and I stopped dead. No amount of tugging from Faith could move me. At his side, Jerry was talking animatedly, but he began to fade from my view, as did Faith's flowery tones. Someone panted near me, and it was a minute before I realized it was me. I needed him, right there, on that dance floor.

Music from somewhere began. His hand encircled me and pulled me close. Our bodies met, perfection, completion. My head dropped back. His mouth rested along my cheek. We danced as one. Suddenly, the steps weren't so tricky or cumbersome. I swayed in his arms in the place I belonged.

"Raven," he whispered in my ear. It was a call, a craving that echoed what was rising in my own chest. I knew from experience that my sexual drive demanded attention sometimes five or six times a week, and Zach and I were not intimate nearly enough. The consequences were that we were

both nearly out of control all of the rest of the time. It was like going days without feeding, a real risk of madness.

Another arm moved around me, yanking me back from Zach. “This is really not the time or place, my friends.”

Zach frowned. “Jerry. Damn it.”

“I think you forgot someone,” his friend returned, jerking his head somewhere behind me.

I turned to find the stricken, pale face of Faith. Oh boy. Our game was up. It was time for Zach to tell her the truth about us and to let her go. It was a huge relief. Now I didn’t have to fight against a desire to kill her. She could live, find someone new. I could have Zach all to myself.

I turned back to him, ready to tell him I’d be waiting at the safe house Jerry kept. It had been the site of one of our couplings and could be again until we decided on where to live. I didn’t figure he would like living in abandoned houses. I could get used to walking among the living much more often. And perhaps they’d come to accept me because of Zach.

The desire had frosted over. A look of revenge all too familiar had replaced the invitation to his bed I’d seen there only a moment ago. I shook my head, willing it to go away.

He dropped his hands to his sides and took a step back as if I had somehow bewitched him and he was just freed. “I didn’t choose you. I didn’t choose this life. I don’t want it. I want her.”

It would have been easier if he’d have driven a stake through my heart. The rejection in the room was palpable. To think that they would at any time accept me, was foolish. It was time that I leave, go back to what I knew. Feed when I needed to, stalk the streets to be sure my meals were safe. Nothing else. No lover, no friends, especially among the humans.

My fangs tore through my gums and extended down onto my bottom lip. They didn’t believe in vampires? We were just myths? Well, I hated them all, all those who ignored me, treated me like I had a plague.

I hissed at Faith, at Jerry, and swept around the room, threatening the others. Delicate ladies fainted, men feigned bravery, but I smelled the fear on them. After I’d made them all quiver, I floated above their heads and then swept from the room. The ache in my chest was a reminder of what dreams were made of—smoke.

Chapter 11

“You went too far, my friend.”

Jerry’s words were easy, but his expression of displeasure was clear. I didn’t need it. I was already kicking myself for handling things the way I did.

“She knew how it was,” I told him defensively. “I never lied to her. Faith is first in my life. She’s my destiny.”

“F—”

I couldn’t be sure if he’d intended to say “Faith” or “fuck.” I brushed passed him, not feeling up to sparing right then. Faith herself was looking faint, and I had to see to her. Looked like this little scene had pushed my hand. I’d have to tell her the truth about what I was. I could only hope she’d understand and agree to marry me. Then things could begin to settle down. Cravings for Raven would be a thing of the past. She’d be able to live, and I could get on with my life. Everything seemed quite simple.

“Zach, I don’t understand what just happened.” Her breaths came in short bursts. Her skin was almost as pale as a vampire’s. I slung an arm around her waist and led her from the room.

It was all I could do to keep her calm until we arrived at her home. Knowing her father was at his weekly poker match and her mother was visiting friends, I felt free to speak with her in the “white room,” the space her mother kept for special occasions. Although I’d been seeing Faith for close to six years, when she was still a senior in high school, I’d never seen anyone enter that room. Since she was still distracted by my behavior with Raven, an obvious vampire, she didn’t protest at our using it.

I pulled her gently to an overstuffed all-white divan and pushed her down into it. “Faith, sit. Let me explain about tonight.”

She nodded, her sweet eyes expectant. I paused. How could I tell her that Raven sent what blood that occupied my veins into a bubbling pool of

lava? Somehow, telling the woman I had chosen to be by my side that I lived to drink blood and part the Night Huntress's legs just didn't seem like an easy thing to say.

Like a fish, my mouth opened and closed, opened and closed. I dragged a hand through my hair, stood, and paced the room. At first I focused on the unused fireplace and then on the heavy drapes, which looked like they'd block out all sunlight, nothing helped me to get to the point.

"Whatever it is, Zach, you can tell me," she encouraged. "We've been through a lot together. Remember the time Freddy Jenkins broke your nose?" She giggled. "I still think it's odd that it straightened out after so many years."

I didn't face her or speak. I couldn't admit just yet that there were many things wrong with my body, which had improved since becoming the undead. My crooked nose was the least of the "blessings." If I were not so anxious of her reaction, I would have chuckled. Come to think of it, I wondered how she'd even handle my more intimate improvements, as Jerry had hinted at previously.

She was right though. I'd been a scrawny sixteen-year-old when I met her, having skipped a grade and being a prime target for bullies like Freddy. Only Faith had seen beyond my gangly, ugly stage. She'd befriended me, and I had loved her ever since. Now, here I was desiring another woman, a woman who made my blood sing with longing. If I were honest with myself, even before we mated, she had a hold over me with those midnight eyes, that sad countenance. I'd found I wanted to make her smile, to brush away some of the macabre outlook she seemed to hold. Even now, facing Faith, I was still unwilling to let go of my dream. Something inside me wanted to hold Raven, to taste her again. Her lips were so soft, even sweeter than Faith's. Her body...

"Zach?"

I cleared my throat and tugged at my pants to try to ease the discomfort of an erection. With my hands crossed before me to disguise it, I turned back to Faith and rushed to sit near her.

I took her hand and patted it, before looking her in the eye. "I don't want to hurt you. And I certainly don't want to lose you. But you should know that...on the night I was attacked by those two men...I...was killed."

She pulled away, a hand fluttering to her chest. “What do you mean you were killed? I wasn’t on duty that night, but surely I would have heard the report that your heart stopped beating. Although now that I think of it the medics are extremely dedicated and I’m not surprised they were able to revive you—”

“Sweetie, you’re not listening!”

“I’m sorry. I’m just trying to understand why you would say it like that. And really, I’ve been asking you for a while why no one seems to know about you coming in with a stab wound.”

“I told you Jerry treated me.”

“But he would have done so at the hospital. We have to keep records. There is no record.”

“Are you checking up on me?” I stood, getting defensive. I know I hadn’t been able to explain the events of that night to her. Nothing that made any sense anyway, but the questioning was grating on my already thin nerves. “Suffice it to say that I died, Faith. That’s the truth.”

She sighed. “And what does that mean exactly?”

I glared at her, not used to such a belligerent look in her normally gentle and accepting gaze. It threw me, made the guilt of my cheating on her even more pronounced. What made it even worse was that we’d never been intimate. How could I admit that I was with another woman, even aware that I would seek her out again tonight? The ache inside me was increasing. It made it hard to focus on our conversation.

“It means I’m a vampire,” I blurted out.

Silence fell like an anvil, muzzling me to further explanation. I waited anxiously for her response, expecting everything from call acceptance to hysterical crying. There was no telling what a gentle woman like Faith would take the news. Years ago, I had recognized her as a woman out of her time, displaying the innocence of women from a few centuries ago. If I didn’t know better, hadn’t strolled with her in the sunshine before my change, I would have thought she’d actually lived then.

Her soft words brought me back to the present. “Before tonight, I wouldn’t have believed...I mean, I had heard just as everyone has that these creatures exist, but I never really accepted it.”

Creatures. Hope died in my gut.

“But you, the man who I had thought would be my husband some day. The one to give myself to, a vampire?” She shook her head. “It’s so hard to fathom.”

I dropped to my knees and reached to take her hand again, but she pulled away as if in disgust. It hurt, but not like I had expected. The desire must be clouding my judgment still.

“Faith, please listen to me. I don’t want this to mean the end of us. I still want to be your husband. I know we were waiting until you finish school, but we don’t have to. We can get married tomorrow. Um. Tomorrow night?”

She seemed to suppress a cringe. “I have to think on this, Zach. It’s a big step, a lot to take in. I have to have time to think.”

I nodded and stood. “Of course. Take your time, but please know, I’m the same Zach you know and love. That hasn’t changed. I will wait for you to call me.”

I left her side and moved toward the door. I stepped out into the chilled night air before she could remember that I never did address the reason my body was pinned to another vampire’s that evening.

Chapter 12

I stalked the gravel road that ran parallel to the beach. I needed the fear of the water to drown out the craving I had for him and the hurt I felt at his rejection. I, too, wanted to distract myself from the violent thoughts playing in my mind at first murdering her and then him.

The rocks crunched beneath my stomping feet, and I moved back and forth, a wind stirring my jacket because I moved so swiftly. How dare he dismiss me like that, put her first, knowing we are one? He deserved...no, she deserved...I growled in disgust and anger at the still night.

I smelled him before I saw him. Whirling to face the guilt clear in his stance, I turned accusing eyes on him. "What are *you* doing here?"

"You know why I'm here," he snapped, more angry than I was it seemed. "My body brings me to you whether I like it or not."

"I don't want you."

"Liar." His sneer was icy. "Let's not play games, Raven. We both want each other. Trust me, I am at attention now. But that's going to change."

My eyes widened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm getting married. And when I do, I will not desire you any longer."

I gasped. Who told him how to break the bond? His friend? It was a matter of time, I suppose. I closed my eyes and turned my back on him. A ghostly tug had me twist back and move closer to his side. "How do you know?"

He laughed, a sound empty of warmth. "This." He waved a small manual in the air. "My friend, Jerry, is a man of many secrets. When this is all behind me, I will demand to know what he's been up to down at that hospital and in his safe house. I suppose I don't know him as well as I thought."

I shrugged, not caring one way or another, but decided to ask. “What is that book?”

He grinned again, this time with humor. “Everything. It tells all the strengths and weaknesses of night creatures. Not just vampires, but werewolves, ghosts, even zombies. If I were not who I am, I would think it was a thing of fiction.” He flipped through the pages. “On page one-eighty-one, it outlines that I can break our bond by either killing you or having sex with another woman. Interesting.”

I bent to pick up a rock and hurled it far into the black water. The distant splash gave me no release from frustration. “So which is it to be? Will you kill me or set me free?”

He frowned. “Must you always be a downer? Why are you like this? Always unhappy, expecting the worse?”

It was my turn to sneer. “You’ve come to me to let me know that soon I won’t have you in my bed, that another woman still holds you though I don’t understand that hold. And I’m supposed to be chipper? I don’t do chipper. I don’t wear bright clothes and go to dances. It’s not who I am.”

“No, of course not. You’d prefer to be dreary, to stay in abandoned houses rather than live among people.”

“I’m dead, damn it!” I turned to walk away, but he grasped my arm to pull me against him. My body ignited. I resisted wrapping my legs around his waist.

“I know you are dead. So am I—because of you.” He spat the words, accusingly. He would never let me forget what I took from him. “That doesn’t mean you have to be here, always among the impoverished, rotting flesh. You can have happiness as you are. How long will the punishment go on, for eternity?”

I yanked away. “So that’s it? You’re trying to save me, to take away your own guilt for abandoning me for her? You fool, Zach. That manual can’t tell you all. Only a vampire can tell you what it means to serve your maker.”

Confusion clouded his features.

I laughed, a still, hollow sound but infused with power. “Foolish young vampire. Shall I show you my power?”

My voice grew deeper. My fangs extended. He stepped back, but I caught the purple material of his jacket with a clawed hand. With my other,

I unbuttoned his pants and reached inside. He was already stiff and hard. I pulled him free and began to stroke along his long shaft, squeezing and tugging alternatively.

“Don’t,” he gasped.

I tilted my head to the side. “Why? Hmm? Turns you on?” I released him and ran a hand down along his inner thigh. “Do you know that I can make you climax with any part of my body? My mouth, my tongue, my hands, or even my words alone. You belong to me. You will not break the bond unless I will it.”

While I said the words, I knew I was losing control. It was why I stayed on the outside, away from everyone. Vampires were loners, mixing only with their kind and rarely with humans. All of us fought to control a power inside that threatened to consume not only ourselves, but also those around us. Zach had not discovered that. Maybe my loneliness, my continuous reliving of losing my family is what provoked the unleashing of my power.

My mind told me to run. My emotions were in control. I would have him right there, right then, and nothing would stop it. Not him, not anyone. But when I looked up into his eyes, I saw that he was on fire like I was. No seduction was necessary, no hypnotizing to bend him to my will. Zach wanted me.

Pushing his pants down along with his boxers, I knelt down before him and took him into my mouth. I teased him with the tip of my tongue while I watched his reaction. He tightened and tossed back his head in ecstasy. *All mine.*

Another trick I had, I thought with pleasure. He was long, but I swallowed all of him. I massaged with my throat and stroked him until he was ready to climax. He growled and panted, bucking against me. I raked his bare thighs with my nails, then slid my hands behind him to grasp his buttocks. After long strokes in and out, he was pleading for release, begging me not to stop. *Mine!*

Another moment and he exploded in my mouth. I milked him and then climbed his body, tearing at my clothes until he settled within my warm folds. I pushed hard. Just as I’d consumed him with my mouth, my moist sex took all of his erection. I screamed out into the night when he shoved deep and rough inside me. “Yes,” I cried, loving every stroke. “Zach, give me all of it.”

He tangled fingers into my hair and turned my head so that our mouths connected, a hungry kiss muffling our words. When my climax raged forth, I threw back my head and howled so loudly that a werewolf would have been proud. But this was my night for domination. I would make him ready for me again, because I intended to take him repeatedly until he fully understood that no human virgin could ever please the lust raging inside him.

Chapter 13

“Where are you taking me?” I admit I was somewhat nervous. Granted we were both dead, still I did feel pain. If she dropped me from several stories high in the air, I didn’t know what would happen. And we could be laid to rest if our heads were severed.

“Don’t worry. I won’t drop you.” She offered a genuine smile, and it seemed that the sun had come out. I shook my head, hoping to dislodge the thought. I should chant my soon-to-be fiancée’s name, but I couldn’t bring the thing to mind.

“You’ve bewitched me.”

She giggled. God, *could* she giggle?

“I haven’t. I don’t do that. What’s the point in making someone do what you want? It’s not real.” She looked away, guiding us over rooftops, the chilled air nipping at our faces. “You are connected to me. You find me irresistible.”

“And you don’t feel the same?” I was annoyed at her claim.

“I’m not in denial.”

The word *whatever* quivered on my lips, but I swallowed it. “Again, where are you taking me?”

We paused in the air above an old Tudor house, the roof caving on one side, turrets crumbling on another. I glanced at her, and the light had seemed to fade from her eyes. This house was obviously some place significant. The neighborhood appeared to be abandoned. No lights shone in the windows nearby. I wondered if this was where she spent her days, sleeping. Yet, how she avoided being burned by the sun with that rotten roof, I didn’t know.

“We are still five stories up,” she informed me. “If I drop you from here, you wouldn’t die. But you might learn to fly finally.”

I grunted. “Or I’d break my leg and have to wait around in pain until it heals, which might not be for another two or three days. Besides that, how would I make it to my resting place?”

She rolled her eyes and then descended slowly, still holding me close to her side. I didn’t like feeling inferior to her and would double my efforts to learn soon. I should have been the one flying her around, chauvinistic though that may have sounded.

Soon we were ensconced in the rotting house. She gave me the tour of what I learned was her home when she had been alive. The place she had shared with her daughter and her husband. Knowing the memories must have been flooding her mind, I didn’t know how she could stand being there.

“How old was she?” Maybe talking about it would help.

“Three.” Her voice cracked, and she touched her belly. “I’ve lost her, and now I will never be able to experience that again—childbirth. I will never hear her giggles again, like when I used to tickle her. He’d come home and tickle us both. We never argued. Or I can’t remember us ever doing it. Maybe I remember only the good times.”

“That’s important.” I don’t know why I felt responsible for her, committed to her happiness. At that moment, I wanted her to heal, to move past what happened and to stop blaming herself. The realization was a shock to me. “You blame yourself. Why?”

She turned away. “I don’t.”

I took her by the arm, pulled her against me. Covering her lips with mine, I attempted to transfer comfort, trust so that she would talk about it. “You do,” I whispered against her mouth.

She shook in my arms, buried her face in my chest, and wrapped her arms around my waist. For a while, she didn’t speak, and I waited with little patience. It wasn’t easy. Time was marching on. We’d already spent a lot of time coming here. Soon we’d need to head back before sunrise. I didn’t want to rush her.

“I teased him. I don’t know why. He was in the marketplace that day while I was buying fruit for my baby girl. She played at my hip and my husband was off fishing. It’s the work that he did.” She stopped, tried to pull away, but I held on and she continued. “There’s no excuse. I thought it would be fun to flirt with my eyes. You know how the women do. Then I

was lighthearted, thought the world was put here only for my pleasure. I teased him and winked. He was a day walker.”

I frowned. “Day walker? What do you mean?”

She pushed closer, and I felt myself growing again. Our desires never lessened for long. I struggled to maintain focus on her words.

“It’s a rare vampire who can still walk in the day. I didn’t know they existed then. I didn’t know anything at all about the undead. He waited until my husband was back to come after me, so that he could kill him and my baby. Then he came after me. He had the nerve to say he thought that’s what I wanted, that my eyes communicated to him.”

“Oh God. I’m sorry.” I did feel sorry for her, though I’m sure she didn’t welcome my pity. Her pulling free with superstrength, nearly knocking me off my feet, was proof that she didn’t.

“Yes, well. It was my fault. If I hadn’t caught his attention, none of it would have happened. So—”

“So you punish yourself by staying away from everyone, even those who might be your friends. You cut off your own kind.”

“I’ve had lovers.”

“How many? Or better yet, were any of them vampires, so that they could live as long as you? Did you avoid it so that you wouldn’t feel responsible for anyone again, wouldn’t let them down?”

“Go to hell, Zach. I don’t need you psychoanalyzing me. Come. It’s time to go back.” She moved toward the window we’d climbed in through.

I crossed my arms. “No. It’s time you face the fact that this wasn’t your fault. It’s time you see that no matter how much you flirted, your eyes certainly didn’t ask that guy to come in here and hurt your family. And the sooner you can forgive yourself—”

“What!” She railed on me. “The sooner I can forgive myself, the sooner you can move on, break our bond? Is that it? Don’t worry. I’ve thought it over. It’s better that we not be. So as soon as possible, I will find someone else and break our connection. Then you can go and live a happy, little fake life with your girlfriend.”

Anger bubbled inside me. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She shrugged. “Let’s go.”

I would have fought her on it, demanded she see it my way, but what was the point? She wanted to wallow in self-pity for what she did so many

years ago. A century wasn't long enough for her. So be it. She'd made her choices. I'd made mine. It was the way it had to be. Now, the feelings I was having for her could be damned. They'd disappear with the breaking of the bond, and the sooner, the better. I didn't have any desire to be shackled to a killjoy for the next few centuries.

Chapter 14

Something didn't feel right. I don't know what, but it seemed like something was about to happen. Zach was storming around like a bear with a thorn caught in his paw. I hardly saw Raven, and when I did, she appeared to be more depressed than she usually was. Even Faith's sunny smile was missing when she showed up for work that night. When I questioned her, she squeaked like a frightened mouse and disappeared on her rounds.

I shook my head, confused. I figured Zach would confide in me soon enough. At least it was obvious that he and Raven still craved each other. Every now and then, from who knows where, she'd come dropping from the sky, he'd take her hand, and the two of them disappeared in one of the shelter's rooms. I considered telling him I wasn't running a brothel, but it was likely that they'd ignore me. So I let it go.

Besides, my little lamb, Jenna, was visiting the hospital tonight on the pretext of an injured canine. I hadn't yet heard of a vamp needing a dentist. It seemed crazy since they healed so much quicker than humans. I would think those teeth were durable or would grow back in should they fall out. Maybe I shouldn't have been running behind an eighteen-year-old, but I was only twenty-four. That wasn't so old for her.

"Hello, Dr. Jerry."

Her voice was sultry and alluring. It called to me. More than one female vampire had used her wiles on me, and I hadn't been caught yet. "Don't you dare use that tone on me, Jenna."

She pouted. I could have fallen at her feet like a whipped dog. In fact, she ruffled my hair like she'd read my mind. "Oh, sorry. I was practicing. Being a vampire is great."

"That's a far cry from the first time you were here," I told her. "Then, you hated all vampires, thought I was one."

She giggled. “That was before I knew you were the special human that you are. I don’t understand why you do what you do. The others have told me that you’re very closed-mouthed about it. What’s all the secrecy? Why are you an undead’s social worker?”

I chuckled. “I like that. Undead’s social worker. I may need to get a private office and put that on the door. Think the police wouldn’t haul me in?”

She shrugged, “Don’t know. Don’t care. My tooth hurts.” Again the cute pout. I was growing hard by the second.

When I would have examined her, a crash and a shout just outside my office door interrupted us. Jenna, true to her ability, moved with swiftness to the door. I called to her before she could open it.

“Wait. Let me check first,” I warned.

She gave me a look and I know I reddened at being caught trying to be chivalrous with a female vampire. It was absurd. Her strength far exceeded mine. I nodded, and she opened the door. When we stepped out, my foot scraped an envelope that lay on the floor. I bent to pick it up, and warning bells went off in my head at Zach’s name being scrawled across the front. Something told me this was not good news.

* * * *

“Damn it!” Zach growled for the fourth time, then scanned the note again. “An exchange. Me for her. There’s no doubt I will do it. The frustrating part is waiting until tomorrow night. Why would they wait until now, when it’s almost day, to leave this?”

“Because they want to frustrate you, make you desperate. You’re less likely to make trouble that way.” I informed him. “Plus I’ve had a few friends around you.”

Zach stopped midstep and stared at me. “A few friends. What do you mean?”

I had intended to wait for a better time to share it with him. I supposed now was as good a time as any. “I came into some information that said you were in danger from Gunther, that he hadn’t given up trying to kill you after that beach incident.”

“But I have not cooperated with the police since that time. I’ve wanted no part of it.” He sat heavily in a nearby chair, his arms akimbo. He didn’t seem to know what to do. “I even gave the extra books I’d kept to his man...um...Mox or something like that.”

I chuckled. “And you thought that cleared up things? Zach, you were his accountant. When the police approached you about a sting, you took it. Did you really think Gunther wouldn’t want revenge or that he would risk you changing your mind later?”

He ran fingers through his hair and tugged at his chin. “I just wanted to enjoy my life. I do not like looking over my shoulder. I want contentment, happiness. You understand that, Jerry.”

I nodded. I understood more than anyone. Zach had suffered abuse at the hands of his stepfather for years until he became the man he was today—muscled and built. It was a wonder that he wasn’t weak and sniveling with all he’d endured. While he wasn’t the He-Man type, he was confident and self-possessing. Underneath all of that, he just wanted a family, to be loved and accepted. We all did. It was partly the reason why I had encircled him with warrior-minded vampires. They would keep my best friend secure in his carefully constructed world, though sometimes I wondered if that was good for him. He possibly needed a wake-up call to what was going on around him, to the reality that he couldn’t stay like he was. Things had changed from that night on the beach, whether he like it or not.

“Yes, I understand that. And that’s why I got some guys together to look after you. Gunther’s not walking away from this thing. My contacts have told me the authorities are close to taking him down. Until then, well—”

“Your contacts? What the hell are you into, Jerry? And I’m not a child. I don’t need protection. When are you going to cut the damn apron strings?”

“When you get your head out of the clouds.” Neither Zach’s extended fangs nor did the veins bulging in his neck intimidate me. I’d faced older and stronger creatures. Besides, he owed me a hell of a lot more than just his undead life! “Now, go sleep it off, and we’ll take this up again tomorrow night when we plan what to do.”

“Fuck that, Jerry. I don’t need to plan. I’ll just take his head off.”

“No.” Spare me the arrogance of night creatures. “Look, he’s got guys of his own. Do you think he sent those two idiots in there tonight to grab

Faith? I had a vamp with me. They would never have outrun her. That means they sent vampires. And you can't go in alone. Now, I'll gather some people to join you and you'll follow the plan."

A sheepish grin spread across his face. The tiny white points indenting his bottom lip were almost comical. "Okay, Jerry. You've thought it all out. Hmm, and to think I thought you were a humble little doctor wannabe."

I sneered and turned my back on him.

Chapter 15

I saw them grab her, the two six-foot vampires with their buzz-cut white hair. They looked like identical twins from their hard, sculptured features to their broad shoulders and long legs encased in matching outfits.

I'd just left Jerry's house and Zach's bed. I hadn't wanted to part from him, but he still remained aloof with me, fighting the growing attraction that I could identify as love. I didn't have to mull it over for a minute. I loved Zach, with all my heart. It took me by storm, railroading my reserves. For so long, I'd held back from caring for others, but somehow he'd reached beyond that. When he wasn't keeping me at a distance, he comforted me with his words, soothed the loneliness, and helped me to realize I needed to forgive myself. That didn't mean I had, but it did hold promise. A promise of coming out of the darkness, maybe making a friend. I'd already visited the ice cream parlor with a young vamp named Jenna. I thought we could become friends.

Yet, all of this progress didn't give me confidence that some day soon Zach would give a real relationship with me a chance. The innocent continually stood in the way, keeping his eyes clouded with her sweetness. It still sickened me thinking of her, knowing that soon she would be his wife and the hold Zach and I had on each other would be broken. I didn't want to face that reality, but I had no choice.

When I flew to the hospital, intending to talk to Jerry about his annoying friend, I found the kidnapping in progress. I stepped into the shadows outside the back entrance to the hospital. A hood covered her face, though I recognized the struggling figure from her hands—pink polish on perfect nails and long, elegant fingers that I'd seen too many times stroking Zach's face.

The memory of it kept me in place as they took her. I did follow when they flew into the air, high over the city and at a speed that I was pressed to

match. It was clear that they were older, more skilled. Andover was a new city, just being developed. Strangely, younger vampires were the norm here. It was rare that I found a vampire older than I was. The others tended to stay in the twin city to the south, where my home had been before I died.

These men were not from around here. Gunther—I'd learned his name only in the last week when Zach had begun to confide his own past to me—must have hired the men from outside town to work for him. If he was recruiting vampires, what chance did Zach have of getting his girlfriend back alive? Something inside me didn't want him to.

When we landed and I stayed well out of the scenting of the captors, I noted the old factory. It was halfway between the old city and the new. A single light shone in a window three stories up. The others were all dark or broken out. I would think that Gunther could afford something better than this, but perhaps he didn't want to go with the obvious.

The two men who'd attacked Zach stood at the entrance. "Good, you've brought her. The boss will be happy with that," said the thinner of the two. "Hand her over. I'll take her in. He's waiting for her."

The one on the left shoved him so hard that he lost his footing and fell hard on the ground. "Out of the way, you fool. Had you followed through with your duty beforehand, this would not be necessary."

It didn't take night vision to see the resentment in the fallen man's eyes. There was that and what looked like desperation. I wondered if his boss would punish him for his failure, or if he was already getting it. Bad guys had little sympathy for screw ups. With Gunther's reputation for cruelty, I was surprised the man was still alive.

The men disappeared inside with the girl. The human stood with the help of his chattering friend. I listened.

"Get off me, Mox. I don't need your help." Thin man brushed himself off. "I'd wanted to get her to redeem us in the boss's eyes. Now we're screwed. Why shouldn't he just get rid of us, or put us on babysitting duty with his niece."

"Oh no, Charles," Mox whined. "I can't take that little girl again. She's a demon."

Hissing, Charles nodded. "Yeah, sometimes I think she really is. If I hadn't..."

"Hadn't what?"

“Never mind.” Charles moved to grasp the door handle. “Let’s get up there and see if we can claim some kind of credit like the fact that we informed the monsters that she was not being escorted tonight.”

Mox chuckled. “Yeah, perfect how we found out he was too busy boinking that other vampire.”

I cringed. That’s all I needed was for Zach to hear that his girlfriend was grabbed only because we were having sex. He was already fighting his feelings tooth and nail. I didn’t want this to add to it. Thinking that I’d never have him for my own, a sort of despair washed over me. I needed to face facts. I decided the best thing for me to do was to take care of everything for Zach, get his girl for him, and then leave the area. I could set up anew in another city. Maybe not the twin city, but somewhere much farther away. I’d mate with another, and then I’d be free of the bond I had with Zach. He could be free. After all, it was my fault that he was in this mess in the first place. It was the least I could do.

I glanced up at the sky. Dawn would come soon. I had just enough time to make it to my house and grab what I needed. What I hadn’t shared with my lover was that for a limited time, I could walk in the day just like my maker. If I wore sunblock and covered every part of my skin with dark clothing, then I could last just a couple of hours. It would be painful and I’d be fighting serious fatigue, but at least I would not have to face the old vampires. The human henchmen would be no problem at all. Even if they managed to get a bullet in me, I’d heal eventually. I could get Faith to safety. I would inform Jerry at the vampire house and then leave.

I turned on my heel and flew easily through the air, toward the south. My old home was closer to the factory than the house I used in Andover. I also kept it stocked with things I might need, including a change of clothing—all black, with gloves, and a long coat with a hood. It would serve for my purposes. On the way was a tourist gift shop which carried the sunblock I needed. I’d have moved on by the time the police responded to the alarm.

All was planned. Now if I could only stop my heart from hurting at the loss of the one person I felt near to being whole with.

Chapter 16

I was aware that I was dreaming. Nothing was fuzzy around the edges like you sometimes saw on television, but there was otherworldliness about the trees and grass, even the gentle breeze ruffling my hair while I strolled along a path. Besides, there was no forest near Andover, just concrete and cookie-cutter greenery in small ordered squares outside the row houses.

I strolled and rounded a bend in the trail. Ahead was a clearing, and in the middle, a fuzzy blue blanket. I know it was a dream because only in that imaginary world could one know that a blanket was fuzzy while it was still several yards away. If my heart had been beating, it would have skipped one at seeing Raven curled on the blanket. Most impossible of all, she was wearing a pink dress, with a bow in her long black hair. Now I know I was in la-la land.

She laughed and held a flower to her nose before handing it out to someone, her eyes shining with love for this person outside my view. Jealousy flamed within me. I clenched fists that were aching to slam into his face. I quickened my step, determined to end his existence. I stepped into the clearing, but no one was there.

I marched up on Raven. "Where is he?"

A coy look in her eyes, she peered at me through lashes longer than I remembered. "Where is who?"

"You know damn well who I mean. The man you're teasing, with that...that dress and those buttons undone." I know I sounded like a fool, but something was building inside me. I couldn't figure out what my problem was. I was hot and cold, angry and full of despair. I wondered if I was getting the flu.

I paced around the scruffy material covering the grass as if I were staking out my territory. Scanning the area, which was strangely devoid of detail, no enemy was in sight. So who had she been looking at? And then it

hit me. This was a “this is your future” dream. If I didn’t stay with Raven, then she would move on. And why wouldn’t she? She was incredibly sexy, phenomenal in bed. In fact, even with me being a vampire, that woman had me aching with intense satisfaction after our sessions. Somehow turning away from that and having only Faith was a huge let down. I felt guilty about it.

I dropped down beside her and took her chin gently between my thumb and first finger. My gaze wandered to those firm alabaster peaks that were just visible with the buttons of her dress open. I grew hard with desire.

“Raven, what are you doing to me?” I groaned before tasting her soft lips. “I can’t get you out of my head.”

Coming out of a sort of trance, she looked up at me. “Zach?”

I chuckled and kissed her again. Drawing her into my arms felt so right. She belonged there. She was so thin but so soft. Her breasts pressing against my chest had me on fire. I wanted her right then, and suddenly, I had an overwhelming desire to see her dressed again in her customary black with the leather and lace.

It was my dream. I willed it and instantly she was my Raven, gothic as only Raven could be. I laid her back, reached beneath the folds of her jacket to find her pants, and freed her enough to get my fingers buried inside her moist center. My craving for her was unbearable.

“Raven. God, Raven, I want you so badly.”

“I’m here for you now, Zach. Right now, I’m here.” I thought it was odd for her to say it like that, but my mind was not analyzing her words. My erection was calling the shots.

I peeled her pants and then her panties down and plunged my fingers deep inside her. A moment later, I couldn’t wait. I divested myself of my clothing and parted her thighs before pressing my length where it desperately needed to be. Stroking, gasping, and grinding with each movement, we were one.

“Zach.” Her voice was sweet honey.

And then I knew she was there, with me in my dream world. This was no longer a premonition, but a meeting of my mate on a higher plain. Never had a dream been so vivid, or the movements of making love so satisfying. The intensity climbed, sending me over the top. Our bodies rhythmically meshed like the flow of two liquids becoming one.

Deeper still, I pushed all of my aching inches inside her, wanting to fill her to capacity. I raised her thighs higher and caressed her bottom. The quivering told me I was doing something right. She whimpered, nearing her release.

“Come on, baby,” I coached, watching the pleasure ripple over her features. “I want to please you, Raven.”

“You do. Zach,” she cried. “You do.”

I lay down against her, cupped a hand behind her head, and laid my cheek against hers. Our lashes laced together, hers wet with tears, an impossibility in real life. It tore at my heart, and I knew the truth. Finally, I knew the truth when we exploded in a shower of the most amazing loving of our lives.

* * * *

I woke satisfied, the front of my pajama bottoms soaked. I laughed, feeling content on one hand and determined to locate Raven for a continuation of our dreams, on the other. A new lightness engulfed me, knowing what I felt for her. I couldn't imagine that I'd gone so long denying what I felt. I loved Raven, the Night Huntress. Laughing aloud, I bounded up from my bed and then fell down hard on my rear. Faith.

A beat after, my door burst open and Jerry entered, clutching a sheet in his hand. “Zach, I have something for you here.”

I stood. “No time, I have to find Faith, make sure she's safe. When I've settled things with her, I fully intend on meeting up with Raven. I don't expect you'll see me after that for a few days.” I grinned like an idiot despite the seriousness of what I needed to do in the next few hours.

Jerry clamped a hand hard on my shoulder. “You must make time to hear this, my friend. The good news is that Faith is safe, brought home by no other than Raven, who—from what I've read here—should be called ‘The Night-and-Day Huntress.’”

I frowned, confused. “Raven? But Faith was grabbed late last night. She wouldn't have time to...”

A memory flashed in my mind of her sharing that the guy who turned her was a day walker. Seems she hadn't shared everything. Well, no matter. After we talked, there would be no more secrets between us. I had to be

grateful she helped me, but I'd scold her for risking her life. It was my duty to rescue Faith, and I felt a little put out that she'd robbed me of flexing my muscles, so to speak. I hadn't been in a fight in my present state, and I was raring to test drive my skills. Maybe I would visit Gunther anyway. Get a little payback. Hmm, seems loving Raven was freeing me in so many ways. I felt ready to embrace who I was.

"Hold on." I just realized Jerry's words. "You said 'the good news.' Is there some bad news, too?"

He nodded, sadness in his eyes. "Yeah. She's gone."

"Who's gone?" The beginning of my dream and Raven's words came back full force to punch me in the stomach. I knew his words before he spoke them.

"Raven."

Chapter 17

I stood watching my friend turn to leave, conscious of his duty to first go and resolve things with Faith, before he went off to find Raven. After all, I'd planned to do, to make them see that they were meant for each other, it turned out that the vampire bond was too strong to resist. Their fate was sealed before it began. Yet, I wondered how it could be that if Faith couldn't keep them apart with her obvious virtue and Zach's foolish devotion to her, then how could Raven have gone off and left him. The thought had barely formed in my mind before I realized the truth. She felt she was doing what was best for him, what would make him happy.

It had been a mistake not to share with her and my friend what had kept him among the living all along. The fact that she had the look of one of the undead and he did not may have been a factor in their ultimate separation also. Possibly she felt she could never fit into his world. I felt guilty for not removing the burden of such a false belief from her shoulders.

Strong, yet soft arms surrounded me, followed by the press of a feminine body. "Jerry, I thought we were going to meet."

I turned to face Jenna, my heartbeat quickening. Her coy look, enticing in so many ways, had me panting like a dog, aching for her. I hadn't allowed her to fade either. Her sweet skin still glowed with the warmth and pinkness of life. I ran a hand along her arms to her shoulders and dragged her against me. Again, I went over in my mind my reasons for deciding to allow myself to be turned. Jenna was the first to make me rethink my decision of a few years ago.

"We will meet, Ms. Impatience. Gosh, you vamps."

An eyebrow cocked at my impertinence, and I chuckled, drawing her closer. I planted a kiss on her full mouth, loving her taste. "Sure about this?" I whispered. "No going back for a very long time."

She moaned against my lips, sinking her fangs gently into the tender skin. I flinched and she laughed. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m not the walk alone type. Not like my new friend, Raven.”

I stiffened. “New friend?”

“Yes.” She pulled away and led me by the hand toward the door. “We’ve hunted together a few times, and we talk now and then at the ice cream parlor. I like her despite how down she seems sometimes.”

I was irritated at my young lover-to-be. After a hundred years, would she still be the sexy eighteen year old with the mentality to match? It had never occurred to me to study whether the vampire hung on to their original temperament, the one they held at death. The thought worried me too, because it might mean that Raven would always be as she was. Pulling back from Jenna, I made excuses.

“I’m sorry, Jenna. I have to take care of something. We will have to put this off until—”

Anger. Another of her fallacies. Hmm, seems I hadn’t overcome my hesitancy for intimacy after all. She increased the pressure on my hand, refusing to release me. “No, you’ve had plenty of time to think this over, Jerry. I’m ready for my mate. I chose you, but I could choose any other.”

Another thing. Arrogance. I sighed. I was a lost cause. “I’m sorry, Jenna. Believe me, I want you like no man has ever wanted a woman, but I’m not ready to convert just yet, and I don’t want to be tied down. I have so much research to do...”

“Excuses! What is your problem?” She dropped my arm. Any harder and it would have flung backward, out of joint. It hurt no less. “I don’t get you, Jerry. I thought we were going somewhere, that you’d let your guard down. Everyone around here has theories about you. Some of the women told me not to waste my time, that it would never work out. Boy, were they right.”

I held up hands, silently trying to convey my apology. How could I admit anything without baring myself? I hadn’t even shared all of my experiences with my best friend, Zach. I felt naked before her blazing eyes. Eyes that demanded I come clean. Blowing out a breath, I moved toward the banister overlooking the lower floor. Probably not a good idea to talk to her in the open with people constantly coming and going.

"Come this way," I told her gruffly. "I'll tell you and show you in private away from listening ears."

She laughed, hands on her hips. "Silly human." Affection clouded her voice, the anger gone more quickly than it had surfaced. "If they want to hear, they will. Increased hearing remember?"

"Not if they don't know there's something to hear. Now come on."

We settled in my office, the door not only shut, but also locked. I still didn't feel it was time for the whole world to know of my experiments. Young though she was, I trusted Jenna enough to know she would not share my secrets if asked not to. Likely, she'd enjoy keeping them from the others. It would give her one up on the older vamps, age being something they lorded over her on a regular basis. Come to think of it, they all behaved as children sometimes. Maybe it was a stress reliever or antics among family members. That thought was way more pleasing.

With my hands folded before me and the breath trapped in my chest, I was flooded by memories. One after another, they returned, and pain pulsed throughout every vein. The love which had seemed to be a lifeline had been ripped from before me, in the blink of an eye. Looking into Jenna's eyes and seeing her soft hair with static-laced wisps flying, I could see why she was obviously so appealing. That red hair was so like Joy's. God, even the *J* was the same. It should have been apparent from the start.

"Well?" Green eyes challenged me.

"I was in love." My voice faltered, and I cleared my throat before continuing. "She was perfect in every way. We'd dated for quite a while, since middle school actually. One night she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Next thing you know, she was a vampire." I wasn't sure I could bring myself to share the rest. And by the sound of the commotion on the stairs outside my office, we were about to be interrupted. Sure enough, a pounding on the door set my teeth rattling.

I moved to unlock the door and open it. "Zach. You look like crap, man."

His hair was ruffled, clothes so wrinkled I'd have sworn he'd slept in them the last few nights. This wasn't the man I knew, and he certainly hadn't looked that way before setting out two days ago to look for Raven. A boulder didn't need to hit me to know that he hadn't been successful in bringing her back. The stubbornness of his kind never ceased to amaze me.

Eyes wild and somewhat puffy, he barreled into the room. His harried demeanor spoke volumes along with his extended fangs. His eyes were bloodshot, his skin a mass of purple bruises atop a white pallor. Either Zach had been in a fight and hadn't fed or worrying about the woman he loved was having counteracting effects on my formula in his blood. Any other issues weren't an option at this point.

"When's the last time you fed? And where did you rest?" I queried like a mother hen.

He brushed aside my concern. "There's no time for that, Jerry. Damn it, I'm not a child. The only thing I care about right now is Raven. Yet, I must be cursed more than the obvious because my life has gone to hell."

"Drop the dramatics." I turned to Jenna. "Excuse us, baby."

Other than a raised eyebrow at my endearment, Zach said nothing. He shuffled tiredly over to a chair and dropped heavily into it. He shoved trembling hands through his hair and dipped his head between slumped shoulders. "Okay, how's this for drama," he spoke to the floor. "I'm destined to be separated from Raven by problem after problem because no sooner did this whole Faith and Gunther thing get resolved, *she* decides to take her penance a step further by latching on to the coven of the guy who killed her. And she's too naive not to realize they want her for revenge."

"What?" That was totally unexpected. Nothing could have prepared me for that. "When was this?"

Zach looked up with a halfhearted grin, "Yeah, now that it's one of your beloved people, it's gone too far. Especially since everyone knows you have a soft spot for us? Hm, Jerry?"

I turned away. When had he become so observant? Zach had spent his life wrapped in his own cares, his family, money, plans, and then Faith. I was surprised at the bitterness I felt, but suppressed it. This wasn't the time. Raven was in trouble. "What happened?"

"Wouldn't you know?" Zach shoved to his feet, unsteady. "After all these years, her maker's family seeks her out, sells her some story about bringing her into the family to make up for what *he* did. She decided it was the perfect time to do her own making up. After she left with them, I tried to follow. No dice. You see the results of that. I can only hope they won't kill her before I can get there again. Now all I need is your special juice."

My eyes widened. I wasn't sure I heard him right. "My what?"

Again, the cocky grin. “You know. The juice you keep in that cabinet. You thought I didn’t know, did you, Jerry? I know you’ve been taking extra care of me with some concoction you came up with. I just didn’t know the level of its impact until I’d gone three days without it. Contrary to what you think, I have fed. A little. The McClaine boys just wore me out in a five-hour fight.” He dropped again on the couch while I prepared a dose for him. “I got a few of my own licks in, but they are huge and worse. They’re day walkers. I was outmatched from the start.”

I punctured a blood bag, injecting it with a double dose of my serum. Zach admitted to feeding, but if he had, it had been his first time feeding from a human. It wasn’t hard to imagine that he’d been both repulsed by and attracted to the thought, and hence did not get enough. “Here. Drink. It will take me a while to gather some friends.”

Chapter 18

I was no fool. I knew what I was getting myself into, joining the McClaines. The men and women had barely concealed the hatred they held for me. My maker, it turned out, was the head of their dark family. Taking him away meant they had no direction, no male strong enough to lead. A type of civil war had begun among them, battles between the vampires to be elected the new leader. The fighting eventually narrowed down who would be the one, but not before distrust and division had settled in. Finally, it was decided among several factions that killing me would bring them together as one again. All this I'd learned in bits and pieces from the younger vamps who had no loyalty to anyone. Had the leaders been more attentive, they would not have trusted me to their care.

We traveled for miles and at top speed, only pausing to feed. The McClaines were not discerning either of whom they bit. Diseased, dirty, affluent, nobody, city official—status didn't matter. If they were hungry, they ate. I knew that this type of vampire blew through Andover occasionally. We worked hard to keep them out. It was a never-ending battle. Recently, I had begun to think that if all the vampires in Andover looked like Zach, then we could blend more, keep a better lookout. Roving vampires would not immediately know we were their kind and therefore would not hide in the shadows, away from us. It would not be too late to stop them from feeding haphazardly, killing our innocents.

Then I remembered that all this made no difference now. I had left Andover—and Zach. It had been hard, but I thought it was the best thing to do. I assumed that the McClaines would choose someone to kill me soon enough, once they were sure they were safe from Andover vampires. I could have told them that there was no one who would likely protect me. When Zach learned I was gone, he'd probably be relieved, knowing our connection would soon be broken. He could marry Faith without worrying that he'd

betray her, and could even make her one of us if she chose. He was free. There would be no one coming after me to take me home. Vengeance could be satisfied. I would atone for my own mistakes. It was the best way.

When the eastern sky began to lighten, I stopped flying and lowered myself to the ground. The young ones followed close behind.

“Hey, you can’t just go where you want, Raven,” a curly-haired one told me, attempting to keep a stern look on her face. “We’re not stopping until New York, I’ve heard.”

I sighed and glanced around me for a place to go beneath ground, in a hurry. “That may be, but I have to get to darkness now. I’m not fully a day walker. I can’t be out here without protection and even then, not too long.”

“What the hell’s going on back here?” An elder McClaine stormed toward me. I braced myself for a fight.

She didn’t look like she cared one way or another what my problems were. And maybe she intended it this way. Her husband was the ruling vampire at the moment—when he wasn’t challenged by his cousin—but she was the one in charge. That fact had been driven home earlier when she sent two huge vampires behind to cover the rear. I could only imagine what they had been up to.

“I need a place to rest for the night,” I told her firmly. “I cannot face the dawn.”

She sniggered. “Which shows you’re not a true blood.” She stared past me to darkness in our wake. Obviously, coming to the conclusion that they weren’t yet ready to end my existence, she nodded. “Fine. I know a place nearby.”

We settled quickly below ground level. It wasn’t the best of circumstances, the ground being damp and wet, but I’d slept in worse, so I didn’t complain. A feeling of longing was beginning to overtake me, and I started eyeing the young male at my side. If I mated with him, I wouldn’t hurt for Zach. But that wouldn’t heal my heart. I loved Zach. I ached for him in my heart and not just sexually. Lying back, I was sorely tempted to visit him in my dreams.

* * * *

I walked along a foggy, damp road, the cobblestones echoing a hollow sound at each step. I knew it was my own dream, and I could have made it more inviting. But perhaps my desperate loneliness at my separation from Zach was making it hard to visualize something sunnier.

Rounding a corner, I spotted a man leaning against a lamp post. His face was in shadow. His clothing was all black, but even from several feet away, I knew it was Zach. I broke into a run and as I neared, he opened his arms. I elevated from the ground, to glide into his embrace. His mouth sought out mine, with an urgency matching my own. The kiss deepened until we stroked along each other's bodies, locating all the sensual spots that sent us airborne. When I looked down, we really were in the air.

"Is it because I'm dreaming that you can fly?" I questioned him between caresses.

He grinned, a self-satisfied look spreading across his handsome features. "Well, this is your dream, my love. But I have learned to fly while searching for you."

Guilt assaulted me. Maybe I should have mated with the young vampire after all. Then Zach wouldn't feel the need to chase after me, to ease the sexual pain we were both experiencing. "I left you a note, with Jerry. Zach, don't follow me. I have done what's best. It's better for your and Faith's relationship if I'm not in the middle of it."

"Will you stop with the attitude of the martyr? You're too goth for that, baby. I know what I want now. I've accepted who I am. I resented you for changing my life because I thought I had it all. I thought I knew what I wanted but was too blind to realize it wasn't enough. Faith is sweet and all that's good, but that's not who I am any more. I don't need a safe little wife who never messes up her hair or yells at me by my side. Damn, she never even puts me through a plate glass window, for Pete's sake."

I laughed, trembling a little with hope. Was this all just a hopeful dream, or was Zach really visiting me on a higher level of consciousness. I wanted to believe it was true. It gave me meaning and a reason not to throw myself to the mercies of the McClaine family. Had Zach really broken it off with Faith? I was almost too afraid to ask him, to think the nights roving the streets alone would end, that is, if Zach had overcome his disgust of drinking from a human.

I pulled out of his arms and paced some feet away. “So you’ve broken it off with Faith then?”

He followed, warming my still heart. Arms enfolding me, he pulled me close again to his chest. “Yes, I’ve broken it off. Truthfully, before I could tell her I didn’t think we’d work out, she said she didn’t want to be with a vampire. Something about a conflict of interest.” He chuckled.

I laughed, too. It was such a rarity for me until I had met him. “Yes, I suppose it would be, her being a nurse. Well, Zach, while I care for you, I need a man who hunts with me, who feeds along side me. I don’t like the blood pouches Jerry gives us. I like a human neck. It gives me a thrill. If you can’t do that...”

“Are you telling me that the fact that I love you isn’t enough for you? I’ve got to prove it?” His brows contracted above his darkening eyes.

I caught my lower lip between my teeth. “Are you saying you *do* love me?”

“What have we been talking about all this time, Raven?” He gave me a little shake. “Of course I love you. I love you with everything inside me. I don’t know how I’ve made it this long in my life without you. And I hate it that this is only inside a dream, that we’re not really together.”

I nuzzled deep into his embrace, burying my face against his chest. “I was just checking, darling. I can’t wait for us to be together. And if you don’t want to feed directly from a human...”

“I didn’t say that. I did, not too long ago.”

“A woman? She wasn’t too pretty, was she?” I demanded.

He chuckled. “No, no too pretty. Certainly, not at your level of beauty.”

“It’s your time, Raven. Time to die!”

I knew the voice came from the waking world. I also knew we hadn’t been sleeping that long. It meant the McClaines were no longer willing to wait. They’d only held off until day, when anyone who would help me would be resting. They knew that Zach was following, probably had help. While it warmed me to know that I had someone who cared, I was terrified that I would lose and die before I could be in his arms again. I knew of no other day walkers to help me.

My love began to fade from my view, his hand reaching for me as he called my name. The cobblestone street with its echoes and mist gave way to the stench of an underground tunnel filled with rats and leaking pipes.

The leader's wife stood over me with all the hate she could dredge up in her eyes.

"Morning, sunshine." Her breath was fouler than our sleeping quarters. "Know what time it is?"

I tried rolling away from her bulk and her smell, but she held on tight. She shook me with a strength I had not tapped into in all my years of being undead. Playing her game seemed to be the only way to get her to stop tossing me about, so I muttered, "It's time for me to die, right?"

"Right!"

With that, she hurled me against a wall. Before I could get to my feet again, she hammered at me again and again. As if I weighed nothing, the Amazon woman dragged me along the ground, my face bumping against debris and other things I didn't want to identify. She reached stairs leading to a manhole and dragged me up them by my ankle. Panic rose in my chest. I could only withstand sunlight if I was beneath a thick coating of sunblock lotion and every part of my body was covered with dark cloth. She meant business. If I went outside now, with the sun high in the sky, I'd fry.

I gripped the rails, fighting hard for the strength to overcome her. I kicked at her head above my feet. She didn't seem to feel a thing. Her grip never lessened. My heart cried out to Zach, knowing I would never see the man I loved again, just when things looked so promising. Here again had I made an error in judgment, coming with these people. I'd meant well. But Zach would be hurt and maybe Jerry, who I realized was becoming my friend. Jenna was a friend. All of their faces swarmed before my mind's eye as the vampire bent on revenge slid back the manhole cover. My life was ending all over again.

Chapter 19

She flung me out into the day. Light burned my corneas before pain raged across my flesh. I could almost see the skin start to pucker from the sun's harmful rays. Whimpering and crying, I crawled toward anything that would provide shelter. But with my eyes shut against the bright morning, I had no idea which way shelter lay. Even without seeing, I heard her coming toward me, determined to finish what she started. I threw up a fist, flailed my arms through the air. Easily sidestepping my swings, she struck out and sent me rolling backward several feet.

With Herculean effort, I hoisted myself to my feet while reaching out with my hands to feel around me. The unmistakable scent of water reached my nose, and I could only pray that I wouldn't stumble into it by accident. Since she'd been hitting me in one direction, I began to suspect she intended to hurl me into the deadly liquid. I had to do something to stop her.

For the moment she'd stopped to rest or maybe to laugh at my predicament. I caught hold of what felt like a tree and opened one eye to a mere slit. Against the sun, my vision was blurry at best, and I fought not to vomit from the intensity of the pain. With the little I could make out, I realized she was heading toward me again. My head spun, my muscles ached. It didn't look good at all. If this was going to be the end of me, I'd spend it thinking about Zach and how beautiful he was, about his face, about his body. After so long, there was someone who cared about me, someone who saw past my defenses and bruised heart to the lonely person I was.

Closing my eyes again, I brought the image his face in my mind, to enjoy watching him while the McClaine vampire beat me. Through the mental mist, I could almost make out Zach's figure, waiting for me anxiously.

"Raven, come back to me. Please."

I gasped. I'd heard him clearly like when we entered that other plane, when we could be together spiritually, if not physically. It couldn't be true. I'd only held that connection to him when I was asleep. And then I realized, dreaming was just a state of mind. Day dreaming was powerful, the same as dreaming at night. If I could connect with Zach, maybe I would feel nothing, just enjoy the last moments with him there with me.

I mentally called out to him. *"Zach, can you hear me? Zach? I'm under attack. I know you can't help because it's day, but I just wanted you to know I love you too. That my life has gotten better since I've known you. Before, I'd only known darkness, aside from the fact that I wander the streets at night. You brought light to my heart, and for that, I will be forever grateful. That is, if there is an afterlife for me."* I gave a bitter chuckle. *"Or this could be the afterlife and I have nothing. At least, I'll have had this short time with you."*

"I won't lose you, Raven." His voice held a desperate quality. I suddenly felt him pulling on me, an odd sensation that was not just in my mind but also in my body. Zach filled me with himself, and we were one person. Maybe it was his need to be near me or because of my call to him and my wanting so much to be with him at that moment. But suddenly, we were merging. Zach's spirit seemed to connect with mine. I could feel strength surge through my body, healing the aches and pains quicker. When I pulled myself to my feet again, having stumbled to the ground, my legs were like fortified steel. It was heady. McClaine rushed on me, but I felt Zach pulling left, and I was not able to resist his will. Together, we sidestepped the attack and our right fist came down on her back, sending her sprawling across the grass.

"Did you see that, Zach?" I spoke aloud as if he could hear me, but I received his answer in my mind right away.

"Yes, we're a great team. Now, let's finish this so I can have you with me once again."

Hope sprung up inside me. With Zach's strength added to mine, I began to believe that we could defeat McClaine. Squinting against the light and longing for a dark pair of sunglasses, I moved toward her and took her arm to twist behind her back. She struggled to free herself, but Zach and I held on. We propelled her toward the water. When she saw it, she began to

scream in terror. At the side of the water, I held her head down near the wet surface.

“Swear you’ll go away and leave me alone forever,” I spat.

“I swear. I swear!” she screamed. I have already explained the effect of water on us. She knew all too well how she’d burn, no matter how old she was or how long she could walk in daylight. We all had weaknesses.

I released her and stepped back, but when I did, she came at me again. Risking my own burns, I grabbed a can lying neglected on the ground and filled it with water. My fingers burned immediately and tamping my own cries of pain, I tossed the contents into her face.

She screamed again, clawing at her face and stumbling backward away from me. I tore at the material of my jacket to wrap it around my fingers. But even as I did, the pain was easing. I paused in my ministrations to stare shocked at my fingers. My natural healing ability was intensified coupled with Zach. My burnt fingers were improving at a phenomenal rate.

Another cry on my left drew my attention from my fingers, and I looked up to find several of the McClaines standing mournfully about the vampire I fought. A day walker from another clan by the look of him with his waist length blond hair, had shoved a spike into her heart. While we all watched in disbelief, her body sparked and sputtered and then changed to powder.

I thought that I would have to fight the day walker and the rest of the McClaines, but they all bunched together with looks of surrender on their faces. “There’s been enough killing in our family. We will leave in peace and never approach you again.” With those words, they moved on the wind and were gone.

The blond turned to me, bowed, and whispered, “Night Huntress.” Then he, too, was gone.

I wearily trod over to the manhole and dropped into the underground for a long rest until night. The last thing I heard was Zach chanting in my ears, “*Come to me, my love.*”

* * * *

I stood in that same ballroom where, so many times, I’d been on the outside looking in and watching Zach enjoy a life I could never have again.

But this time, I was pink with life. My figure was fuller, not so thin. Others didn't know I was one of the living dead. And that's how I liked it.

They did see Zach, him dressed in a black suit, white shirt, and blindingly bright tie, hold his hand out to me. I would have laughed at his penchant for vibrant colors if I were not distracted by being pulled to tightly in his arms. It felt right, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

Glancing around the room, I didn't spot his best friend, Jerry. "Where's Jerry tonight, Zach?"

"Didn't I tell you? He's now seeing Jenna, the young vampire. Seems he finally moved on from his self-imposed loveless state. And the two of them have formed the Vampire's Protection Association. Its chief aim is to protect the vampires of Andover and to shelter those who need it when they are passing through. They have already stationed protectors around the city to watch over the innocents."

The idea intrigued me. I began thinking that I'd like to be a part of it. Finally, I could also move on with my life, put the painful past where it belonged. Working with other vampires to secure our home would be the perfect occupation.

"You look beautiful tonight, Raven." Zach pressed a gentle kiss to my ear, sending tremors over my body. "How can I stand here and dance when that the silky blue is clinging to every one of your curves, making me think you have nothing underneath it."

Pretending innocence, I looked up at him with wide eyes. "Oh, was I supposed to put something on under it?"

I think a flame took him then. His eyes were suddenly midnight black. The name Night Hunter came to mind, watching him. It seemed fitting that tonight, he would hunt me, and I would, without a doubt, let myself be caught.

NIGHT HUNTRESS

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yvette A. Lynn is the mother of two boys and lives in Baltimore, Maryland. She has loved reading since before she knew how. She finds that writing gives voice to all the stories just floating around in her head demanding an outlet. She has loved to write since middle school, and though she gave it up for many years, the heroes and heroines never stopped pushing her to come back.

Yvette's favorite types of books to read are fantasy, paranormal, and vampire/werewolf. She's a softy for a romance and loves when it's both sensual and action-packed.

She loves hearing from both readers and authors, so please visit her website at www.yvettelynn.com.

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