



Unclaimed

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Blurb

When Ashley's first boyfriend found out she was a vampire, he tried to kill her. Since then, she's avoided relationships. Now Victor, the most powerful vampire in Chicago, has decided to claim Ashley as his mate, and he won't take no for an answer. Between fending off Victor's advances, waiting tables at an all-night diner and keeping her refrigerator stocked with blood, she's about to implode from sheer stress.

Then she accepts a job from the CPRI (Center for Paranormal Research and Investigation) and finds herself partnered with Will Connor, a young telepath. Ashley is immediately attracted to Will, but tells herself that she won't let this become more than friendship. Loving humans is too dangerous. But as they work together to track down a psychic serial killer, her resolve weakens. Will makes her feel like a normal person, not a monster. Behind his blue eyes lies a pain as deep as her own, and an understanding of what it's like to grow up different from everyone else. He also has the tastiest looking neck she's ever seen.

When Victor finds out Ashley's been sleeping with a human, he challenges Will to a duel...to the death. Ashley knows there's no way Will can win against such a powerful vampire. Will is doomed—unless Ashley can kill Victor first.

Chapter One

Ashley stared at a splotch of blood on the pavement. She crouched, dipped two fingers into the sticky puddle and licked them clean. Her tongue tingled with the sharp, electric taste of salt and adrenaline. The blood was fresh, still warm. She leapt to her feet and broke into a run. A waning moon stared down through a gap in the clouds, bathing Chicago's streets in its pale, cold light. Puddles gleamed like molten silver. She glanced at one and saw a swirl of blood in the water.

The trail led to the mouth of a narrow alley. She stopped just outside it, pressed her back against the brick wall, reached beneath her coat and drew her Beretta. She held her breath, listening. Wet smacking sounds drifted from the darkness. Her sweat-slick hand tightened around the gun's grip as she craned her neck and peered into the shadows.

A figure crouched in the alley, his head bowed, his back to her. The smell of blood wafted from the alley, mingled with the ripe stink of garbage from the nearby Dumpsters. As she watched, the man lowered his head and tore another mouthful of flesh from the motionless body on the pavement. A low, animal growl trickled from his throat.

He was eating the corpse.

She stood motionless, taking slow, controlled breaths, wondering if she could get any closer without attracting his attention.

The vampire raised his head. Blood smeared his mouth like lipstick. His eyes gleamed red as he scanned the shadows, and his stretched wide in a grin, showing jagged, yellow fangs. "I know you're there." His voice was low and raspy. "I smell you."

His hunger hit her like a gust of wind, thick and hot, and she tightened her mental barriers. He was too far gone to even bother shielding his emotions.

She stepped into the alley and raised the Beretta. She willed the slight tremor from her arms. Fear evaporated as she found that place inside her head where she needed to be, the cool, empty place where hesitation and uncertainty did not exist. "Hello, David. Been awhile, hasn't it? You look like shit."

He tittered, and the sound sent a chill scurrying like cold centipedes down her spine. Her gaze darted to the victim, a heavysset, middle-aged man in a brown overcoat, lying face-up in a red pool. His eyes were wide and empty behind cracked, smeared glasses. Half his face had been eaten, and bits of bone gleamed through the gore like pearl in the moonlight. "How long have you been eating their flesh? Didn't your mother ever tell you it would rot your brain? Blood is life..."

"'Blood is life, flesh is death, eat the flesh and draw your last breath.' Yes, I know that stupid little rhyme." David licked his lips. They were mangled, sliced up by fangs grown too big for his mouth, but he didn't seem to notice. Bloodstains covered his denim jacket and faded t-shirt. A silver cross glinted on a chain around his neck. "I recognize you now." He stood. Blood crusted his nails, dripped from his fingers. He raised his hand to lick the wet, warm gore from his fingertips. "You're Victor's bitch."

She tensed. "No, I'm not."

He laughed and wiped the back of one hand across his mouth. "Doesn't matter. Victor can't touch me now. I'm too strong." He took a step toward her. "What's a little wet dream like you doing out here all alone? Aren't you scared?"

“Scared of a pathetic sack of bones? A walking corpse? No, not terribly.”

His grin faded. “You should be. Their flesh gives me powers you can’t imagine.”

“Give me a break. You’re wasting away in front of me. I’m surprised someone hasn’t killed you yet.”

“No one is going to kill me.”

“You’re already dead. You just don’t know it.”

His eyes narrowed. He hissed, fangs bared, and sprang at her like a cougar. She fired. The bullet tore through his shoulder.

He didn’t even seem to feel it. His body slammed into hers, knocking her to the ground. The Beretta flew from her hand and skittered across the pavement. Flat on her belly, she struggled with David clawing and snarling atop her. Long, ragged nails raked her shoulder, stripping away cloth and skin, and she cried out at the searing pain. His moist, hot breath puffed in her ear, and a tongue slid out to caress her racing pulse. He opened his mouth to bite.

Ashley gritted her teeth and brought her elbow upward in a sharp, hard thrust to the soft space beneath his ribcage, driving the breath from him. He went limp, stunned, just for a moment, but long enough for her to get out from under him. She grabbed her Beretta and rolled onto her back. David leapt to his feet, fresh blood—her blood—dripping from his nails. He opened his mouth. Threads of saliva glistened between his long, sharp teeth.

She fired. He stumbled backwards, a bullet hole in his shirt.

She sprang to her feet and fired again, then again. Hot blood trickled from her shoulder, down her side.

He stood, jaw hanging. He looked down at his chest, now riddled with bullet holes.

She charged, rammed her elbow into his side and knocked him to the pavement. She planted a foot on his chest and pressed down until he snarled with pain. “So...” She aimed the gun at his face. “How’s it feel to be killed by a little wet dream?”

When he didn’t answer, she pressed her foot down harder, and he growled. Blood bubbled between his lips and ran down his chin. Ruby eyes, bright with hate, stared up at her.

She pressed the Beretta’s muzzle to the underside of David’s chin and forced his head back. “Remember the Dickinson boy?”

“Who?” His voice was a weak rasp, barely audible.

“The one you killed. Have you forgotten already? How you skinned him alive, ate half of him and left the rest in a Dumpster?”

“Oh.” A faint wheeze of laughter escaped his throat. “Him.”

Ashley nodded. “This is for him. And for the man you killed tonight.” She fired.

The bullet tore through David’s chin, through bone and brain, and exploded out the top of his skull in a spray of blood.

His eyes glazed over. His jaw sagged. Then, as she watched, his skin tightened, shriveled and cracked. Foul-smelling black liquid ran from his mouth. An eyeball oozed from the socket and slid down his cheek like a glob of red and white jelly. He deflated as his body melted to goo, until all that remained was a set of empty clothes and his silver cross. She reached down and picked it up. A fake ruby the size of a pinhead glittered at its center.

It was very fashionable among vampires to wear crosses. They thought it was funny.

She picked up David's clothes, wadded them into a ball, and shoved them into the nearest Dumpster. She dropped the cross atop them and slammed the Dumpster's lid. All that remained of David was a dark, sticky puddle on the pavement. Even now, that puddle was shrinking, evaporating into wisps of greenish smoke.

David's victim sprawled motionless on the pavement, like a discarded doll. She approached and looked down. David had gnawed half the man's face off. His throat and chest were a mass of shredded meat.

With two gloved fingers, she pulled his eyelids shut. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Ashley walked away, her wounded shoulder throbbing. Blood soaked through her shirt in a wet, spreading patch.

Someone would find the body and alert the police. Given the appearance of the man's wounds, his death would likely be blamed on an animal. Most human killers didn't tear out their victim's throats or eat their faces. The police would probably puzzle over the unusual bite-marks, call local zoos to see if any animals had escaped recently, but they wouldn't suspect the truth. They never did. To the average person, vampires were the stuff of horror novels. To Ashley, they were an everyday reality.

More blood oozed down her arm and dripped from her fingertips, leaving small, dark spots on the pavement. She pressed a hand to the wound, trying to staunch the flow.

She'd left her battered gray Ford parked on a narrow residential street. She popped the trunk, pulled out a black towel and spread it over the driver's seat before she got in. She'd gotten blood on her seat too many times, and it was a bitch to clean. Tonight, she'd come prepared.

* * * *

Ashley's apartment building was a brick and concrete eyesore with tiny windows, surrounded by paved lots littered with broken glass and cigarette butts. The narrow strip of yellow grass on the building's right supported a single, scrawny tree. Its branches stretched skyward like raised arms, as if beseeching God to end its sad life with a well-placed lightning bolt. Someone had draped a condom over the tip of one branch, and the flimsy bit of latex fluttered in the breeze like a miniature flag.

She took the elevator to the fifth floor and walked down a narrow, musty-smelling hallway, past a tea-colored stain on the threadbare brown carpet. The stain had been there since she'd moved into this building three years ago. She unlocked her door, entered and peeled off her blood-soaked, black leather coat. She examined the stain and made a mental note to never again buy any item of clothing made from leather. It was too difficult to clean. She'd bought the coat back in college, before washing blood out of her clothes became a regular chore.

She retreated into her closet-sized bathroom. A fat roach scurried away from her feet and squeezed itself through a crack in the wall. She ignored it and undressed. Her shirt stuck to the blood on her shoulder, making her wince as she pulled it free.

The long, ragged claw-marks had already begun to heal. They looked as though they'd been inflicted last week, instead of an hour ago. Being half-vampire did have its advantages. The shirt, however, was ruined. She shoved the torn, bloody wad of cloth into a plastic bag, which she dropped into the wastebasket.

She showered, soaped away the drying blood, the smell of sweat and fear, and watched the red-tinted water run in rivulets off her body.

She thought about the dead man in the alley. If she'd gotten there even a few minutes sooner, that man would probably still be alive, but thinking about that did no good. With an ease born of long practice, Ashley folded up the memories and tucked them deep into a drawer at the bottom of her mind. She visualized herself shutting the drawer and locking it tight; sealing those thoughts away where they couldn't hurt her. A psychologist would probably say she was repressing them. Whatever. Maybe ordinary people could afford to air out their bad memories, or come to terms with them, or whatever people were supposed to do. She had too many. If she tried to face them all, she'd end up in a padded room.

A wave of dizziness washed over her. She leaned against the stall wall and shut her eyes until it passed.

She touched the claw-marks on her shoulder. They had already closed, forming hard, pink ridges of scar tissue. Her fingertips wandered over the jagged paths of the scars. By morning, even those would be gone. The wound itself wasn't the problem. She'd just lost too much blood. Soon, she would have to replenish it.

She shut off the water, towed herself dry, slipped into her robe and walked to the kitchen, to the stainless steel mini-fridge where she kept the units of whole blood from the local hospital. She opened the refrigerator door.

Bare steel racks gleamed under a tiny light-bulb. Empty.

A cold wire of fear cinched her gut. The refrigerator had been half-full that morning, she was certain. How could half a dozen pouches of blood just vanish? Had they been stolen? But who would steal her blood, and why?

She looked around the kitchen, but saw no other signs that someone had broken in, not that there was much in her kitchen to steal. No toaster, no microwave, just some cheap silverware and a few green plastic bowls. She inspected the living room. The TV was still there, and the stereo. She checked the bedroom and opened the first drawer of her dresser. The spare cash she kept stuffed in a white sock was untouched. Nothing else had been taken. Just the blood.

She went back into the kitchen, closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. She sorted through the familiar smells of dust, linoleum and dish soap, searching, until her nose caught a faint but unmistakable scent.

Victor.

Her hands clenched. He hadn't even bothered to mask his scent. And it wouldn't be the first time he'd come into her apartment uninvited. Locks were no deterrence to Victor. But why would he steal her blood?

No time to wonder. Tomorrow she could pick up another batch, but tonight, she needed to hunt. She had no choice.

Another wave of weakness swept over her, and she sank to her knees, trembling. Sweat beaded on her brow. She took deep breaths until the weakness subsided, then slowly straightened. Goosebumps rose on her bare arms and legs. Her apartment wasn't cold. Her internal temperature was dropping. She touched her forehead. Her skin, always cool to the touch, felt like ice. She had five, maybe six hours before she was too weak to walk.

Ashley changed into a fresh pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She ran a hand through her short, damp hair, buckled a leather holster around her waist and picked up her Beretta. After reloading it, she shoved it into the holster and put on a denim jacket just long

enough to hide the gun. Walking around with a concealed weapon was illegal in Illinois, but then, she did a lot of things that didn't really square with the law. She wasn't about to venture out unarmed in a city filled with vampires.

Her cell phone blared out a ringtone from the coffee table. She gave a start.

Only a handful of people knew her cell phone number. When she got a call, it was usually important. With a muttered curse, she grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"It's ten-thirty, Ashley. Where the hell are you?"

Shit. She smacked her forehead. "Jack, I'm sorry. Something came up."

"Are you coming in tonight or not?"

"I'll be there in five minutes." Ashley hung up and rubbed her temples. Jack was going to tear her head off. What was she supposed to tell him? *Sorry, but I had to hunt down a crazed vampire serial killer* just wouldn't fly.

Why hadn't she just told him she was sick tonight? She *couldn't* work. She was already feeling the effects of blood deprivation. If she didn't feed before sunrise, she was in big trouble.

She checked her schedule, scrawled on a Post-it on the cabinet. Well, her shift was only until four a.m. Still time to hunt before dawn. Maybe she could sneak out during her break. She knew she was leaving far too much to chance, but she really couldn't afford to miss work again. If she lost this job...well, the landlord had told her that if her rent check bounced again she was going to be out on her ass. And if she lost her apartment...

Better not to think about that.

Most people had parents, or at least friends they could crash with. If she lost her apartment, she had nowhere to go except to Victor, and that was not even an option. Sleeping in an empty refrigerator box on the street would be safer. Hell, sneaking into the Lincoln Park Zoo to sleep in the lions' cage would be safer.

She changed into her work clothes: black slacks and a white, button-down blouse with a dorky little bow on the collar. Not her favorite look, but Jack was picky about what his servers could and couldn't wear. Wearing a holster to work was out of the question, so she shoved her Beretta into her purse and ran out of the apartment.

Chapter Two

Ashley's beat-up antique of a car pulled, wheezing, into the parking lot of Maxine's Diner. *Open 24 Hours*, boasted the neon sign. The restaurant was only a few blocks from her apartment. When it was nice out, she walked to work, but tonight she couldn't spare those extra minutes. She ran in and stood, huffing for breath.

Jack stood facing her, arms crossed over his broad chest. He was a big man, not tall, but solidly built. He looked like he could've played football in high-school, though his stomach had gone saggy since then. Greasy, dark hair peeked out from under a paper chef's hat. "You know we don't have any other waitresses on tonight, don't you?"

"Sorry. Won't happen again."

"Good, because this is your last warning." He shoved the hated red-striped smock at her. "And wipe down some of those tables when you don't have any customers." He turned and marched into the kitchen.

Ashley slipped the smock on. A cramp seized her stomach. Head buzzing, limbs shaky, she stumbled into the bathroom and leaned against the wall, eyes closed. She took a deep breath and pressed a hand to her stomach until the cramp faded. Her eyes opened and she willed the world to stop spinning.

A glance into the bathroom mirror made her wince. Was it the harsh lighting, or did her skin look even paler, more transparent, than usual? She could see the faint blue roadmap of veins on her forehead. Yuck. She turned away, wishing the old myth about vampires and mirrors was true so she wouldn't have to see herself right now.

She wanted a bowl of warm blood. Barring that, she wanted a cigarette. Barring that, she wanted to lie down on the cool, tiled floor, close her eyes and not move for the next day or so. Or even just a few minutes. But she knew that wasn't an option. If she collapsed now, she wouldn't have the strength to get up.

She squared her shoulders. She could do this. Just a few hours, then she could hunt. Hunching over the sink, she splashed cold water onto her face, wiped it dry with a paper towel, and applied a few touches of make-up from the meager stash in her purse—pink gloss for her pale lips, beige foundation and blush for her ashen cheeks. There, that was better. She looked a little more human, a little less like something that had crawled out of a grave. She smoothed her striped smock and walked out of the bathroom.

A tall, lean young man in a dark coat and faded jeans sat alone in a corner booth, staring out the window. His coffee-brown hair was rumpled—as if he'd just rolled out of bed—and slightly too long, so it curled at the nape of his neck.

She approached and pulled a notepad and pencil from her pocket. "Hey there. Sorry for the wait. What can I get you?"

The young man looked up. His face was drawn and pale, shadowed with stubble. In spite of that, there was something striking about him, something that made her stop and stare. High cheekbones, strong nose, dark, straight brows...and those eyes. They were a deep, dark blue, like the horizon at dusk, when all but the last, soft rays of sun had faded from the sky—the sort of eyes you could drown in, if you weren't careful.

"I'll just have some coffee," he said. His voice was warm and deep, slightly hoarse.

"At this hour?" She strove for a playful tone. "You wouldn't happen to be part

vampire, would you?"

Now, why had she said that?

He smiled. Even the smile didn't erase the lines of tension around his eyes, which made him look older than he probably was. Twenty-five going on sixty. "I don't sleep much."

"I'm kind of a night owl, myself." The vampire thing had been a joke, but for a moment she wondered. A lot of vampires had that sense about them, that they were much older than they looked. But he didn't smell like one. Vampires smelled of cold stone and dust. He smelled like cotton, cheap soap and warm human flesh. "I'll be right back with that coffee."

She fetched a pot from the kitchen and filled his cup. Her eyes moved down the line of his long neck, over his broad shoulders and chest, down to his narrow waist. He was hard and toned—not overly bulky, but despite his loose clothes, it was obvious he had some good, solid muscle on him. Though he sat motionless, she could sense the energy and strength humming through his body, like something coiled inside him, ready to spring out. Clearing her throat, she straightened. "Sure you don't want anything else?"

He studied her face, and she had the strange sense that he wasn't just looking at her, but into her. Reading her as if she were an open book and those dusky blue eyes were scanning the contents, committing every detail to memory. Her mouth had gone dry, and her pulse jackhammered in her throat. It felt almost like he was probing her mind, as a vampire would...or was it her imagination? Either way, she couldn't look away from those eyes. She felt caught, pinned in place.

Surprise flickered briefly in his expression. Then his face went shielded and blank. "Anything you recommend?"

It took her a moment to remember what they'd been talking about. "Oh. On the menu, you mean? Um, I never eat here, really." At his raised eyebrow, she shrugged. "I'm a vegetarian, and I'm allergic to wheat gluten, which means no bread. That kind of limits my options in a hamburger restaurant."

He glanced at the sticky, ketchup-stained menu, then closed it and folded his hands in front of him. He had nice hands, she noticed. Large and strong, with long, graceful fingers. "I'll have the chicken soup."

"Coming right up."

Ashley returned a minute later with hot soup and packaged saltine crackers. As he crumbled crackers into the soup, she stared at his throat. She couldn't see his pulse, but if she concentrated, she could hear the strong, steady beat of his heart. She imagined it pumping inside his chest, ruby-red and filled with rich, life-giving blood. For an instant she seemed to *see* the veins through his skin, red and neon-bright, as if her hunger had given her a flash of X-ray vision. *Oh Jesus*. She gulped. Her teeth felt sharp in her mouth. She kept her lips closed when she smiled at him, and it took all her willpower to keep her voice steady and normal-sounding. "Anything else I can get you?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again and shook his head. Suddenly his expression was serious. "No thanks."

She wondered what he'd been about to say before he thought better of it. *Yeah, your phone number*, maybe? Just as well he hadn't asked. Oh, he was hot, but that was beside the point. She didn't get involved with men. Victor made sure of that.

He swallowed a spoonful of soup. She watched his Adam's apple bob up and down.

Her fangs pressed against the inside of her mouth, and she turned away, heart thumping. She needed to get away before she jumped on him like a hungry panther.

When she returned a third time, he was gone and he'd left a ten dollar bill, enough to cover the check, plus four-fifty. A generous tip for a bowl of soup and coffee. After she cashed it out and pocketed the tip, a wave of weakness rolled over her. She stumbled and leaned against the counter. Her vision went black for a moment. When her eyes cleared, Jack loomed over her, frowning. "You all right?"

"Yeah." She straightened. Black spots danced in front of her eyes. "Just really hungry. I think I need to take my break."

He glanced at the empty dining room and grunted. "Go on. Make it quick."

"Thanks." She hung up her smock.

"Hey, can you work tomorrow? Five to midnight? Sherry's kid is sick."

Ashley shook her head. "No day shifts, remember? Doctor's orders."

His frown deepened. "I know you got that skin condition, but if you're indoors all day..."

"Even the sunlight from the windows is too much. A few hours in those UV rays and I look like I've been dipped in red paint. It's not pretty. Not to mention the increased risk of melanoma."

He sighed. "Okay, okay."

She shrugged into her coat, grabbed her purse and left the restaurant. Hands in her pockets, head bowed, she walked down the street. Another wave of vertigo crashed over her, and she leaned against a nearby brick wall. The world spun and tilted like an out-of-control carnival ride.

A group of teenagers walked past her, laughing and talking loudly. The smell of their warm, healthy young bodies filled her nose, and she licked her lips. No. Too many of them. Too risky. After they turned the corner, she walked on. She stumbled and fell to her hands and knees. The weight of exhaustion pressed down on her back and flattened her against the pavement like a giant hand. *Maybe if I just rest here a minute...*

She closed her eyes. Numbing cold spread through her body, like ice water in her veins. *I should really get up.* She was too vulnerable, laying here in plain sight. *So tired...*

"Hey." A warm hand gripped her shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes and slowly raised her head. A young man crouched in front of her. He looked familiar, but she was so disoriented that it took a few seconds to recognize the guy from the restaurant, the one she'd waited on just ten minutes ago. "Oh." Her voice was a faint croak. "It's you."

He leaned closer, his gaze searching her face. Those dusky blue eyes filled her vision, and again, she had the sense that he was looking into her, his thoughts touching hers—yet it didn't feel like a vampire's mind-probe. Rather than being invasive, it felt almost soothing, like warm, gentle hands moving over her. "You okay?" he asked, and his deep voice vibrated pleasantly in her ears.

She struggled to clear the fog from her brain. "Yeah. Fine."

"You don't look fine." An arm slipped around her waist and helped her to her feet. He led her toward a bench, his arm a warm pressure around her body. She leaned against his shoulder as they walked. She sank to the bench.

He sat next to her and pressed the back of one hand to her forehead. Her eyes slipped shut at the unexpected warmth. She soaked up his heat, drank it in. "Your skin is like

ice,” he said. “I’m going to call an ambulance.” He pulled a cell phone from his pocket.

“No.” She grabbed his wrist.

He looked at her, eyebrows raised.

She released him. “Sorry. I just need to rest. I skipped dinner, so I’m a little light-headed. That’s all.”

He frowned. “Then let me bring you something to eat.”

“No, I can get something on my own.”

“This isn’t a good neighborhood,” he said. “You shouldn’t be alone here, especially if you’re not feeling well. I can’t just leave you.”

This would be easier if he wasn’t so nice. She almost wished she’d run into a would-be rapist, or at least some annoying punk, so she wouldn’t have to feel guilty for what she was about to do. But she couldn’t afford to pass up a chance like this. Fate had delivered him to her like a neatly wrapped present.

Her gaze focused on his throat, and she moistened her lips with her tongue. But she couldn’t feed on him while he was conscious. That was a short path to madness. She met his gaze and waited for his eyes to go wide and unfocused, for his face to go slack, but his expression remained alert. “Damn it,” she muttered, and felt a twinge of panic. The power wouldn’t come. She was too exhausted to summon it.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

Another wave of dizziness swept through her. She was running out of time. She grabbed his head between both hands and thrust her face toward his. His eyes widened.

If he’d fought her, she would have lost; she was too tired, too weak, to maintain her focus. But in that moment of surprise, his mind was wide open. Before he realized what was happening, she’d thrust her mind into his and seized control. *Sleep*, she thought. He blinked, and his eyes slipped out of focus. His face softened. She had him. Thank God.

She slid her fingers into his hair. “Lift your arms and put them around me.”

He hesitated only a moment before obeying. His arms slipped around her, fingers interlacing loosely behind her back.

She gripped a fistful of his hair and tilted his head back, exposing his throat. She watched the pulse in his neck, the rise and fall of the great vein just beneath the skin. She heard the blood rushing within, swift and hot. She leaned closer and opened her mouth. Her canine teeth lengthened. Slowly, carefully, she slid them into his neck. His body twitched, then went limp as she drank, his arms still draped around her. To anyone who walked or drove past them, they would have looked like lovers making out on a bench.

The taste of him burst on her tongue, an explosion of salt and heat. Her arms tightened around him as blood flowed down her throat and spread through her body, like liquid fire spilling into her veins. The young man remained motionless in her arms, warm and heavy. Then a faint groan escaped his throat, and he stirred in her arms. *Not yet. Please, not yet.* He groaned again.

She swallowed one last mouthful and forced herself to pull back. Tiny trickles of blood ran from the twin holes in his neck. She ran her tongue over the punctures, lapping up the last two drops. The punctures shrank and vanished. The young man let out a soft sigh. His eyes rolled beneath the lids, trying to open, as if even now, he were fighting the spell. In a few minutes, he’d wake with a headache and a muddled memory. If he recalled anything at all, he would probably dismiss it as a dream.

She kissed his temple, a silent thanks. Some thanks, though. He’d shown her

kindness, gone out of his way to help her, and she'd returned the favor with her teeth in his neck. She studied his face, her gaze lingering on his lips. Even now, she could see lines of tension etched around his eyes and mouth. What had happened to him, to put those premature age-lines on his young face? A lock of dark brown hair lay across his forehead, and her fingers itched to smooth it back. She started to reach out, then stopped herself.

She stood and turned away. As she walked back to the diner, she pulled a package of cigarettes from her pocket, lit one and raised it to her lips. The taste of smoke mingled with the taste of blood in her mouth.

"I thought you didn't feed on humans," said a deep, male voice. "Getting desperate? Or have you finally realized how much better it tastes when it's hot?"

She turned. A tall, broad-shouldered form stood nearby, swathed in shadow, leaning against the side of a building. He wore a loose, black, long-sleeved shirt with the first three buttons undone in a calculated fashion to show a hint of his chest—muscular, hairless and white as marble. Tight-fitting dark jeans hugged his legs. He shifted position slightly, folding his arms over his chest. The yellow glow of the streetlight reflected off of a red eye and a set of sharp teeth. "Your hunting techniques are still clumsy, though. I could teach you how to do it properly." He leaned forward, and the light fell across his coldly handsome face. A neat, black beard framed his mouth. "You'd be surprised how little pressure you need to exert, how easy it is to manipulate their will, their memories. The human mind is like clay."

She kept her expression neutral. "What do you want, Victor?"

"Just to talk."

"I'm not in the mood."

He chuckled. "Nothing has changed, has it?"

She ignored the question—the answer was obvious, anyway—and asked one of her own instead. "You stole the blood from my apartment. Why?"

"What makes you think it was me?"

"Don't be coy. I know your scent. Why did you do it?"

"To test you."

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I wanted to see if you would rise to the challenge. You did not disappoint. You are a hunter. It is in your blood, in your very soul."

"And you're a manipulative prick. I should have known it would be some stupid reason like that. You wanted to test me? Fuck you." She turned and started to walk in the opposite direction.

"Don't think you can just walk away," he said, his voice cold.

She halted, shoulders tensing. She knew she should keep walking, but when he spoke like that, it was difficult to disobey. She would have liked to think he was cheating, using his mental powers, but the simple truth was that he scared her. She stood motionless, her back rigid. In her pockets, her hands clenched, nails biting into her palms.

"You can try to avoid me, but you're just postponing the inevitable," he said. "We both know this can't go on forever."

"What can't?"

"This life of yours. Drinking blood from little plastic bags, working for a paycheck, pretending to be civilized. Pretending to be one of them. You're a wolf trying to graze

with the sheep. One of these days, they're going to turn on you, and you'll have nowhere to go." She felt, more than heard, his movement as he approached.

She growled, still facing away from him. "Don't come any closer. I'm armed."

"I know. I smell metal and gunpowder." He paused. "And I smell David's blood. Did you kill him?"

She turned to face him. "Someone had to. Or do you think it's okay for a vampire to go on a killing spree whenever he feels like it?"

"What I think is beside the point. David had friends, and they won't be happy about this. You should leave the job of killing rogues to a stronger vampire."

"Well, I didn't see anyone else stepping up to take care of it, and he'd already killed two humans."

"Humans die all the time. A few more or less make no difference."

"It must be nice to feel so superior to everyone. Maybe you can sit around with a clean conscience while innocent people are murdered right under your nose, but I can't. If I have the power to prevent an innocent person from dying, then I do it."

He raised his eyebrows. "And did you?"

"What?"

"Prevent an innocent person from dying."

Ashley's breath caught in her throat. The dead man's face, his blood-smeared glasses and empty eyes, flashed through her mind. Her chest tightened. No, damn it. She was not going to lose it in front of Victor. "He was dead when I got there. But at least now I know David won't kill anyone else."

He took a step closer. "You already attract more than your share of attention from other vampires. This...hobby of yours has made you even more of a target. Alone, you're very vulnerable. You need the protection of a stronger vampire."

She glared at him. "And let me guess. You can offer me that, for a price."

"Everything has a price."

She dropped the cigarette and crushed it beneath a foot. "You can ask me as many times as you like. The answer's not going to change. I won't be your whore."

"You think that's what you would be to me? A whore? You really don't know anything." His eyes glowed red in the darkness, like embers. "Your mother did you a terrible disservice, trying to raise you as a human, keeping you ignorant of the ways of our people. She filled your head with nonsense. You believe that a blood-bond is slavery. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"So what is it, then?"

"A partnership."

"A partnership where one partner is in total control?"

"You would still have a certain amount of autonomy, you know. You would not be a mere puppet, like one of my human vessels."

"But you'd still have the power to control me when I went against your wishes."

"If you are wise, that will not happen often."

She narrowed her eyes. "Forget it. I don't even know why I'm still talking to you. I'm not giving up my freedom."

"And this is your idea of freedom? Serving food to humans? Struggling to make rent?"

"I can walk away from this job if I want. I could never walk away from you, once

you claimed me. Anyway, you've already got a stable of human lovers. Why waste so much energy chasing me? Is it just that you can't stand being rejected?"

"You are far more valuable to me than any human. You know that."

"Oh yeah. Because I can make vampire babies, right? Okay, so I wouldn't be a whore. More like breeding stock."

"You see that as a dishonor? Our women are respected for their capacity to bring life into the world."

"Your women are kept locked up like prisoners. You have a strange notion of respect. Sorry, but no matter how you dress it up, a life of incubating your spawn is the last thing I want."

His back stiffened. "I could force your compliance, you know." His voice was low and calm, but there was an undercurrent of something cold. Something ugly. "I could bind you to me against your will. I am trying to be a gentleman about this, but you make it very difficult." He took another step toward her. "I have waited far too long already, honoring the foolish promise I made to your mother."

Ashley drew her Beretta and aimed it at the center of his chest. "If you come any closer, I'll shoot you."

"That toy is no threat to me."

"You think you can survive a shot to the heart? Let's test that claim." She eased her finger onto the trigger.

"You wouldn't dare," he said, but there was the faintest hint of uncertainty in his voice.

"Are you willing to bet your life on that?"

For a long moment, neither one of them moved. They weighed each other with their eyes. Then he smiled, a flash of teeth in the darkness. "You do try my patience. I have other business to attend tonight, but I will return, make no mistake. You are mine, and you will remain mine, no matter what you do."

"Eat shit."

"Eloquent as ever." He turned and walked away, hands in his pockets, the heels of his boots beating a slow rhythm against the pavement.

She exhaled and wiped the back of one hand across her sweat-damp brow.

* * * *

By the time Ashley left work, she could already see the faint, pink light of dawn on the horizon. She drove home, struggling to keep her eyes open. It had been a long night. Her limbs felt like stone, and each movement was a test of willpower. The early morning sunlight made her skin prickle and sting. When the sun peeked over the horizon, it seemed to suck the strength out of her like a black hole. Normally, sunlight this dim wasn't an issue, but the confrontation with Victor had drained her. She wanted to crawl into bed and hide beneath the covers.

She'd hunted down a total of seven rogue vampires. Each time, she'd gone into it knowing she might not survive. She'd stared death in the face. She wasn't afraid of dying. But she was afraid of Victor.

She was an adult now. She should be strong enough to face him without flinching, to look him in the eye and see him as the petty bully he was. But somehow, whenever she heard his voice, she was suddenly thirteen years old again, a child with a toy gun, facing

a shadowy bogeyman.

Back in her apartment, she drew all the curtains shut, crawled into bed and pulled a heavy blanket over her body. She curled up beneath it and closed her eyes. Her Beretta was in its holster, hanging from the knob on the closet door, but she kept a Glock under her pillow. It was always loaded.

Chapter Three

The next evening, Ashley drove to the hospital. The doctor knew her and didn't ask questions. Cash changed hands, and she drove home with her big red cooler filled with plastic pouches of iced O-negative. When she got home, she poured some into a coffee mug and drank it in one long gulp.

Victor was right about one thing, at least. Fresh blood tasted better.

When she arrived at work, the tall, shaggy-haired young man was there again. He sat in the same corner booth, leaning back, hands in his coat pockets. The sight of him gave her a shock. Her heart lurched. Did he suspect? Had he come to confront her?

She approached the table. She had no choice. As usual, she was the only waitress working the night shift.

He looked up. "Hey." There was no accusation in his eyes, no suspicion.

The knot in her gut loosened. "Hey. Another sleepless night?"

"Yeah." A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He looked better than he had last night. His eyes were a little brighter, his face less pale. But still, there were those tension lines, and a shadow deep in his eyes. The ghost of some old pain.

"Coffee?" she asked. He nodded, and she filled his cup. "So what'll it be tonight?"

He looked into her eyes, his expression serious. "Actually, I came to talk to you."

The knot tightened again. "About what?" she asked, keeping her expression polite and blank. Now the questions would come. She wondered just how much he remembered. Enough, maybe, to realize that something weird had happened to him. Her mind raced, trying to come up with some explanation he would buy.

"I wanted to ask if you'd like to get a cup of coffee sometime."

Her jaw dropped. She snapped it shut and stared at him, half-convinced she'd misheard. "Coffee?"

"Maybe tomorrow afternoon, if you're not busy?"

"Oh." She gulped. "I don't usually date customers." Which was true, though the full truth was that she didn't really date at all. And for good reasons.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll give you my cell number, and if you want, you can call me. No pressure." He took a pen from his pocket. "I don't have anything to write on, so..." He gently gripped her wrist and turned her hand over, exposing her palm. The pen tickled as he wrote his number across her lifeline. The warm pressure of his fingers on her wrist sent a tiny jolt of electricity up her arm. "Don't worry, I'm not going to turn into a stalker and start hanging around the restaurant if I don't hear from you." He smiled. She noticed his eyes were framed by thick, ink-black lashes, the sort that most women would kill to have. "But I'd like to get to know you better. I'm curious about you."

For a moment, she stood staring at him, feeling like the world's biggest ditz. Funny. She could keep her cool when someone was trying to kill her, but a harmless invitation to a coffee date left her completely flustered. "Do you want anything else?"

"Just coffee tonight. My name's Will, by the way."

"Ashley." She could still feel the warmth of his fingers against her skin, lingering, like the after-image of a lightning flash.

* * * *

Ashley sat on her couch, staring at her palm. It had been over four years since she'd been on a date. She couldn't even remember the last time someone had asked her.

She wasn't a great beauty, like her mother had been, but she knew she wasn't unattractive, either. She'd probably get asked out more often if she went to bars, or clubs, or parties, or anything remotely social, but there just didn't seem to be any point. Getting laid had never been a big priority, and relationships were far too risky.

She didn't need a shrink to tell her that her experiences with Brian, her first and last boyfriend, had left her with a deep-seated fear of intimacy. But considering how many secrets she had to protect—and what would happen to her if those secrets were ever exposed—it was a pretty reasonable fear.

She knew she should just scrub her hand until the number was no longer visible, remove the temptation. Even setting aside the risk of exposure, there was Victor to consider.

But if Victor didn't know...

Her cell phone rested on the coffee table in front of her. She stared at it and nibbled her thumbnail. It was just coffee, after all. Nothing serious. It had been so long since she'd had the chance to just sit and talk with someone. Victor didn't count. Talking to him was like playing chess. Every word was a calculated move, a way to put your opponent on the defensive.

She picked up the phone. Will probably wouldn't answer, she thought. It was too early in the morning. He would still be in bed. His cell phone wouldn't even be on.

She dialed. His phone rang once, twice. Just when she'd decided to hang up, there was a click, and Will's voice said, "Hello?"

She wet her lips, heart hammering. "Hey. It's Ashley. I hope I didn't wake you up."

"No, I'm still awake."

"Still?" she said. "You've been up all night?"

"Told you I didn't sleep much."

"You weren't kidding." She hesitated. "So, um, did you still want to do something tomorrow? I mean tonight?"

"Sure. How's seven o'clock?"

She thought for a moment. The sun would be down by then. "That's fine."

"You know the Moonlight Café? It's just a few blocks north of Maxine's. You turn left on Bryn Mawr and you're there. They're open all night. We can meet there, if you like."

She fingered a lock of hair. "Sounds good."

There was a brief silence.

"I'm glad you called," he said. He had a great voice, she thought, deep and soft. A bedroom voice.

"I'm glad I called, too. See you tonight." She hung up and wiped her sweat-slick palms on her shirt. For the first time since her sophomore year of college, she was going out with a man. At her age, a date shouldn't be a big deal. So why was she shaking?

* * * *

Ashley retired to bed, where she tossed and turned for an hour. When she finally

drifted off, David's victims haunted her dreams, their mangled, bloodstained corpses staring at her with accusing eyes.

She woke with a start and stared at the ceiling as she waited for her pounding heart to slow. The last orange light of sunset bled through the cracks between her blinds. She rolled onto her side, away from the burning sunlight, and hugged a pillow to her chest. A glance at the clock told her it was almost six.

She rolled out of bed, showered, and slipped into a fresh t-shirt and jeans. She stared into the mirror and grimaced. *I look like a twelve-year-old*. She'd always been tiny, and she didn't have much going on in the chest area. Her mother had always assured her that she would "fill out," but Ashley was in her mid-twenties now. This was as big as her tits were ever going to get.

She changed into a snug-fitting, short-sleeved black shirt with a tiny crescent moon and star applied in silver glitter below the collar. The black shirt at least gave some indication that she *had* tits, albeit small ones. A pair of black sneakers completed the ensemble.

After gulping down some cold blood from the fridge, she looked into the mirror again. Ruby eyes stared back at her. She opened her contact lens case and popped in dark brown lenses. It was supposed to be chilly that night, so she slipped into a denim jacket. The black coat was for hunting. She wasn't a vampire hunter tonight. She was just Ashley.

Her jacket wasn't nearly as good for hiding guns, but she didn't plan on leaving the apartment unarmed. That was like going outside without a shirt, so she slipped her Beretta into her purse.

Chapter Four

The Moonlight Café was a tiny place, tucked between a Korean deli and a laundromat. A sign hung on the door with the café's name written in flowing white script against a black background dotted with stars.

Will stood in front of the building, a tall, lean figure, hands in his pockets, head held erect as his eyes scanned the crowds of people hurrying past. Looking for her. Her fingers tightened on the strap of her purse, and her stomach did somersaults as she approached. "Hi."

He turned, and his face lit up. When he smiled, his dark blue eyes actually seemed to brighten a shade, like the sky after a storm, when the sun peeks through the clouds. "Hey." He wore a black shirt under a long jacket, and his freshly shaved face looked as though it would be velvet-soft to the touch. She smelled aftershave and strong soap. The shirt was snug enough to show off the width of his shoulders, his narrow waist and flat stomach.

She swallowed, trying to get some saliva flowing. She felt as if she'd been gargling with sand. "I hope you weren't waiting long. Am I late?"

"No, I'm early." He glanced at the café. "Want to get some coffee?"

"Um, sure." God, if another vampire saw her now, her reputation would be destroyed. Ashley Hunt, fearsome slayer of rogues, reduced to a bundle of nerves by a pair of pretty blue eyes. And a very nice ass. She admired it as he walked ahead of her, through the café door; small and tight, round and firm as an apple. She wondered if it should worry her that she thought of food when she looked at him.

Will ordered a cinnamon latte. Ashley ordered plain coffee, and they chose a table near the back. It was a good thing, she thought, that most human food and drink was harmless to her, but she knew from experience that she couldn't live on it. A vampire who ate nothing but human food would starve. It all tasted like soggy sawdust and Styrofoam, anyway.

She sipped her coffee, which may as well have been plain hot water. Will took off his jacket and draped it over the back of his chair. Her gaze wandered along his well-muscled arms, taking in the veins on his wrists, the light dusting of dark hair on his forearms. Vampire males had almost no body hair. The difference intrigued her. Would that hair tickle her if she rubbed against it? She thought about running a finger down his arm, wondered how he would react.

"So, you go to school around here or anything?" he asked.

"Um, I graduated from Northern Illinois University a few years ago. Journalism major." She emptied a sugar packet into her coffee and stirred, not because it made a difference in the taste, but because she needed something to do with her hands. "What about you?"

He shrugged. "Never finished college. I have a job, but if I tried to describe it I'd just bore you into a coma."

She chuckled. "It can't be worse than mine."

"You might be surprised."

Now, there was a cryptic statement. "What do you want to do, then?" she asked.

"In a perfect world?" He leaned back in his chair. Her eyes traced the long, lean lines of his body as he stretched. "I'd probably just paint and draw all day. You know how in school there was always one quiet kid who sat in the back and just doodled in his notebook all the time? That was me."

She smiled. "I was that kid, too. Except I was usually reading instead of drawing." She looked down at her hands, suddenly self-conscious. Her face grew warm as the silence stretched on. "I'm sorry. It's just been so long since I've had a real conversation with anyone. I'm out of practice."

"What about friends? You talk to them, don't you?"

"I don't have friends." For a moment, he said nothing, and her heart sank. She'd blown it. Now he would think there was something wrong with her. Who didn't have friends? Just hermits and sociopaths. She wasn't sure which of those categories she fell into, but either way, she'd probably just held up a big red flag: *Danger! Weirdo!*

But when he answered, there was no judgment in his voice. "That's a shame. It's hard to face the world alone. Some people can do it, but no one should have to."

She met his gaze, surprised.

He sipped his coffee. "It isn't easy to let down your guard. Believe me, I know. I didn't have any real friends as a kid. I was...different. And I was afraid of what would happen if others found out. So I pushed people away. It took me a long time to learn how to let anyone in."

She smelled sweat beneath his aftershave and deodorant. Was he nervous? "What do you mean, you were 'different?'"

"I'm not like most people." His gaze sharpened as he looked at her. An intent, searching gaze. "You understand what that's like, don't you?"

Her heartbeat quickened, and she looked away. Did he know? No, of course not. If he knew she was a vampire, he wouldn't be sitting here having coffee with her. Would he? She swallowed, throat tight. *I shouldn't be doing this. It's risky. It...* Warm fingers touched the back of her hand, and her breath caught. Their gazes met, and his blue eyes stared deep into hers. "I'm not your enemy," he said, his voice quiet and soothing, and a wave of calm washed over her. He withdrew his hand.

Her skin tingled where he had touched her. She blinked, disoriented. What had just happened?

"How's your coffee?" he asked, distracting her.

She sipped her coffee and grimaced. "I let it sit too long. It's cold."

"I'm finished with mine. Do you want to go for a walk?"

"Sure."

He stood and offered her his hand. She took it. Her skin tingled again, as if a mild electric current had passed between them. They walked out of the café, and she let her hand slip out of his. She didn't want to, but it felt safer to let go. For now. Will tucked his hands in his jacket pockets.

The night air was cool and fresh, and far off, in the gaps between skyscrapers, she could see the glint of moonlight on Lake Michigan. Will walked with a slow, easy stride, glancing up at the sky. The wind played with his shaggy, brown hair. She found herself looking at his throat. She wanted to bury her face in it and breathe in the warm, vanilla-sweet smell of his skin.

A crowd of people passed them on one side, talking and laughing. He winced, bowed

his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. His breathing grew heavier.

She studied his face, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

He opened his eyes. "I've got a bit of a headache, that's all. It'll pass."

"Are you sure?" She leaned toward him, reached out and brushed his hair from his face. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and his eyes were glazed, unfocused. His pupils had all but swallowed up the blue of his irises. "If you're not feeling well..."

"No, I'm fine." He looked around, grabbed her arm and steered her down a side-street, away from the flow of foot-traffic. "This way."

"Will, what's going on?"

"Nothing." He wiped the back of one hand across his forehead. "It's the crowds. Once I get away from the crowds I'll be fine."

Their path took them to a residential area, a narrow street lined with brick apartment buildings. Sure enough, the tension eased out of his shoulders, and the pain faded from his eyes. "There. This is nicer, isn't it?"

"Why do crowds bother you so much?" she asked.

He hesitated. "It's just...the noise. I get bad headaches sometimes, and the noise makes it worse."

She frowned. She doubted it was really that simple, but said nothing. They walked for a few minutes in silence.

"Tell me something about you," he said.

"Like what?"

"Anything. What's your favorite movie?"

"I don't watch many movies."

"Favorite book, then."

She hesitated. "You'll laugh."

"I won't. Cross my heart."

"*Watership Down*."

"That's the one with the rabbits, right? Why did you think I would laugh?"

"Well, it's a kids' book. Or at least, that's what people assume when they see it's about talking animals."

"What do you like about it?"

She paused, thinking. "It's honest. It's not cynical, but it doesn't pull any punches. The world is a big, scary place, and you have to rely on your wits to survive, especially if you're one of the hunted." She stuck her hands in her pockets. "So what about you? What's your favorite book? Or movie?"

"If I'm being honest with myself, I'd have to say the Star Wars trilogy. Which I guess is technically three movies, but I don't know if I could possibly pick a favorite from among them." He smiled. "Now the truth is revealed. I'm a total geek."

A smile tugged at her lips. "No, it's okay. I like sci-fi. Never seen Star Wars, though."

He raised his eyebrows. "Really? Well, I'll have to remedy that. How about a Star Wars marathon?"

"A Star Wars marathon?"

"Sure. If you think you can stand the onslaught of geekiness."

She laughed. "Bring it on."

"All right, then, it's a date." He reached out, took her hand and squeezed her fingers

lightly. "Your hands are freezing." He rubbed them between his. "Do you need a heavier jacket?"

"No. My hands are always cold." Her eyes lingered on his hands; the long fingers, the broad, firm palms. She suddenly ached to feel those hands on her breasts. She imagined him running his hands under her shirt, brushing his thumbs over her nipples...

She gulped and pushed the thought away. She'd made the mistake of getting close to a human once, and she'd vowed she would never make it again. She shouldn't have agreed to this date; it wasn't fair to string him along.

She stopped walking and turned to face him. She stared at her right hand, still cradled between his palms. "Listen..."

He traced a line in her palm with one finger. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Yes?"

She braced herself and looked up, meeting his gaze. In the dim light, his eyes were pools of warm, blue-black shadow.

She tried again to speak, but her throat tightened, resisting the words. His thumb touched her lower lip, and suddenly, she couldn't remember what she'd been about to say. He leaned toward her, his eyes still focused on hers. His warm breath tickled her lips. She found herself trapped in his eyes, unable to move. His arms slipped around her waist and pulled her closer, and a moment later, his warm, soft lips were pressed against hers. A tiny, involuntary sound, somewhere between a whimper and a moan, escaped her throat. Her lips parted. His tongue flicked against them, but didn't enter. The kiss was gentle, undemanding, but she felt it down to the base of her spine.

She pulled back, dizzy, and took a deep breath. "Will..."

Warm hands framed her face. His thumbs stroked her cheekbones. "What is it?"

She closed her eyes. When was the last time she had been touched so gently? Come to think of it, when was the last time she'd been touched by someone who wasn't trying to kill her?

She grasped his wrists, pushed his hands down and held them at his sides. "There's something I should tell you." She moistened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. "I have a...a medical condition. I can't go outside during the daytime. My body can't tolerate UV rays."

"Okay," he said.

She stared at him. "Okay? That's all?"

"I can see you at night. That's not a problem."

"There's more to it. It—it just isn't a good idea for me to date anyone right now. I shouldn't have agreed to this at all. I'm sorry."

She expected protests, confusion, hurt. He just stared at her, his expression unreadable. There was an odd, probing intensity in his eyes as they searched hers.

"Why?"

"It's hard to explain."

"If you just aren't interested, say so," he said. "I can handle it. But if this is about something else, please tell me what's going on. Whatever you're worried about, it might not be as big a deal as you think."

She knew she should just let him believe that she wasn't attracted to him. It would be easier. But she couldn't do that. She couldn't lie to him. She sighed and lowered her eyes. "If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. You'd think I was nuts."

“Try me.”

She shook her head. “It’s too risky.”

He gripped her hands in his. “What if I’m willing to take the risk?”

She pulled her hands from his. “You don’t know me well enough to say something like that and mean it. We just met the other day.”

He touched her hair, and she looked up. His blue eyes burned with a fierce light. “Let me help you,” he whispered.

She stiffened. “What makes you think I even need help?”

“I can see it. You’re always on guard. You’re carrying some terrible weight on your shoulders. I don’t know what it is, but I know it’s there.”

That was too close to the truth for her comfort. He seemed so damn certain, but how could he possibly know? “Look, I’m not some helpless fairy tale damsel. I don’t need a knight in shining armor to sweep me off my feet and fix all my problems.”

“Maybe not, but you need a friend. Someone to talk to, a shoulder to lean on. At least let me be your friend, if I can’t be anything else.”

She hesitated. A friend. That was okay, wasn’t it? That was safe enough. Victor couldn’t expect her not to have friends. He couldn’t kill someone just for being a good listener. Could he?

“Just say we can see each other again sometime,” Will said.

She crossed her arms over her chest and nodded.

He touched her shoulder, then wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She hugged him around the waist and laid her cheek against his chest, over his heart. He smelled so clean, so warm.

She allowed herself to hold him for a moment, then stepped back and looked him in the eye. “There are plenty of girls in the world, you know.”

“So?”

“So why me?”

“Maybe I’m curious about you. Maybe I just like you. Is that so hard to believe?”

“A little. I suspect you’ve got some kind of white knight complex.”

He blinked. “Meaning?”

“You’re drawn to me because you think I need saving. That I’m in trouble and that somehow, you can find a way to fix it. You’re ready to fight some dragons.”

He smiled, but there was something terribly sad in his eyes. She thought back to the night she’d met him, in the diner. She’d seen it then, too, a shadow in his face, the echo of an old wound. Who or what had wounded him? “Is that so bad?”

“It won’t work.” She turned away, back rigid, chest tight. A burning lump rose into her throat.

He set a hand on her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

He was too kind, she thought. A man like him had no place in her world. If she let him in, he’d end up hurt or dead. She took a deep breath. “It’s late. I have to get ready for work.”

“Let me walk you back to your apartment.”

She nodded.

They walked back without speaking. He stopped just outside the door and turned to face her. His dark brown hair spilled across his eyes, and he brushed it away. “I’m glad I got to see you tonight,” he said. Once again, he seemed sweet, boyish, a bit shy. But for a

moment, she'd seen something else staring out from those dark blue eyes, something older, something scarred. He was more than he seemed. But whatever else he was, he was human. That much, she was sure of. And as a human, he was vulnerable.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" he asked. "We can meet in front of the café again."

She hesitated. "Okay."

They stood facing each other, looking into each other's eyes. Then Ashley turned and went inside. As she walked up the four flights of stairs to her floor, she remembered the gentle pressure of his arms around her. She wished she could feel it one more time. For a moment, she considered turning around, running back down the stairs and out the door, to see if he was still there, but she stopped herself. He was probably a block away by now.

She unlocked her door, opened it, and froze. A wave of faintness washed over her. She leaned against the wall, heart pounding.

On the wall facing the door, the word MURDERER had been scrawled in something dark and runny. Her hand tightened on the knob. The message was written in blood. It could only be blood. *But not human*, she thought, *please, not human*.

She stood still for a moment, holding her breath, listening with her ears and mind alike, but there was no whisper of breath, no rustle of movement. The apartment was empty. Slowly, she closed the door and approached the word on the wall. She touched a finger to the blood. It had dried to a thick, tacky consistency, but it wasn't old. Her fingertip came away wet and red. Whoever had done it, he or she had been here within the past few hours. She smelled vampire, but it wasn't Victor. She didn't recognize the scent.

She leaned closer to the wall and sniffed. Dog's blood. The knot in her stomach loosened, just a little.

She fetched a bucket and sponge from the hallway closet, filled the bucket with soapy water, and spent the next half-hour scrubbing the blood from her wall, wringing the sponge out over the bucket until the water was a dull rust red. She emptied it into the bathtub.

Most vampires wouldn't be stupid enough to attack her, knowing they would have to answer to Victor. This was just an attempt to scare her. Probably. Still, it worried her that someone had known enough to do this, known where she lived and how to get inside.

She glanced at the clock. 9:40. She was going to be late to work if she didn't hurry. She quickly changed clothes and jogged to Maxine's. She made a mental note to talk to her landlord about changing the locks.

The knot of tension in her gut hadn't quite gone away. She took a deep breath, wishing she had someone to talk to. She thought of Will's eyes, his smile. That was what he offered, wasn't it? A shoulder to lean on? But there were a thousand reasons she couldn't tell him the truth. No, best not to involve him too much. She would enjoy his friendship while she could, but she couldn't let things get too serious. He was part of a world of sunlight and warmth, a world she could never belong to.

Chapter Five

Ashley's shift crawled by like a prison sentence. She had only a few customers, and the tips were lousy. She spent most of her time wiping down tables and watching the minute hand of the clock. At last, tired and footsore, she hung up her smock and left the diner. She wished she'd driven. She'd been trying to save money on gas, but hell, it was just a minute's drive. What difference did it make?

She walked down a dark street, hands in her coat pockets. She sensed someone behind her and stopped. Her shoulders went rigid.

"Well, if it isn't the proud bitch herself."

She turned. A tall figure in an overcoat stood on the sidewalk, his features obscured by shadow...all but his eyes, which gleamed ruby red. Lank, shoulder-length black hair hung around his narrow face. Even if the eyes hadn't been a dead giveaway, the fact that she hadn't heard any footsteps would have tipped her off. Only vampires moved so silently. He stepped forward, into the yellow glare of a streetlight. The light illuminated his sharp features and thin lips. He looked no older than seventeen or eighteen.

"I've been wanting to see you," he said. "You weren't home when I came to visit, but I left a little message on your wall. Did you find it?"

She didn't reply.

"Tell me, how does it feel to be a murdering traitor? To have the blood of your own people on your hands?"

His voice sounded familiar, but it took her a moment to put a name to it. "Nicholas, isn't it? Is there a purpose to this visit, or did you just come to let off some steam?"

"David was my brother."

She sucked her breath in between her teeth. She hadn't known that. "I'm sorry," she said, more quietly, "but your brother was already dead when I found him."

"Liar!" In an instant he was in front of her. He seized the front of her shirt. She hadn't even seen him move. Red eyes glared into hers as Nicholas' lips peeled back from sharp fangs. Hot breath struck her face. "Everyone knows you're a hunter. Are you going to look me in the eye and deny it?"

She stared into his eyes. "Listen to me, Nicholas. I didn't kill your brother. I killed a walking husk that used to be him. David, the David you knew, was already gone. If I hadn't finished off what was left of him, someone else would have."

"He could have been saved!" Nicholas grabbed her face and squeezed, his nails pressing into her cheek until her eyes watered from the pain. "Dave was all I had. He was the only person I loved, and you shot him like he was a fucking animal. You're a traitor to all of us. Everyone knows it, but no one dares lay a finger on you, because you're Victor's little piece of ass. I'm not going to stand by and watch any longer. I'm going to put a stop to you."

"Sorry, Nicholas, but grief only gives you so much leeway." Ashley pulled her Beretta from her purse and pressed it to his stomach. "Back off, and both of us might live through the night."

His fist tightened on her shirt. "Shoot me. I don't care."

"Do you really want to die tonight? What good would it do anyone?"

A hand closed tight around her throat. "If I can kill you before I die, it'll do the world some good."

"You'll be dead before you can finish the job. If I pull the trigger now, the bullet will go straight through you and sever your spine." Her finger eased onto the trigger. "One last chance, Nicholas. Let me go."

His eyes narrowed.

"Would David have wanted this?" Ashley asked. "Would he have asked you to die pointlessly, avenging his memory?"

He hesitated.

"Think about how he used to be, before he started eating humans. Would he have wanted you to kill someone for his sake?"

Tears welled in his eyes. "Shut up. You didn't even know him."

"Yes, I did. Not well, but I knew him. Hell, I liked him. Before he turned, he was one of the most decent vampires I knew. I didn't want to kill him, but someone had to. You know it as well as I do. If I hadn't finished him off, he would have died on his own. Rogues never last very long. Once they start eating flesh, they waste away. By the end, they're nothing but walking corpses."

A tear slid down Nicholas' pale, acne-mottled cheek. "You fucking bitch," he said, but the rage had bled out of his voice. He sounded tired, his voice choked, on the verge of a sob.

"Don't do this," she said. "Killing me won't bring him back."

His face crumpled. His grip on her throat loosened, and he looked down. "I..."

A pair of hands grabbed him from behind and dragged him back. Ashley stumbled. Nicholas let out a choked cry as Victor slammed him against a wall. "What did I say I would do if I ever caught you within ten feet of her?"

"V-Victor!" His voice was a squeal. "Wait, please!"

Victor reached between Nicholas' legs and grabbed his balls through his pants. He pressed a hand to Nicholas' mouth, muffling his scream as he twisted, then squeezed. A dark stain soaked through the crotch of Nicholas' pants.

At first, she thought he'd wet himself, then the hot, salty smell of blood hit her. Bile rose into her throat. "Victor, stop! Let him go!"

Victor released Nicholas' ruined balls, grabbed him by the collar of the shirt and slammed his head against the wall, leaving a dark patch of blood. He grabbed Nicholas' neck in both hands and snapped it. Nicholas' skin wrinkled and tightened. Blood ran from his mouth and nose. His eyes softened, melted and dribbled like thick red and white tears from empty sockets. Victor dropped the corpse to the sidewalk. Green vapor rose in ghostly plumes from the shriveling body. "Pathetic," said Victor. He kicked the remains aside.

Ashley took a deep breath, fingers still locked tight around the grip of her Beretta. Her knees felt like water. "You didn't have to do that."

"He was about to kill you," he said.

"No. He was going to let me go. I could see it in his eyes."

"You're deluding yourself, if you really believe that." He stalked closer. "I protect what is mine. And I will kill anyone, human or vampire, who dares to touch you." He loomed over her. Nicholas' blood stained his hands. The stains shrank, evaporating into steam as she watched.

She stepped back, heart pounding. Would he smell Will on her? “I never asked for your protection.” She took another step back and aimed her Beretta at him. “Leave me alone.”

“You need me. No matter how much you deny it, you can’t change the facts.”

She trembled. His words made her feel helpless, weak. She’d been calm as she stared into Nicholas’ rage-maddened eyes, yet with a few words, Victor stripped away every ounce of her confidence and self-possession. How did he do it? She swallowed, throat tight. “I’m tired. I want to go home.”

He took another step closer, flowing like liquid shadow. “I will take you to your apartment.”

“I can get there fine on my own.”

“I am not offering you a choice.” His voice washed over her in a dark wave. “Give in.”

Her vision blurred. She struggled to focus her eyes, to hold her Beretta steady, but her hands trembled. Her arms suddenly felt very heavy. The gun sank slowly, and he gripped her wrist. He took the Beretta from her limp fingers and lifted her into his arms as if she weighed no more than a sack of feathers. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t speak. A small, weak moan escaped her throat.

He carried her. The world glided past, a sea of dark, blurry shapes.

“Sleep,” he said

Her eyes drifted shut, and darkness swallowed her.

* * * *

Ashley awoke in her bed. Her shoes and coat had been removed, but otherwise, she was fully clothed. Her Beretta rested on the bedside table. She sat up and looked around. Though a trace of Victor’s scent lingered in the air, there was no other sign of him. She was alone.

She closed her eyes and pressed the heels of her hands against her lids. Nicholas’ muffled scream echoed in her memory. “Damn it,” she whispered, tears welling. “I could have handled him. It didn’t have to end that way.” But there was no undoing what had been done. Miserable, aching inside, she buried her face in her hands.

* * * *

The next evening, Ashley met Will in front of the Moonlight Café. He wore a dark gray turtleneck, and his hair looked soft and shiny, as if it had been freshly washed. When he spotted her, he lifted one hand in a wave. She jogged over.

“Hey.” He smiled.

“Hey.” Her stomach fluttered. “Want to get some coffee?”

“Actually, I wondered if you’d just like to go for a walk.”

“Sure,” she said, relieved. She hadn’t really wanted to spend three-fifty for a cup of tasteless liquid.

He offered her his arm, and she took it. People passed them on either side as they walked, and she remembered his aversion to crowds. “Let’s go down to the lake,” she said. “There’ll be fewer people there.”

They made their way through the crowded city streets to the edge of Lake Michigan.

The dark water glistened, reflecting the moonlight. A seagull wheeled overhead, its wings a white banner against the night sky.

“Did anything happen last night?” asked Will.

“Why do you ask?”

“You seem preoccupied. That’s all.”

She looked away. An image of Nicholas’ bloodied corpse flashed through her mind. She heard, again, his muffled whimpers as Victor popped his balls like grapes. She swallowed, her mouth dry. “Last night, I ran into someone I knew. Someone who was angry at me.”

He leaned closer, until she felt his warm breath against her cheek. His voice was low, gentle. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s over.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Will’s arm a warm pressure against hers. A breeze ruffled his coffee-brown hair. Her eyes traced his profile, the line of his jaw, the dark sweep of his lashes. Her gaze lingered on his neck, and she noticed the glint of a silver chain, almost hidden beneath the collar of his turtleneck. “What’s that?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re wearing something on a chain.”

“Oh. This.” He pulled a small, silver cross out from under his shirt.

If the old vampire legends had been true, she would’ve been shrinking in horror from the sight of that cross, shielding her eyes. Luckily, most of the myths surrounding her kind were just that—myths. Hell, her mother had taken her to church when she was a kid, bundling her in heavy clothing to protect her from the skin-searing sunlight that poured in through the arched glass windows. Ashley had knelt and taken communion, sung the hymns, recited the Lord’s Prayer with everyone else. But the people at church had looked at her as if she didn’t belong there. No one ever said anything to her face, of course, but she saw the glances they exchanged, heard their whispered voices. Somehow, they knew. They sensed her differentness.

At least one priest must have known for sure what she was. She remembered her mother arguing with him while Ashley stood outside the door, listening. He hadn’t wanted her in the church. He didn’t think vampires had any souls to save. “How can you say that?” her mother had demanded, her voice tight with anger. “She’s a child, an innocent child! She can’t help what she is! It’s ignorant people like you that have made her life so difficult!”

“Ashley?” Will’s voice pulled her back to the present. “Are you all right?”

“Fine.” She glanced at his silver cross. “You’re Christian?”

“That’s a hard question to answer.”

“You don’t have to if you’d rather not. It’s been so long since I’ve had a social life, I’ve sort of lost my sense of what’s appropriate.”

“It’s okay.” He fingered the silver chain. “I was raised Catholic. I don’t know if I still believe in the doctrines of the Church, to be honest. But my mother gave me this cross a long time ago, for my tenth birthday, and I promised her I would always wear it.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah.” His fingers closed around the cross. “She was a devout believer.”

“Was?”

“She’s dead.”

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "How old were you when you lost her?"

His face was calm, but he held the cross tightly in his fist. "Thirteen."

"I lost my mother when I was young, too." She watched her feet as she walked, hands in her pockets. "May I ask how it happened?"

"She killed herself."

"Oh. God. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"No. It's all right." He tucked the cross back into his shirt.

She glanced up at his pale, calm face, his haunted eyes. She ached for him, because she knew how much it hurt. She knew that anything she said would sound trite and hollow, so she just took his hand.

"The church says suicide is a mortal sin. My mother herself believed that people who killed themselves went to hell."

"Do you believe that?"

"No. At least, not in my head. The idea of hell never made any sense to me. Why would a loving God create a place of torture? But I have dreams..." He trailed off, looking away. "She's always calling me. In my dreams. Calling for help. I hear her, but I can't reach her. And I think, what if there *is* such a place, and what if she's really..." He took a deep breath. "Sorry."

"For whatever it's worth, I don't believe in hell either."

He gave her a wan smile.

Ashley squeezed his hand. He squeezed back. A few minutes later, the color had returned to Will's face, and his eyes were calm. But he hadn't let go of her hand. "Have you ever been to Navy Pier?" he asked, breaking the silence.

She shook her head. "Stuff like that isn't fun to do alone, and I've never really had anyone to go with."

"Would you like to go tonight? We're almost there, anyway. You can see it ahead."

"Is it still open? It's after eight."

"Sure, it's a Saturday. I know the big Ferris wheel is open 'til ten, at least. You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

She felt a smile spreading across her face. "No way."

He smiled back. "Then let's go."

* * * *

When they finally parted ways for the night, it was nearly ten o'clock. Ashley was late for work, and Jack chewed her out. She barely heard him. In her mind, she was still sitting next to Will in one of the little red cars on the Ferris wheel, cool wind ruffling her hair as they moved upward and upward, until the whole city lay sprawled beneath them like toy buildings. She remembered the heat of Will's body, the warmth of his laughter, the gentle pressure of his shoulder against hers.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Huh?" Her eyes focused on Jack. "Oh. Yes."

He squinted. "What's wrong with you? Did you get enough sleep?"

"Yeah. I feel fine." She realized, with some surprise, that it was true. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt better. Being with Will made her feel like nothing mattered but the moment. When she was with him, she was at peace.

Maybe, just for a little while, she could allow herself the luxury of being happy.

The night passed in a haze, and she returned, exhausted, to her apartment. There were no angry words on the wall that night. Thank God for small favors. She showered, sank into bed, and slept a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

The next evening, her cell phone rang. She picked up. It was Will. “Hey,” he said, “I was wondering if you’d like to come over tonight. I did promise you a Star Wars marathon. Do you have to work?”

“Not tonight.”

“Then this is as good a chance as we’re going to get. We have to watch all three movies in one night, or it’s not really a marathon.”

Her heart jumped. “Come over? To your apartment?”

“I won’t try anything. Scout’s honor.”

“I’m not worried about that,” said Ashley, though that was exactly what she was worried about. More specifically, she was worried that if he tried something, she wouldn’t be able to resist him. “It’s just, well, it’s been a long time since I’ve been in a guy’s apartment. Or anyone else’s apartment, really. But I’d like to come over. Where do you live?” He told her the address, and she scribbled it down on a Post-it. “I’ll come over at seven-thirty, then? Okay. Cool. See you then.” She hung up. A whole night with Will, she thought, dazed. Had she made the right choice?

Chapter Six

Will met Ashley outside his apartment. Her stomach did flip-flops as she followed him inside, up the stairs and down the hall. He unlocked his door and held it open. She stepped in and looked around the spacious, clean living room. "Nice."

"It's usually a lot messier. I tried to clean up a bit."

A small black cat leapt off the couch and darted under it. The cat had been sitting so still that Ashley hadn't even seen it until a second ago.

"That's Lily," said Will. "I got her from a shelter about a year ago."

She crouched and peered under the couch. A pair of round, yellow eyes peered back at her. She stretched out a hand.

"Careful," he said. "She's a little skittish."

Lily crept forward and nosed Ashley's palm. Then she slipped from beneath the couch and rubbed against her leg. A low purr resonated in the cat's tiny chest.

"Huh," he said. "I've never seen her so friendly with a stranger."

Ashley rubbed Lily behind the ears, and Lily closed her eyes, purring like a small motor. "Cats always seem to like me."

"I'm impressed. It took her weeks to get this comfortable with me." He chuckled. "You must have some psychic bond with felines."

Ashley had never thought much about the issue, but his remark made her wonder. Some vampires had animal familiars. If she wanted, could she compel cats to do her bidding? She visualized a dozen cats leaping onto Victor, hissing and clawing, and giggled. Will gave her a quizzical look. "It's nothing," she said.

"I ordered a cheese and mushroom pizza," he said. "Then I remembered you can't have bread. If there's anything else you want, just say the word and I'll order it."

"I'm fine. I had a late lunch."

She was worried he would insist, but he just nodded. "Make yourself at home."

When Ashley sat on the couch, Lily curled up beside her and yawned, showing a curled pink tongue. Ashley looked around the living room, and her eyes settled on a faded toy mouse lying near the TV. An impulse struck her. *Lily*, she thought.

One luminous yellow eye opened and peered up at her.

Bring me that mouse, Lily. Ashley reinforced the command with a mental picture of the toy.

Lily leapt off the couch and darted across the room. She lifted the mouse in her jaws, trotted back, jumped onto the couch and dropped the mouse in Ashley's lap.

Will laughed. "She's in a playful mood."

Lily looked up at her, motionless, as if awaiting further commands. Ashley's heart pounded. She tossed the mouse to the floor, but Lily didn't even glance at it. Her wide, lantern-like eyes remained fixed on Ashley. *At ease, Lily*, she thought. Lily curled up on the couch again and closed her eyes.

"Huh." Will stared at the cat. "Weird."

"Yeah." Her mouth was dry. She cleared her throat. She hadn't really expected it to work. She'd have to remember this. "Uh, why don't we get started?"

He crouched in front of his TV and slid an ancient, hand-labeled cassette tape into

the VCR. Remote in hand, he sat next to her and pushed play.

As they watched, she inched closer to him and leaned her head against his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her and kissed her forehead, a chaste kiss, but even so, the warm pressure of his lips made her heartbeat quicken. Her gaze traced his long, slim, denim-clad legs. What if she set a hand on his thigh...or his crotch? How would he react? She flushed, raised her eyes and forced herself to focus on the movie.

By the time *Return of the Jedi* ended and the credits rolled, it was nearly dawn.

He stretched and smiled at her. "So, you've finally seen the Star Wars trilogy. What do you think?"

"It was fun. Though, to be honest, it seemed kind of biased."

"Really?" He raised his eyebrows. "I've heard it called a lot of things, but 'biased' isn't one of them."

"I mean the way the Jedi and the Empire were portrayed. Good guys verses pure evil. It's not like that in real life. There's no evil Emperor to pin all the blame on."

"True. But I think the Emperor is more of a symbol than anything. We all have a part of us that wants to do bad things. That's what the dark side really is, something within ourselves."

"Maybe." She paused. "I guess I'm being silly, critiquing a space-fantasy movie because it doesn't reflect a balanced worldview."

"No, it's all right. Believe me, I'm delighted to find a girl willing to have a serious, philosophical discussion about Star Wars with me." He glanced at the clock. "But I guess it's getting really late. Or really early, depending on your perspective. Are you sleepy?"

"No, this is like the middle of the day for me. If you're tired, though..."

Will shook his head. "I'm fine. Is there anything you'd like to do?"

Run my hands and tongue all over your body. The thought flashed through Ashley's head before she could stop it, and heat flooded her cheeks. She cleared her throat, averting her gaze, hoping he hadn't noticed her blush. "You told me you like to draw and paint. How about showing me some of your art?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Honestly, my paintings aren't that good. It's just something I do as a hobby. I don't usually show them to people."

"Come on." She poked his arm lightly. "Tease. You know you want to. What sort of things do you paint? Landscapes? People?"

"Both. And creatures. Just things I make up. If you're really interested..."

"I am."

"Okay." He chuckled, though it sounded forced. "Just remember, I warned you." He led her into the bedroom. There wasn't much to see, just a bed and a dresser enclosed by cool, white walls. Yet being in this room, knowing this was where he slept each night, made her feel as if she were entering some secret, sacred space. She looked at the bed. The pale blue sheets had been neatly made, and there was a faint impression in the pillow where his head had rested.

He opened the closet. Inside, a few dozen canvases leaned against each other, crammed awkwardly into the small space.

She raised her eyebrows. "You have a lot."

"I've been painting for awhile. My storage space is kind of limited, though."

She picked up one of the topmost paintings and examined it. A pack of wolves ran through a forest. A dark-haired woman, clad only in leaves, sat astride the largest wolf,

riding it like a horse. The painting was rough and unpolished, done in a stark, simple, almost cartoonish fashion, but she found the style compelling. She set it carefully on the floor and took out another, then another. His paintings were filled with fantastic scenes and odd creatures: turtles the size of houses, dragons, spacescapes and beautiful women with the heads of cats.

She picked up another painting. A blond-haired, clean-cut family sat around the table with their heads bowed and hands folded in prayer, place settings in front of them. A human brain sat on the table, with a pair of hands slicing a piece from the front with a carving knife, as if it were a Thanksgiving turkey. "This one's kind of creepy." She looked up. "What does it mean?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Sometimes these images just pop into my head."

He sounded too nonchalant to be convincing, but she let it pass. She lifted another painting from the heap. It showed a small form, a child, sitting in the corner of an empty, shadowy room. She couldn't tell if the child was a boy or a girl. He—she?—was curled into a ball, head bowed, arms wrapped around his or her knees. Dirty brown hair hid the child's face. "What about this? This one must mean something."

He averted his gaze. "Not really."

She looked down at the painting again. It was very simple, very stark, but there was a haunting quality about it. On impulse, she turned it over. The words I'M SORRY were written on the back of the canvas in charcoal.

He gently took the painting from her hands, put it back in the closet and closed the door. She stood, feeling awkward. She had the sense that she had just seen something very personal and painful, though she had no idea what it meant. She met his gaze.

His face was unreadable. "I don't show these to many people," he said.

She wasn't sure how she was supposed to interpret the statement, so she just nodded. After a brief pause, she said, "You're very talented." But at the moment, the words felt somehow inappropriate.

"Thanks." He smiled, though the expression was forced. When his eyes met hers, they were wet.

"Will," she whispered, surprised.

"I'm okay," he said.

She took a step closer, eyes locked with his. She reached up and cupped his cheek with one hand. He closed his eyes. She trailed her fingers over his jaw, felt the slight prickle of stubble. Her fingers touched his lips. His eyes opened. Those dark, thick lashes were wet, shining with tears, but the look in those eyes had changed; the pain was still there, but it was mixed with an odd hunger, something deeper than desire. She recognized the look because she'd felt that same hunger herself: the need for closeness, for human contact, for someone who would understand her pain. Without taking his eyes from hers, he gripped her wrist and kissed her fingertips, one by one. The warm touch of his mouth sent little tingles racing along the nerves of her arm. His thumb brushed across the pulse in her wrist. Then he kissed that very spot, where her blood flowed close to the surface.

She found herself leaning toward him, without conscious intent, as if some invisible force pulled them together like magnets. Her mouth grazed his neck, and his pulse was suddenly there, right beneath her lips, strong and hot and fast.

The room suddenly seemed too warm. A tremor ran through her. His fingers still encircled her wrist, thumb resting against her racing pulse. She felt as if they were

connected at those two points, her mouth on his neck, his hand on her wrist. Their pulses beat in rhythm, as if one heartbeat echoed through both their bodies.

His lips brushed her cheek, trailed down to the corner of her mouth. His body suddenly seemed very big, his presence almost overwhelming, warm and male and solid. His face was inches from hers, so close she could see her reflection in his storm-blue eyes. "You're beautiful," he whispered.

His breath tickled her lips. Afterward, she couldn't remember who'd made the first move, but the next thing she knew, his mouth was on hers, his arms wrapped around her waist. Her hands slid up his back, into his thick hair. Her mind screamed at her to pull back. Her body wanted more. A flush of heat spread through her, and her nipples tightened to hard, tingling points. His heart pounded against hers. Her thighs trembled and pressed together. She wanted his hand between them, wanted those long fingers inside the melting heat of her core. She wanted him to take off her clothes, lay her down on his bed and push himself into the center of that aching need. It would be so easy. All she had to do was reach down and let a hand brush over the hard bulge in his jeans, and the rest would just happen.

Dizziness washed over her. Ashley closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She pulled back, away from him. At the moment, it felt like the hardest thing she had ever done. "I can't," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

Will said nothing. She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes, but she felt his gaze on her. She wondered if he had any idea how much she wanted him, how painful this was. Tears prickled in her eyes. She blinked them away and steeled herself. "I should go. It's late."

"Ashley..."

"I'm sorry." She felt like a coward, not to mention a tease, but she'd made up her mind not to let this go any further. He didn't know what he was getting into. It wasn't just Victor; he was only half the danger. The other half was Ashley herself. What if she lost control and bit him? What if she couldn't stop herself?

A vision of David's last victim flashed through her mind. She saw the cracked, blood-smeared glasses, the torn throat and mangled face. She saw Will's face in its place, his blue eyes wide and empty. Her chest tightened, and a faint whimper escaped her throat.

Will gripped her shoulders. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice low and urgent.

"Nothing."

He touched her cheek, and her skin tingled beneath his fingertips. "Tell me what's wrong." His voice was soft but firm. Something about that voice made her want to tell him. The words rose into her throat, but she bit her tongue and choked them down. He leaned closer, and his lips almost brushed her ear as he whispered, "Please?"

She stared at the floor. "What if I told you I was something that shouldn't exist?"

"What do you mean?"

She swallowed, her mouth dry. "What if I said I was a monster?" she whispered.

"I would say you're wrong about that." His hands framed her face. "You're a beautiful young woman. There's nothing monstrous about you."

He had no idea. She almost laughed, but the sound lodged itself in her throat, and she choked it down. She had a feeling if she let it out, it would emerge as a sob. She stared at the floor. "I should go."

He sighed. "Okay." His voice was quiet, resigned.

Her throat was tight. A bitter taste filled her mouth as he walked her to her car and gave her a firm hug. She hugged him back. "Thanks for coming over tonight," he said softly.

Metal rattled in the nearby ally, and she gave a start. She turned to see a pair of green eyes flash in the darkness. A cat bounded away and vanished with a flick of its tail.

"Just a stray," he said. "We get a lot of them around here. They're always knocking over the garbage cans, looking for food." He rubbed her shoulders. "What's wrong? You're shaking."

"It startled me, that's all." She hoped it had been just a stray. The city was filled with Victor's servants, both animal and human, and he saw through their eyes.

"Be careful driving home," Will said. "The roads look a little slick. I think it rained earlier."

"Okay."

"And remember, if you ever need to talk—about anything—just let me know."

"Thanks." She couldn't meet his eyes. If only he knew how tempting that invitation was, how badly she wanted to tell him everything. But the risk was too great. She gave him a tiny smile. "Good night."

"Good night." He hugged her one last time. His arms were firm, a circle of warmth surrounding her like a protective bubble, a force-field, as if his embrace somehow kept everything dangerous at bay. But she knew that safety was an illusion.

Chapter Seven

Ashley stepped into her darkened apartment and closed the door behind her.

She froze, hand still on the knob. Victor was in the room. She heard no breathing, no movement, but she smelled him. She waited, holding her breath, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

He sat on her couch, ankles crossed, boots propped on her coffee table. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes were ice. "Hello, Ashley."

Her hand strayed to her purse. She wondered if she could get her Beretta out before he could stop her. She doubted it. Drawing a gun from her purse took longer than drawing it from a holster, and his reflexes were faster than hers. She moistened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. "How did you get in?"

"I convinced the landlord that I was a close friend of yours and that I'd left something important in your apartment. He was very cooperative, once I manipulated his thoughts a little."

"What do you want?"

"You've been with someone. I smell him on you. Who is he?"

A cold knot of fear twisted her gut. "None of your business."

She felt his thoughts probing hers, like cold fingers prying at her memories, and flinched. "Get out of my head!" She shoved his mind out. It took all her effort.

"Who is he?" Victor snapped. "How long have you been seeing him? Have you slept with him?"

"He's just a friend!"

"I don't believe you."

She trembled. "I don't really care whether you believe me. It's the truth. Or am I not even allowed to talk to other people now?"

"Not when I can smell their lust all over you like cheap perfume." He stood, his eyes glowing dull red, and bared his teeth. "You belong to me. I humor you with these conversations because I would prefer that you come to me willingly, but there is no choice. I laid my claim on you when you were a child, and I will kill any who dare to challenge it. I have but to complete the ritual that I started ten years ago."

She reached into her purse, but he leapt in front of her. She hadn't even seen him move. One moment he was on the couch, the next, he loomed over her. His hands shot out, grabbed her wrists and pinned them to her sides. He pushed her against the wall. She pushed back, but it did no good. She glared up at him. "If you're going to claim me, why don't you just do it? You had me unconscious the other night. You could have finished the job then. Why are you dragging it out? Do you just enjoy seeing me squirm?"

His red eyes were inches from hers. "It will be better for both of us if you accept me willingly."

She twisted in his grip. "Let me go."

"Do I have your word you won't try to shoot me?"

"If you don't try to manhandle me, I won't shoot you. Besides, I thought you weren't afraid of my little toy gun."

He released her and stepped back. She rubbed her aching wrists.

Victor smiled. "Now, then, what were we talking about? Ah yes, that boy."

"There's nothing to talk about. He's none of your business."

"Don't think you can close the subject that easily."

"I've told you the truth. He's my friend. I've made it clear to him that we can't be more than that."

"Don't insult my intelligence. I smell your desire for him, as well."

Her cheeks burned. "So what? We aren't doing anything. I just want someone to talk to. I like him. Will treats me like a person."

"Like a human, you mean?"

"No. I mean he treats me like I'm more than a walking uterus. I can be myself with him. I don't have to keep my fucking guard up every second, like I do with you."

"Really." His voice was heavy with contempt. "Have you told him what you are?"

"Get out."

"Or what?" He took a step toward her.

She stepped backwards and reached into her purse. Her fingers closed around the grip of her Beretta. "Or I shoot." Her fingers tightened on the gun's grip.

He stared at her. His face was immobile, unrevealing. It may as well have been chiseled from marble. "A word of advice. If you care at all for that boy, you will stop seeing him at once. Or I will take matters into my own hands."

A cold finger of fear touched her heart. "Don't you dare hurt him."

He smiled, a smile as thin and sharp as a knife's edge. "Just stay away from him, and he'll be fine. If, however, I find out you've been seeing him, I will personally make sure that he never touches you again." He walked past her and paused in the doorway, looking over his shoulder. "He can never understand you. Not the way I can."

She looked away, her throat tightening. "Just get out."

He stepped into the hall. She slammed the door, leaned against it and wiped one sleeve across her sweat-soaked brow. She locked the door and double-checked the locks before she set the gun down, then she sank to the couch, trembling. Locks wouldn't stop Victor, if he really wanted to get in. He'd proven that. But locking the doors made her feel better anyway.

She retreated into her bedroom, took off her shoes and curled up on her bed. She thought of Will, and tears burned her eyes. She'd been a fool. Tomorrow, she would tell him they couldn't see each other anymore. If he got hurt, she'd never forgive herself.

She buried her face in the pillow. Tears soaked into the cotton pillowcase.

* * * *

"Will...we have to talk."

"What is it?"

Ashley sat next to him on a bench in a small public park a few blocks from her apartment. She stared at her hands and swallowed the lump in her throat. This shouldn't feel like breaking up. They weren't supposed to be a couple, after all. "I can't see you again. Ever. We shouldn't even be together right now, but I didn't want to do this over the phone."

His eyes widened. "I don't understand. We agreed to just be friends. Now you're telling me we can't even do that?"

"That's what I'm telling you."

“Why?”

“I can’t explain.”

He stared at her, his expression unreadable. “Is it something I did?”

“No, it’s not you.” She averted her gaze. “Please. I’m trying to be as honest with you as I can. I could have made up some bogus reason or just stopped answering when you called, but I don’t want to do that to you. There’s a reason, but telling you what it was would just complicate things too much. It will be better for you, for both of us, if we just don’t spend time together anymore. That’s all. If he knows I’m still hanging around you—”

“He?”

She winced. She hadn’t meant to mention Victor, even indirectly.

Will leaned toward her, eyes intent. “Who is ‘he’? Have you got some jealous ex-boyfriend stalking you?”

“Something like that.”

“Call the police. Get a restraining order.”

She buried her face in her hands. “That wouldn’t work.”

He touched her shoulder. “Listen, whatever is going on, we can find a way to deal with it. You don’t have to face it alone. I’ll stand with you. I’m willing to accept the risk.”

She met his gaze. “But I’m not. I don’t want you getting hurt because of me. This is my problem, and I’m not going to drag anyone else into it.”

“But if this guy is as dangerous as you say, I can’t just do nothing. Who is he?”

She shook her head. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be. Just pretend like we never met and go on with your life.”

“I can’t just abandon you when I know you’re in trouble. I care about you.”

“We barely know each other.”

“You can’t deny that there’s something between us. You feel it as much as I do. And now you’re telling me that you want to just pretend like we never met?”

“It has nothing to do with what I want. Don’t you understand? I’m trying to do the right thing.” She stood and turned away.

“Let me help you!”

“Goodbye, Will. I’m sorry.”

She felt his hand on her arm. She slapped it away and turned to glare at him. He recoiled, eyes wide. “Leave me alone,” she said. “And don’t follow me. I mean it.”

“Ashley...”

“Stay away!” she shouted, loud enough that a few passers-by stopped and turned to stare at them. She walked away, leaving him standing, stunned, at the edge of the park.

* * * *

Back in her apartment, Ashley collapsed into bed and curled up, hugging her knees against her chest. Her throat burned from holding back tears.

She had learned to control her emotions at an early age. She had to, or she would have broken under the strain. Why was she going to pieces over something like this? She should be used to this by now. She’d been alone for most of her life. She’d just go back to her normal routine and forget.

Except she knew that she couldn’t. However brief, her friendship with Will had

reminded her what it was like to be with someone, to be held, kissed, to feel safe in someone's presence. For a few days, they had shared something real, something that, given time, might have grown and filled the aching emptiness in her heart. Now, she'd never see him again.

She closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against her knees.

* * * *

The next evening, there was a voicemail on her cell phone.

"Hey," said Will's voice. "It's me. I just..."

She deleted the message without listening to the rest. She reminded herself that this was for Will's sake, that she was protecting him.

Over the next few days, she received three more messages from him. She deleted them all, and left one of her own: "Please don't call me anymore. My mind isn't going to change."

She was afraid he would come to her apartment. If she saw him in person, she wasn't sure she'd be able to push him away again. But after that last message, she never heard back from him. A week passed, then another. Still nothing. She found herself checking her cell phone several times a night, waiting for another message, if only so she could hear his voice again. But he didn't call.

That was good, though. That was what she'd wanted. Right?

* * * *

She got home from work one night, got out of her car, and checked her phone again as she stood in the parking lot. "You have no unheard messages," the recorded voice intoned. She turned off the phone and shoved it into her pocket. Tears prickled in her sinuses. She pressed her knuckles against her forehead and closed her eyes.

Her nape tingled. She felt eyes on her back. Slowly, she turned to see Victor leaning against a red Corvette, arms crossed over his chest. His expression was cold, neutral. "You're getting careless. Normally, you would have sensed my presence immediately."

She walked past him toward her apartment building.

He caught her arm, and her lips pulled back from her fangs. "He's not going to call again," Victor said. "He's given up on you."

She yanked her arm from his grip and turned to face him. Tears stung her eyes, and she hated herself for showing weakness in front of him. "I lost my only friend in the world because of you."

"Friend?" He sneered. "Please. He wanted to fuck you, that's all."

She glared at him through her tears. "How the hell would you know? You've never even met him!"

"I don't have to. Have you ever examined a human mind? Not just skimmed the thoughts, but really dug around inside it? They're dull, petty, selfish creatures, driven by base animal needs. I promise you, this one was no different."

"You don't know anything about him." She turned and stormed away.

Victor's voice followed her. "They aren't like us. They will never accept us."

Chapter Eight

The phone rang. Ashley groaned and pulled the covers down, just enough to glare at it.

"I swear, Jack," she muttered, "if this is you calling to ask if I can come to work early, I'm quitting." She'd told him a hundred times that she couldn't work during daylight hours.

She pulled the covers back over her head. Fuck it. He could leave a message. Another ring. And another. With a growled curse, she grabbed the cell phone from the bedside table. She sat up, pushing a hand through her sleep-tousled hair. "Hello?"

"Ashley Hunt?" The speaker had a crisp British accent and a slight lisp.

Her brow furrowed. "Who is this?"

"My name is Dr. Robert Abel."

"How did you get my number?"

"I have my ways." Delivered in his nasal voice, the words didn't sound as mysterious or ominous as they were probably supposed to. "I'm calling to offer you an opportunity."

She rubbed her forehead. Her curtains blocked most of the sunlight, but she felt it anyway, like a dull pressure against her skull. The light seeped into her brain, making her sluggish. "You've got thirty seconds to make your point. If I'm not interested, I'm hanging up."

"I have a job for you. A very important job. But I can't discuss the details over the phone. I would like to arrange a meeting."

"Why should I—"

"Five hundred thousand."

Her jaw dropped. "What?"

"I'm willing to pay you five hundred thousand dollars. Twenty thousand upon acceptance of the job, the rest when you complete it."

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"As I said, I can't discuss the details over the phone. We can meet in a public place, if that would make you more comfortable. How about Charlie's? You know where it is, don't you?"

"The diner? Sure." It was just a few blocks from Maxine's.

"I'll arrive at noon," said Dr. Abel.

"Listen..." She wet her lips. "Noon isn't good for me. How about this evening? Around eight?"

"Noon. My time is valuable. I'll wait for half an hour, and if I don't see you, I'll assume you aren't interested." He hung up.

She stared at the phone.

It might be a trap. It might be a set-up. He might be working with the cops, or God knew who. Had they found her fingerprints, or maybe her blood, in the alley where David killed his last victim? Was she being investigated? It didn't matter, anyway, because she couldn't go out in the sun. Well, okay, she could if she had to. It wouldn't kill her. But it was dangerous. Sunlight made her slow, weak. Vulnerable.

Did she want to take the chance? Was it worth it?

Even as the questions ran through her head, she knew that on some level, she'd already made the decision. She needed to find out what this was about, or her curiosity would never leave her alone.

She got out of bed, showered and dressed, and put in her colored contact lenses. She could tolerate the sun for a few hours. It wouldn't be pleasant, but she'd endured worse. She grabbed a bottle of sunscreen and slathered it over her face and her neck, then put on a hat and a long leather coat. She slipped a pair of shades onto her face. She shoved her Beretta into its holster, buckled it around her waist, and left the apartment.

* * * *

Charlie's Diner stood on a corner, next to a gas station. Ashley entered through the smudged glass double-doors and looked around at the rows of booths and tables. Breakfast was over, and the lunch rush hadn't started, so the restaurant was mostly deserted.

A bored-looking older woman sat behind the counter, reading a newspaper. She glanced up. "Just one? You want a booth or table?"

"I'm here to meet someone, thanks." She walked past.

In a corner booth sat a wiry man in an oversized gray suit and massive spectacles. He met her eyes and signaled to her with a nod of his head. She approached, hands in her pockets. "Ms. Hunt?" he said in the same nasal voice she'd heard over the phone.

"That's me."

"Have a seat."

She sat across from him, and her nose wrinkled. He smelled of chemicals.

"I'm Dr. Abel. Pleased to meet you." He grasped her hand and shook it briefly. His own was disproportionately large, his grip surprisingly firm.

She studied his face. He was middle-aged, maybe early forties, with thinning, light brown hair, a pencil-thin mustache and pale blue eyes, slightly magnified by his thick glasses. He wasn't a very imposing figure, but of course, that didn't mean he was harmless. Too many people made that mistake with her.

He pulled something from his pocket, a small, metal rectangle about the size of a TV remote, and set it on the table. He pushed a button on top of the device, and a red light blinked. A faint hum filled the air. "Sound-shield," he said. "Just to be cautious."

She leaned forward and peered at the object. She had never seen or heard of anything like it.

"Now, to business," he said. "I work for a large research center, primarily concerned with the development of psychic abilities."

She frowned. "You mean like ESP?"

He nodded. "Telepathy, mainly."

"And I'm to believe you?"

"Ms. Hunt, there is a great deal more to this world than most people understand. I'd think you, of all people, would be aware of that."

A chill crawled up her spine. Did he know what she was? No, he couldn't. She had guarded her secret with the greatest care, knowing what exposure would mean. "So why haven't I ever heard of this psychic research center?"

"The public isn't ready to know yet. But that isn't important. I contacted you because

you have the unique talents to do the job I have in mind.”

“What kind of job are we talking about?”

“About six years ago, I worked with a young man, a telepath of extraordinary ability. He could form mental links over great distances.”

“What does any of this have to do with—”

He held up a hand. “It didn’t take us long to figure out that his gift was a valuable tool for tracking down missing persons and criminals. Our institution created a project to do just that. The government gave us the resources we needed, and we helped them find the people who needed finding. There were things we failed to take into account, however.”

“Like what?”

“Like the effect it would have on the young man’s mind. Several of the people he located were serial killers. Being linked to their depraved minds for so long...it brought out a darker side of his nature. He became increasingly violent-tempered, until finally...”

She waited. “Well?”

He sighed. “To make a long story short, he snapped. He tortured and murdered three of the scientists who had been working with us on the project, then vanished. We found evidence which led us to believe that he had committed suicide, though we never found the body. I’ve since learned that he is very much alive and enormously dangerous. He needs to be...dealt with.” He fidgeted. “If you catch my drift.”

She stared into his eyes. “So what do you want me to do?”

“We’re aware of the type of work you do. We know about David and the others.”

A chill crawled up her spine. “Isn’t this a matter for the police?”

“The government doesn’t know the whole truth. All they know is what we told them in the reports. It was easy to cover up the murders he committed. He didn’t use conventional weapons, he used his powers, so all the physical evidence suggested that his victims had died of strokes.”

“So you lied. Why?”

“If they knew what had really happened, they would shut down our institution. I won’t allow everything we’ve worked for go down in flames.” His mouth was a tight, pale line. “There are bound to be setbacks and risks in any new field of human achievement. Haven’t astronauts died in the space program? Why, compared to the number of lives we’ve saved, the number we *could* save, the casualties have been minimal. But those little men in Washington are too frightened, too stuck in the past. Too many of them see us as mad scientists playing God. They’re looking for any excuse to cut our funding, and if they do...”

“I get the idea.”

He adjusted his glasses. “I wish it wasn’t necessary to take care of the problem like this, but as long as he’s alive, he’s a danger to everyone around him, and he’s too powerful to control or contain. He needs to be dealt with swiftly and permanently.”

“So what’s this man’s name?”

“I’d rather not discuss this any further. Not in public.”

“Why?” She glanced at the device on the table. “No one can hear us, right?”

“In theory, no. But one can never be too cautious. I’m sure you understand. I’d like you to accompany me back to our headquarters. I can give you all the information there, and then you can decide whether or not this job is for you.”

“You’re asking me to put a lot of trust in you.”

He smiled. “Hardly. You’re not helpless, Ms. Hunt. Do you really consider me a danger?”

She shrugged. “You could have a bunch of guys with machine guns waiting to ambush me when we get to a secluded place, for all I know.”

He sighed. “Look.” He whipped an ID card from his pocket and held it up. The words CENTER FOR PSYCHIC RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION were printed along the top of the card in bold, black letters, above a small photo of Dr. Abel.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” she said.

“Then you’re just going to have to decide whether or not you want to trust me.”

She was silent a moment, thinking. She had taken much bigger risks than this, and for less. Still, something warned her, some tingle at the base of her spine. It was not a sense of immediate danger, but the feeling that something wasn’t quite right, like hearing a note that was just slightly off-key. She knew that she couldn’t just walk away from this—she was too curious—but she would proceed with caution. “So where is headquarters?”

“Outside the city. About twenty minutes by car. We can take mine.”

“Then how will I get back home?”

“I can drive you to the nearest El-stop once we’ve concluded our discussion.”

She sat, trying to think. The sunlight pressed against her skin. A dull, hot pain pulsed behind her left eye. She wished he’d picked a table further from the window. It occurred to her that he’d chosen the worst possible hour for their meeting, the hour when the sun was at its zenith. Had that been deliberate? Had he wanted her at her weakest? *Easy*, she thought. *Take it easy. Not everyone is out to get you.* Still... “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with this.”

“There isn’t anyone else who can do this job. I’ve been researching you for awhile, Ms. Hunt. I know what you are and what you hunt. I also think I know why you do it.”

“Oh really?” She narrowed her eyes. “How can you presume to know anything about my motives?”

He shrugged. “Simple deductive reasoning. No one pays you. You don’t get credit. No badges, no public acclaim. A sense of moral responsibility is your only possible motive.”

“Maybe I get a rush. Maybe I enjoy the kill.”

“No, I don’t think so. You don’t fit the psychological profile of a thrill-seeker. You do it because it needs to be done, and that’s why you’re going to accept this job. Your targets have all been monsters. Killers. This man is a monster too, perhaps the worst one you’ll ever face. Maybe it’s our fault he turned out that way, but the damage is done. There’s no other way to deal with him now. Will you help us?”

She looked away. “I don’t know.”

“Please, Ms. Hunt. We need you.”

Ashley stared at him over the rims of her shades. She had been prepared for threats, bribes. Not begging. She averted her eyes again and bit her thumbnail, then quickly lowered her hand. She had tried everything to break herself of that habit. Big, tough vampire hunters didn’t bite their nails. “All right, I’ll come with you to your headquarters. But that’s all I’m promising. I haven’t agreed to the job yet.”

He relaxed slightly. “Of course.” He pulled a white kerchief from his pocket and

dabbed sweat from his broad forehead. "Shall we go, then?"

"You mean right now?"

"No time like the present."

She was dealing with something serious. She could see that much.

* * * *

Headquarters was a flat, windowless gray building, surrounded by empty fields and tall, chain-link fences topped with barbed wire. It looked like a prison. The metal gates swung open as Dr. Abel's car approached.

He parked in a nearly empty lot. Then he and Ashley got out and walked together across the cement-paved enclosure, to the main building. The steel doors slid open as they approached. A blast of air-conditioning hit her as she entered the lobby. It felt like walking into a giant refrigerator.

The room reeked of disinfectants. Its white walls and slate gray floor gave it a cold, unfriendly appearance. Something beeped, and she gave a start. A man in a gray uniform approached her with a metal detector wand and waved it over her. Another beep.

"No need to be alarmed," said Dr. Abel. "Standard procedure. You aren't carrying any weapons, are you?"

"Of course I am. I'm always armed."

"Well, you won't need your gun here, and they aren't allowed in this facility. If you would just place it in this bin, we will hold onto it for you until—"

"No."

He blinked. "Pardon?"

"I don't walk into a strange place unarmed."

Dr. Abel exchanged a glance with the man in uniform. "So you always carry a concealed weapon? I believe that's illegal in this state."

"What did you expect?" she snapped. "Sorry, but the gun stays with me."

Dr. Abel frowned. "Very well." He nodded to the man, who stepped back.

Ashley followed Dr. Abel down the narrow hallway.

"Your lifestyle has made you paranoid," he said.

"Sometimes paranoia is justified."

He glanced at her over one shoulder but didn't respond.

They walked to a set of automatic doors. He slid a key card into a slot, and the doors parted, revealing a carpeted, windowless office with a mahogany desk. The automatic doors slid shut behind them. He sat at the desk and nodded to the gray armchair facing him. "Sit."

She did. "So," she said, swiveling her chair to one side, "does this rogue telepath have a name?"

"Nathan Blaine." Dr. Abel removed some large, glossy photographs from a desk-drawer and handed them to her. They displayed the frontal view and profile of a young man with blond hair, sharp cheekbones, and a narrow blade of a nose. His eyes were striking, cool gray, with a sharp, focused look. "Twenty-six years old."

She slid the end of a cigarette between her lips and pulled a lighter from her pocket. "So what can he do, exactly? What makes him so dangerous?"

"Ms. Hunt, please, don't smoke in this room. Or anywhere else in this facility, for that matter."

She frowned, but removed the cigarette from her mouth.

“To answer your question...” He took a thick packet from the drawer and handed it to her. “Here’s a list of the specs, everything we know about his abilities. In addition to his thought-reading capabilities, he can influence and control emotions, create illusions in people’s minds, make them see what he wants them to see.”

She flipped through the packet.

“There’s something else I think you should see,” said Dr. Abel. He turned to a small television sitting on his desk and switched it on.

The screen displayed grainy black-and-white footage, obviously taken from a security camera. A man in a white coat writhed on the floor of a narrow hall. There was no sound, but his mouth was open wide, as if he were screaming. He clawed at his own face and neck, then tore off his coat and shirt and raked his nails down his chest. His movements grew slower, then finally stopped. His eyes stared vacantly into space.

Dr. Abel switched off the television. “Blaine’s power in action. I don’t know what he caused Dr. Sheffield to see or feel, but he tortured him in this manner before causing a fatal stroke. Blaine killed the others in a similar manner.” He looked at Ashley. “That was five years ago. He vanished shortly afterwards.”

“But you think he’s still alive?”

“Recently, I began receiving these in the mail, each from a different post-code.” He pulled an envelope from his desk drawer and slid it toward her. She opened it.

Inside were newspaper clippings. They were all recent. **PROM QUEEN COMMITS SUICIDE**, read the first headline. Her eyes skimmed over the article. She shuffled through the clippings. They all concerned suicides, all of them unexpected. The people involved were all successful and apparently happy. One was a wealthy businessman, another was a mother of three.

Ashley looked up. “You think Blaine is responsible for these deaths?”

“I’m certain of it. These people were acting under his powers. He killed them, and he sent me the articles to gloat. More recently, he began targeting children. He’s stopped killing from afar. Now he prefers to do it with his own hands. His powers make it very easy for him to kidnap his victims and to evade us.” Dr. Abel lowered his eyes. His hands were still clasped together, the knuckles white. “He’ll keep killing as long as he can get away with it. He needs to be stopped. And you’re the only person who can do it.”

“Why me?”

“You have certain natural advantages. You’re resistant to telepathic power, for one thing. I know about people like you. Though this is the first time I’ve had the chance to talk face-to-face with a member of your...your species, shall I say?”

Her mouth was dry. “You mean vampires.”

“Yes.” He leaned forward, eyes shining and eager. “I have so many questions.”

“I have a few, myself. How did you find me? How do you know what I am?”

“This,” he said. He pulled a laminated sheet from his desk drawer. In it was a faded, yellowed newspaper clipping with a photo of a pale child wearing sunglasses and a dark turtleneck. **TEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL BITES CLASSMATE**, read the headline. **BOY HOSPITALIZED DUE TO THROAT INJURIES**.

Dr. Abel stared at her intently, as if gauging her reaction.

She kept her face blank. She reached up to rub the bridge of her nose with a fingertip. “Huh,” she said. “I’d forgotten about that. Where’d you find it?”

"The library, where else?" He tapped a finger against the clipping. "It seems the doctors were very interested in you. You had some sort of rare skin condition, as well as an unheard-of blood disorder. That was how they perceived it, anyway. You needed regular transfusions. Your system couldn't digest normal food. They wanted to study you more closely, but your mother wouldn't allow it."

"She was very protective," she murmured.

"Was? Is she deceased now?"

"That's none of your business."

"Very well." He slid the clipping back into his drawer. "Once I knew your name, it wasn't difficult to learn your current whereabouts. Learning about your vigilante career was a bit more difficult. You're very careful to cover your tracks, and the people you kill conveniently disintegrate after they die. Fascinating trait, that." He paused. "I wonder, would it be too much to ask that I be allowed to draw some blood samples from you and take some x-rays? I'm very curious."

"No," she said. "I'm not your guinea pig. You hired me to do a job, not to stand around being poked and prodded."

"I hope you'll reconsider. I'd be willing to pay you extra for your trouble. Name your price. I've waited so long for the opportunity to study a live member of your species. Anything you wanted to give us, even a hair sample or a—"

"Let's get back to business. Where is Blaine now?"

He sighed. "We don't know."

"Then maybe you should call me back when you find him. I don't know anything about locating people."

"No. But Connor does."

"Who?"

"One of our men," he said. "Mr. Connor is a tracker, like Blaine."

"A telepath?" she asked.

"That's right."

"So can't he just locate Blaine and have you call me back when he finds him?"

"It would make more sense for you to work together. He can give you updates on Blaine's activities, so you won't be caught off guard. I think you'll find him quite useful. Besides..." He shrugged. "He wanted to work with you. Insisted, actually."

"With me, specifically?"

"Yes. Your name seemed to mean something to him."

A flicker of suspicion leapt in her mind. Could it be...? No, no way. Too big a coincidence. "Does he know what I am?"

"Is there any reason your, ah, race should be an issue?"

"Race," she muttered. "That's a good one."

"Your condition, then. Your dietary requirements. Whatever you want to call it, I don't think it will be a problem."

"I'd think some people would have a problem with it. Would you feel comfortable hanging around someone who might see you as food?"

"But you won't feed on him. You don't feed on humans at all, do you? If you did, you wouldn't need to keep a refrigerator stocked with units of whole blood."

She sat up straighter. "Just how do you know so much about me, anyway? Have your people been spying on me and snooping around?"

“Ms. Hunt, please.” He smiled thinly. “Do you think I would hire a hit-man without doing a thorough background check? It’s simple common sense. Since the usual means of getting information were not open to me, we had no choice but to ‘snoop,’ as you put it.”

“I’m not a hit-man,” she said. “Or a hit-woman, for that matter.”

“Do you prefer ‘vigilante?’”

“It has nothing to do with what I prefer. A hit-man is someone who kills people for money. I’ve never done that.” Not yet, anyway.

“Fair enough.” He pressed his fingertips together in a steeple. “So, will you take the job, or not?” His face was calm, but she smelled the sweat seeping from his armpits.

She was silent. It occurred to her that if he wanted, he could try to blackmail her. He knew a great deal about her, more than she’d want anyone to know. But if he knew that much, he probably also knew that she wouldn’t respond well to threats or blackmail.

She still had the chance to back out, if she chose. But if she did, who would stop Blaine? How many humans would it take to capture such a powerful telepath, and how many of them would die before he could be brought to justice? Dealing with Victor had given her plenty of practice at resisting telepathic power. Blaine’s abilities couldn’t be much stronger than a powerful vampire’s, could they? And of course, she was faster and stronger than any human. “I accept,” she said.

The tension eased out of Dr. Abel’s shoulders, and he smiled. “Glad to hear it. Now, I believe I promised you an advance?” He opened up his desk drawer and pulled out a large leather suitcase. He opened the latch and lifted the lid of the suitcase, revealing stacks of hundreds bound together with green rubber bands. “Cash, of course.”

She stared, mouth open.

“Go ahead. Count it, if you wish.”

She hesitated, then reached out and picked up a stack of bills. She riffled through it with a thumb. They were all hundreds, crisp and new. It was more money than she’d ever seen in her life. And this was only a small fraction of what she’d get if she completed the job. Half a million. No more waiting tables.

Her heart pounded. The sight of all that money almost frightened her. This was big, bigger than anything she’d ever been involved in. A part of her wanted to back out, but it was too late. She’d already given her word. She closed the suitcase and took a deep breath. “Okay. So this guy I’m working with, when do I meet him?”

“Right now,” said Dr. Abel. He flipped up a small panel on his desk and pressed a button. “Mr. Connor? Please come to my office.”

Ashley and Dr. Abel sat in silence, waiting as the seconds ticked by. The doors slid open, revealing a tall young man with coffee-brown hair. He wore dark slacks and a white, button-down shirt with short sleeves. Her heart jumped, and it took all her discipline to keep her expression neutral and composed.

Will’s dark blue eyes met hers. His expression didn’t change, but she heard his heartbeat quicken, even from across the room.

She was grateful for the dark shades that hid her eyes. She kept her mental shields up, her mind firmly closed. Dr. Abel didn’t need to know that they already knew each other. She stood and stretched out a hand. “Ashley Hunt.”

“Will Connor.” He took her hand. His expression remained blank, shielded. “Pleased to meet you.”

She shook his hand once, briefly. Her gaze held his. He didn’t look away.

Dr. Abel stood. "Well, you have your mission. There is a car waiting for you outside of headquarters. It will take you both to the nearest El stop, and from there, you're on your own. Feel free to contact me if you have any more questions. Here is my number." He handed Ashley a tiny, cream-colored card. He touched the suitcase. "As for this...It may not be wise to board a train with a suitcase full of money. I can have a man deliver it to your apartment personally, if you'd prefer."

"Thanks," she said. "I'd appreciate it."

He grasped her hand and gave it a firm shake. "Good luck."

"I didn't get this far by relying on luck," she said. "I don't need it."

"With all due respect," said Dr. Abel, "this time, you will."

Chapter Nine

Ashley and Will sat side by side on the El, staring straight ahead. Neither had spoken since leaving headquarters, and the silence stood between them like an invisible wall. The train was empty, save for an old man in a brown overcoat dozing in his seat. Outside the windows, apartment buildings rolled past in a blur, and the engine's dull rumble filled Ashley's ears. The hard plastic seat vibrated beneath her.

Will glanced at her and opened his mouth, as if he were about to speak, then closed it again and looked away. His hands were folded in his lap. She watched his right thumb running slowly back and forth over the knuckles of his left hand.

"What's your stop?" he asked.

"Fullerton. Yours?"

"Same."

She tightened her coat and adjusted her shades. Her hands itched for a cigarette, but every time she started to reach for one, the no smoking sign overhead seemed to glare at her like an angry red eye. She crossed her arms over her chest. "I guess we have a lot to talk about."

"I guess we do."

Another moment of silence.

"So," she said, "you're a secret agent, or something?"

"I work for the CPRI, yes."

"So this was the job you didn't want to talk about. The one that would supposedly bore me into a coma."

He shrugged. "I didn't want to lie to you, so I just omitted as much of the truth as I could. The CPRI's existence is a secret. I'm not allowed to talk about what I do."

"You're a telepath?"

He nodded.

"Did Dr. Abel tell you what I am?"

"He didn't need to. I'd already figured it out." He looked into her eyes. "You're the one, aren't you? You're the one who bit me that night, outside the diner."

No way out. She took a deep breath. "Yeah, that was me." She expected to see horror on his face, or maybe rage, but she saw only a neutral mask. Was he really so calm? Or just very good at hiding his emotions? She wondered what else he had hidden from her.

"Humans don't usually remember being fed on," she said.

"Most of that night is a blur. I just remember waking up on a bench with a sore neck. But it wasn't hard to put two and two together."

Confused, she shook her head. "You mean you already knew when you asked me out?"

"I had my suspicions. For one thing, I couldn't hear your thoughts. That's what first caught my attention. Most of the time, it's all I can do to keep other people's thoughts from overwhelming me. It's like a constant, background static. But with you, I had to strain to get even a glimpse of your thoughts or feelings. At first, I thought you might be a telepath, like me, but after waking up with my memories in a jumble...and then, learning about your aversion to normal foods, the way you avoided sunlight..."

"Wait. You knew what I am. Or you suspected, anyway. And you knew, or suspected, I had bitten you. Yet you still asked me out. Was that some sort of experiment? I mean, did Dr. Abel tell you to do it, so you could study me up close, or something?"

"No."

"So why?"

"I was curious. And I just wanted to ask you out."

She paused. "It didn't bother you, knowing I was a...what I am?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Why should it? Vampirism isn't contagious. You're born one thing or the other. I know that much."

"Yeah, but still. I'd think most guys wouldn't be too happy to know their date was a bloodsucker, and that she'd been snacking on them without their permission."

He smiled with one corner of his mouth. "Should I be freaking out?"

"That would be the normal response, yes."

"Guess I'm abnormal."

Cautiously, Ashley lowered her mental shields, but she felt nothing from him. He had shielded his mind, blocking off his thoughts and emotions. So, he knew how to do that. He was good at it, too. She couldn't sense anything. "You weren't at all upset about what I did?"

He hesitated. "Maybe at first." His voice was very soft. "But you seemed so uncertain, so shy, like a stray cat that had been hurt by people and was afraid to get close to anyone. How could I stay scared of you? More than anything, I just wanted..."

The old man grumbled and shifted in his sleep, and Will fell silent.

"We shouldn't be talking about this here," said Ashley, and he nodded.

She stared at her hands. She had never expected to see Will again, and now here he was, sitting next to her...except he seemed like a different person. He was acting more guarded than usual, but it was more than that. Just knowing he was an agent for the CPRI somehow changed things. She wondered if he was looking at her with new eyes, too. Even if he'd suspected she was a vampire all along, he hadn't known anything about her vigilante activities. Now that he knew she'd killed people, would he still see her as a friend?

For awhile, the only sound was the rattle of the train and the occasional, muffled snore from the old man.

The train slowed to a halt.

Ashley and Will left the station, walking side by side. The glaring sunlight struck her like a physical blow. She winced and shielded her eyes with one hand. She started to pull a cigarette from the package in her coat-pocket, then decided against it. Her hands were shaking too badly to light it. She wasn't accustomed to being out this much during the day. "We need to talk," she murmured. "Someplace private."

"My apartment isn't far," said Will. "About half a mile."

"You're inviting me into your apartment?"

"If you're comfortable with that."

"Are *you* comfortable?"

He smiled. "You're not going to bite my neck again, are you?"

"No."

She wondered if she could walk half a mile in the sunlight without passing out. She

guessed she was about to find out.

People passed by to either side in a blur, carrying briefcases, talking on cell phones, walking their dogs. Will rubbed his forehead with his long fingers, a tiny furrow between his brows.

“Headache?”

“Crowds,” he muttered. “It’s hard to block out so many minds.”

“Can’t you shield your thoughts?”

“Not indefinitely. It takes an effort. Sometimes I slip up and read people’s minds without meaning to. At least I don’t have to worry about that with you. I can never...” He paused and glanced at her, frowning. “Are you all right?”

Ashley was dizzy and drenched with sweat. She licked her dry lips and tried to ignore the stinging, prickling sensation that crawled over her skin. The sun beat down on her, trying to crush her into the pavement, like a giant hand pressing down. “I’ll be fine.”

“It’s the sun, isn’t it? It hurts you.” He took her arm.

She pulled away. “I’m fine.” Sweat trickled down her forehead and dripped from the tip of her nose. Her legs felt like jelly, but somehow she managed to keep upright. Beside her, Will took her arm again, and she didn’t have the strength to pull away. His hand was a warm, steady pressure, like an anchor. The people passing around them were blobs of color, fuzzy and indistinct. Their voices echoed in her head.

He leaned close, and she felt the warmth of his breath. His lips almost brushed her ear. “Almost there,” he whispered.

At last, they reached his apartment building. He led her up the stairs and down a narrow hall. The walls seemed to sway and tilt as she walked, making her stumble. Will stopped in front of a door and unlocked it. He helped her over to the couch. She collapsed and curled into a ball as he drew the thick curtains and dimmed the lights. Her skin burned, every nerve ending raw and exposed.

He pulled a blanket over her. He carefully slid her shades from her face, folded them and set them on the coffee table. “Let me get you some water.”

“Don’t want water.” Her tongue felt thick. “Just need to rest.”

He left the room, and she resisted the urge to cry out for him not to leave her alone. He returned a moment later with a damp cloth in hand, pulled up a chair, sat, and wiped the sweat from her brow.

She closed her eyes. “Why are you being so kind to me?”

“We’re partners now, aren’t we? Partners are supposed to help each other.” He spread the cool cloth over her forehead. “I’m not angry,” he said quietly. “I know you have trouble believing that, but it’s true. I know that when you took my blood, it was because you had no choice, because you needed it to live. How can I blame you for being what you are? I know what it’s like to have people fear you for something you can’t help. Before I learned to control my powers, I was always hearing people’s thoughts and responding to them as if they’d spoken out loud. I didn’t even realize what I was doing, most of the time. Even my own parents were afraid of me. I know what it’s like, to be seen as some kind of abomination because you were born different. I know what a lonely feeling it is.”

She kept her eyes shut and took slow, deep breaths. “You’re wrong.”

“About what?” he asked.

“About me. You think I’m just a human being with fangs.”

“Isn’t that what you are?”

“No. I’m a monster. Less a monster than the ones I hunt, maybe, but I’m not like you.” Her eyes opened again, just a crack. “I’m not a little lost kitten.”

“You aren’t a monster, Ashley,” he said firmly. “You need blood to survive. That’s all.”

“You don’t understand. I...I’m...” She was so tired, she couldn’t even remember what she’d been about to say. It was a struggle to hold her eyelids open. Finally, she gave in and let them sink shut again. Enfolded in darkness, she slept.

* * * *

Ashley opened her eyes to the orange glow of sunset spilling through the gap between the curtains. She sat up, peeled the damp cloth from her forehead and looked around. A strange feeling washed over her as she took in the cool white walls, the gray carpet and bookshelves. The last time she’d been in this apartment, they’d been friends watching Star Wars together. Now...

She heard someone moving in the kitchen. Will entered the room, barefoot, a cup of coffee in one hand. “You’re awake.” He sat in an armchair across from her and set the cup on the coffee table. “Do you need anything?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. Just got careless. By now, I should know better than to expose myself to so much daylight.”

“Has that ever happened to you before?”

“A few times.” She started to reach for a cigarette, then remembered that she was in someone else’s apartment. Her hand dropped to her side. “It’s like a hangover. It feels terrible for awhile, but there’s no permanent damage. Of course, if I stayed out long enough it might kill me.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know.” She cracked a weak smile. “I don’t really want to put it to the test.” For a moment, they sat in awkward silence, avoiding each other’s eyes. She cleared her throat. “Did you ever meet him? Blaine, I mean.”

“No. I joined the CPRI after he vanished.”

She heard a soft meow and looked down to see Lily rubbing against her legs.

“She remembers you,” he said.

Ashley reached down, and Lily butted her head into Ashley’s palm. Ashley stroked her, and Lily arched her back, purring.

“What do you do, exactly?” she asked. “At the CPRI, I mean.”

“I’m a tracker. I locate people.”

“How? Do you just concentrate and get a sense of where someone is? I mean, can you feel whether Blaine is north or south of us, or how many miles away?”

“It’s not really like that. Sometimes I can feel when a certain person is nearby, but that’s not very useful when it comes to locating criminals or missing persons. Usually, I have to pick up the location from the person’s thoughts and memories, or piece it together based on what I can see through his eyes. Or hers. That’s why it took me so long to find Kelly. She didn’t have any idea where she was.”

“Kelly?”

Will met Ashley’s gaze. His expression was carefully neutral, closed off. “Dr. Abel didn’t tell you about her?”

She shook her head.

He averted his eyes, but not before she saw the shadow of pain in their depths. She had seen that shadow before. "I'm not really supposed to talk about my missions, anyway."

"Confidential?"

He nodded and cleared his throat. "Anyway, I have to form a mental link with Blaine before I can locate him. Sometimes that can take awhile. Dr. Abel still doesn't understand how my power works, but the theory is...well, it's complicated."

"No, go on."

He paused, his expression pensive. "Thought patterns are specific to an individual, like fingerprints, and telepaths can identify people by that pattern. But most telepaths need to meet the person first."

"And you don't?"

He nodded. "I can develop a sense of someone's thought patterns without even meeting him. I just have to know things about him. It helps if I can touch things that the person has touched. People leave a sort of psychic residue, especially on objects or places they're very attached to."

"Residue? Like a scent?"

"Exactly."

She found herself staring at his throat. She remembered the taste of his blood, so warm and rich, filled with subtle flavors—a smoky wood taste, like the smell of a fire on a winter evening, and a musty sweetness like the smell of old books, with hints of cinnamon and vanilla. Scents of home, of comfort. Even now, she could roll the memory of that taste around in her head, like a hard candy. It had left a stamp in her mind, and she knew that she would always recognize it, always remember. She wet her lips.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"No, nothing." She rubbed her arms absently, as if she were cold, though she felt anything but. "I just want you to know...I don't normally feed on humans. I get my blood from the hospital."

"Do many vampires do that? Drink bagged blood?"

"No. Most prefer to hunt. They enjoy it."

"And you don't?"

"It's not a matter of what I enjoy. I don't use people without their consent. Not if I can help it."

"I see." He studied her face, his gaze probing and intent. "You're unusual, then."

"Well, I'm only half-vampire, after all. My mother was human. That's probably why I can tolerate sunlight for short periods of time." She looked away. She'd never known her vampire father. Her mother had never spoken of him. She'd done her best to raise Ashley as a normal child, even sending her to school with human children...though that hadn't worked out well. And not just because Ashley had to slather herself with sun-block and wear layers of protective clothing every time she left the house.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Will said, "How long are we going to keep doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"I mean, how long are we going to avoid talking about what happened between us?"

"There's nothing to talk about," she said firmly.

His steady gaze didn't waver. "I think there's plenty to talk about."

"I don't know what to tell you." She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling cornered. Even now, how could she possibly explain her situation without putting him in danger? She didn't want him involved in the mess between her and Victor. "This hasn't been easy for me, either. I didn't want to push you away, but I had no choice."

He touched her arm. "I've missed you. You know, before I met you, I'd never known someone I could just talk to, without having to block their thoughts and emotions. And I have so many questions I want to ask you. There's a lot we could learn from each other. You're a telepath yourself, after all...and you're obviously very good at shielding your thoughts. You don't even have to work at it, it seems. I'd love to learn how to do that."

She chewed her lower lip. "I don't know if I could explain how I do it. It's always been instinctive, for me. It's like trying to explain how to lift your arm, or blink your eyes. But I could try to teach you sometime, if you like." She paused. "I still can't get over how calm you are about all this."

"What, about you being a vampire? Do people usually react that badly?"

"I don't usually give people the chance to find out. But those who have, yes. It's just human nature. I used to think that once they got to know me as a person, I could tell them the truth and they would accept it, but that's not how it works. Once people learn what I am, I become a different person in their eyes. So these days, I just avoid getting too close to people. That way, no one gets hurt and no one is disappointed."

"That seems like a lonely way to live," he said.

"I don't have much choice. The alternative is too risky."

"What about other vampires? Do you have friends among them?"

"No. I haven't met many I'd care to have as friends. They see humans as cattle. As meat. It's no wonder so many of them go rogue."

"Rogue?"

"The vampires I hunt are rogues. Dr. Abel told you about that, right? About what I do?"

"Yes."

She resisted the urge to ask how he felt about her vigilante escapades. There'd be time to talk about that later. "Normal vampires don't kill humans or eat their flesh. Rogues do. They're monsters in every sense of the word. Once they reach that point, though, they usually don't last long. Other vampires hunt them down, or they just burn out and die. Vampires aren't meant to eat flesh. It poisons them."

"Why do they do it, then?"

"Same reason humans get hooked on drugs. It's a rush to feed on a human who's conscious and afraid. The adrenaline does something to the blood. Once you've done that a few times, the cravings just get more and more intense. Pretty soon, it's all you think about. Of course, those vampires are all convinced that it won't happen to them, that they'll be strong enough to resist the madness. Classic vampire arrogance."

"You seem to be pretty prejudiced toward your own kind."

She shrugged. "I'm not saying all vampires are evil. I've met some decent ones...though they're a minority. But we all have the capacity for that sort of violence."

"Humans have the capacity for violence, too."

She shook her head. "Not every human has the capacity to become a sadistic serial killer. Humans hurt each other out of greed, or lust, or conflicts of ideals. They hurt each

other as a means to some other end. Most of them don't kill for the sheer pleasure of killing. That's the difference between humans and vampires. That violence, that darkness, is a part of all of us. Some succumb to it and some don't, but the temptation is always there."

"For you, too?"

"For me, too."

His heartbeat quickened. She could hear it, a rapid thump, muffled by layers of cotton and flesh. "You think you could become a rogue?"

"Yes." She stared into space, her fingers tightening on the arm of the couch. "And the idea scares me more than you can imagine. That's the other reason I don't feed on humans when I can help it. It's too easy to lose control when you're feeding." She took a deep breath. She had revealed far too much about herself tonight. She had to start being more careful. "Listen, I really should get going."

"At least let me walk you back to your apartment. How far is it?"

"A few miles. I'll be fine, though."

"I know you can take care of yourself. I just want to walk with you."

She rubbed the tip of her tongue over one fang. There were still so many questions that needed answers, but she couldn't ask them all tonight. So she asked the one that seemed most important. "How much self-defense do you know?"

He blinked. "I studied Judo and Fujian White Crane for a few years."

"And what sort of firearm do you carry?"

"None."

She raised her eyebrows. "The CPRI didn't give you a gun?"

"I locate missing persons. Combat isn't my specialty."

"You should carry one from now on."

"Why?" His gaze sharpened. "Do you think we're going to be attacked? Are there people trying to hurt you?"

"I can handle myself. I'm more worried someone will try to hurt *you*."

"Don't worry about me. I have a built-in radar." He tapped his temple. "I can always sense when someone with bad intentions is near. Makes it much easier to avoid trouble."

"Maybe that works with humans, but it won't do much good if we run into a vampire. You won't be able to hear his thoughts."

He stared at her intently. "Do you think we're going to run into a vampire?"

She hesitated. There was no way out. She had to tell him the truth. "When I told you we couldn't see each other again, it was because a very powerful vampire had just given me a warning. He said that if he ever saw us together, or smelled you on me, he'd personally make sure you never touched me again."

"This is the jealous ex-boyfriend you mentioned?"

"He's not really an ex-boyfriend. Just someone who'd like to get into my pants...and if he can't, he wants to make sure no one else can, either. He's already killed three other people because they challenged his ownership of me. And those were vampires. Do you really think you'd have a chance if he ever came after you?"

"Ownership?" He frowned. "What do you mean, ownership?"

"That's another long story. I just don't want to see you get hurt. That's why I pushed you away. Do you understand, now, why I had to do it?"

His jaw tightened, and she saw from the determined look on his face that he wasn't

going to make this easy. "I'm not an ordinary human. As a telepath, I have defenses most people don't. Besides, we're working together now, so it's going to be difficult for us to avoid seeing each other." He stood and offered her a hand. "May I walk you home?"

She hesitated. "I need to make this point absolutely clear. If he ever sees us together, he might try to kill you. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," he said.

"Then for God's sake, why?"

"I won't let fear dictate my actions." She could see the tension in his neck, his jaw. He took a deep breath. "My father was...disturbed. I lived in his shadow for a long time. I was always afraid...afraid of disobeying him, afraid of what he might do if I made him angry. I felt so small, so powerless around him. All it took was a look, a raised hand, and I was paralyzed with fear. It's no way to live. When I left home, I promised myself that I wouldn't ever let a bully like my father dictate the terms of my life...that I wouldn't let fear stop me from being the man I wanted to be. I refuse to stay away from you just because some jealous dick doesn't like seeing you with me." His hand remained outstretched, motionless. His eyes remained focused on hers. "Let me walk you home."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. Then, slowly, she placed her hand in his, and his fingers curled around hers.

Chapter Ten

They walked down a narrow residential lane, side by side. The night was quiet and cool. A breeze carried the sound of traffic from a busier street, but there wasn't a car or another pedestrian in sight. Ashley lit a cigarette and glanced at the sky. "In the town where I grew up, you could look up on a clear night and see the whole Milky Way sprayed across the sky. Here, you're lucky if you can see three or four stars."

She spoke mostly to break the uncomfortable silence. The city was never this quiet. It was as if the ground, the buildings, the very air held its breath, awaiting something catastrophic. She knew she was being paranoid, but still...

They passed a deserted playground surrounded by patchy, yellow grass. A lone swing swayed back and forth, a tiny, almost imperceptible movement. Wind, she thought.

Something small and fast scampered across the street. Her hand darted to her gun.

Will rested a hand on her back. "Just a raccoon."

She nodded, embarrassed. Her heart wouldn't stop pounding, however. She had to pry her own fingers from the Beretta's grip; they didn't want to let go.

His hand remained on her back as they walked. Somehow, it made her feel safer. Her back felt less cold, less exposed.

She watched him from the corner of her eye, thinking about what he'd said earlier. She'd gathered that he wasn't close to his father, but still, she'd never thought he might have been abused. She'd been bullied at school, but at least she'd had a loving mother to return to. Will hadn't even had the safety net of a good home life. Yet somehow, he hadn't let it turn him into a bitter shell. Somehow, he'd managed to hold onto warmth and humanity. He was stronger than her, in that regard.

The hairs on the back of her neck tingled, and her head jerked up.

"What is it?"

"Shhh." She listened, holding her breath. She dropped the cigarette, stamped it out with her boot, raised her head and sniffed the air. "Shit." It was him, sure enough. She'd know that smell anywhere. Why had she allowed Will to accompany her? What had she been thinking? He wasn't even armed!

"What's going on?"

She grabbed his wrist. With a jerk, she pulled him behind her and stood in front of him, staring into the darkness. Her heart pounded. "He's here. Watching us. I feel it." Her fingers tightened on Will's wrist, then released him.

She stared into the gap between two brick apartment buildings, where the shadows were thick, almost touchable. As she watched, one of the shadows moved, and a pair of red eyes caught the gleam of a nearby streetlight. Victor stepped forward.

He was dressed from head to toe in black: black jeans, black shirt, black boots. "Good evening, my dear." His voice was deep and smooth, his expression cold. "And who is this?" His penetrating gaze shifted to Will.

"No one. He's no one."

"That's odd. He looks remarkably like someone." Victor strode toward them, moving like an oilspill, silent and smooth. He lifted his chin, and his nostrils twitched. "I recognize that smell." He sighed, a heavy, resigned sigh, and shook his head. "Ashley,

Ashley. Didn't I warn you not to see him again? And yet, here you are, strolling together on a moonlit night. Perhaps you thought I was bluffing? Perhaps you don't think my warnings are to be taken seriously?"

Fear flooded her chest like ice water. "This isn't what it looks like."

Will stepped forward. "So you're the one who's been stalking Ashley. You're the reason she's so afraid to even be seen with another man. What right do you have to dictate who she can see?"

Victor chuckled. "Bold words, but I can hear your heart pounding from here. You're afraid, aren't you? Scurry away like a good little mouse...that is, if you wish to see the dawn."

Will tensed. "I'm not afraid. I'm angry."

"Prove it, then. Fight me."

Will's eyes narrowed.

Ashley gripped his arm. "Stand back," she whispered. "Let me handle him."

Victor's fangs flashed in a grin. "No, let him try. I want to see what this bold mouse can do." He flung his arms open, as if to embrace them, and stood waiting. "Well? Go on. I am undefended. If you won't fight me, then retreat. This woman is mine."

A furious flush rose into Will's cheeks. "She doesn't belong to you or to anyone. You have no right..." He took a step forward. Ashley grabbed his arm. He looked over his shoulder, surprise in his face. "Let go of me."

"You're going to get killed if you keep going."

He stared into her eyes. Color burned in his cheeks. Her fingers dug into his arm until he winced. "He's manipulating your emotions. Can't you feel him in your head? He's using your own anger against you, clouding your judgment. Think! Don't let him control you!"

Victor's mind lashed into hers, sharp as a whip, and she winced as a red pain sliced through the center of her brain. His voice echoed inside her skull: *Do not interfere.*

Will shook off her grip and marched up to Victor. Victor was almost a full head taller, broader in the chest and shoulders. Will faced him like David facing Goliath, arms stiff at his sides, fists clenched. "I won't retreat."

"Very well." Victor swung one arm, like a cat batting at a toy, and his fist cracked across Will's face. The blow sent him flying backwards. He hit the street, and his shoulder skidded across the asphalt.

"Will!" Ashley hurried to his side and crouched. He was breathing hard. Blood oozed from a split lip. "Are you..."

"I'm fine," he said through clenched teeth. He stood, his movements slow and stiff. His shirt was torn at the shoulder, the skin beneath scraped raw, but he didn't seem to notice. His eyes were focused on Victor. There was a wildness in those eyes, a look that said he wouldn't quit until he lay broken and bleeding on the street.

She grabbed his wrists and stared, hard, into his eyes. "Listen to me. He's not letting you think straight. Block him out of your mind. Think about something else."

He blinked. His eyes lost focus. "I..." Rage flared in his eyes again. He growled, pulled free of her grip and charged Victor. Will's arms and legs lashed out in a series of kicks, jabs and punches. He moved with a speed and precision that most humans couldn't come close to, but it was like watching someone fight a shadow. Whenever Will tried to hit him, Victor simply wasn't there. He seemed to move without moving.

Victor's fist cracked against Will's jaw again and sent him sprawling. Will staggered to his feet and took a shaky step forward. A trickle of blood ran from his nose, and he wiped it away with the back of one hand. Then Will's eyes widened, and his hands flew to his throat. He gasped.

She gripped his shoulders. "What's wrong?"

Will's mouth moved, but no sound emerged. He sank to his knees, eyes bulging. She could hear him fighting for breath in harsh, pained gasps. Her mind raced. Somehow, Victor was doing this to him.

She whirled to face Victor. "Stop it!"

Victor stood, stone-faced, arms crossed over his chest. Will bowed his head and clawed his own throat, as if trying to pry away invisible fingers. Ashley drew her Beretta, aimed at Victor and fired.

The bullet ripped through Victor's cheek, tearing away skin, exposing teeth, gums and a bit of skull, gleaming wetly through the gore. His eyes widened. He dragged his hand across the wound and stared at the blood on his fingers.

Will drew in a great, whooping gulp of air.

Ashley's chest heaved, but her hands were steady as she kept the gun aimed at Victor's head. He took a step toward her. The wound on his face was already healing, muscle tissue re-knitting to cover the exposed bone, ragged edges of skin flowing together like liquid. The skin rippled, then smoothed out, leaving his face unblemished. He rubbed a hand over his cheek. "That hurt." His eyes darkened as he glowered at her.

Will stood, still holding his throat. His breathing was raspy. He glared at Victor, chest heaving.

"Will?" She stared at him. Something was happening. The air wavered and shimmered around him, like a heat mirage. Power crackled in the atmosphere. "What's going on?"

Will didn't answer. His eyes looked strange. Their color had shifted from a deep storm-blue to the hot, bright blue of electricity. His fingers twitched, clenched and flexed. He stepped forward, in front of Ashley. She was too surprised to stop him.

Victor raised his eyebrows. "So, you have some power of your own, do you?" A smile spread across his face. "Interesting. But it's not enough."

"Try me," he said.

Victor's eyes narrowed. She felt the thrust of his power. It wasn't aimed at her, but even so, she flinched as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water in her face. Her skin tingled, every hair standing on end. Between Will and Victor, the air was alive with energy. She could almost see their minds, their wills, pushing against each other, trying to force the other into retreat. A bright ribbon of blood ran from Will's nose, over his lips, and he wiped it away with his sleeve. His eyes burned hot and bright. Victor's upper lip twitched and pulled back from his fangs. A bass growl rumbled in his chest. Ashley stood, her fingers tight on the hilt of her Beretta.

More blood trickled from Will's nose and ears, and she spun to face Victor. The Beretta shook in her hands. "Knock it off!"

Victor's eyes narrowed to a hard line. A vein stood out in his temple, throbbing. His lips peeled back from his teeth, and the air sizzled as energy poured out of him. Will cried out sharply, fell to his knees and collapsed onto the pavement.

She stared at his motionless form, mouth dry. "What did you do to him?"

“Nothing permanent. He’ll awaken with no more than a bad headache—which is less than what he deserves.” He strode toward her, kicking aside Will’s unconscious body. “Now, my dear...” He smiled, his eyes glowing with feral light. “I have honored my promise, but I will wait no longer. I intend to claim what is mine.” He licked his lips, his eyes focused on hers. “You will take my blood into your body.”

She shuddered and flinched, her head jerking to one side. “No.”

“You think that by avoiding my gaze, you can resist my power? My voice can accomplish the same thing. You cannot resist me forever. I am far stronger than you. No matter how hard you fight me, I will wear down your defenses. Why put yourself through this battle, when there can only be one outcome?” His voice was low and smooth, deep musical notes. “Come to me. Stop fighting and accept the gift of my blood, the ancient ritual of our people. Become my mate.”

She stood, legs planted wide apart, back straight, both hands on the grip of her Beretta. Her hands trembled. “I’ve been more than generous with the warnings. This is your last one. The next shot will go straight into your heart.”

His smile faded. “They’ve made you weak. Look at you, hiding behind that toy. You disgrace yourself and your race.”

“I’m giving you ten seconds. If you’re not gone by then, I’m going to fire.”

He took another step closer. “Don’t be a fool. Put down the gun. You know you cannot win. If you come with me now, I will send the human into a deeper sleep, extract this incident from his memory and return him safely to his home.” His voice was honey-smooth, gentle and persuasive. He stretched out a hand. “If you truly care for him, you will not endanger his life further with your pointless rebellion. I can assure you that if you cooperate, I will not harm him.”

“I’d have to be really stupid to believe that, after what you just did. And you’ve got two seconds left. One...”

“You wouldn’t—”

“Two.” She fired once. Twice. Two dark holes appeared in his chest, and blood blossomed from them, spreading across his shirt in a wet, glistening stain. He screamed like a wounded panther, lips peeling back from long, sharp fangs. She fought the urge to clamp her hands over her ears. The scream was so ugly, so frightening, that hearing it was almost physical pain.

“I warned you,” she said, voice shaking.

His skin tightened around his skull and crackled like breaking ice. His mouth pulled inward, a wrinkled hole, frozen in a dark O of pain. His fingers arched and shriveled to brittle claws as green vapor rose from his wounds. His clothes hung in baggy folds from his withering, skeletal body. She swallowed hard, fighting the urge to vomit. A deep moan rose from his chest. He dropped to all fours and crawled away like an animal, leaving a trail of blood. The dark mouth of an alley swallowed him.

She knew she should follow him and finish him off. One more shot would do it. If she let him go, he would call one of his human vessels, feed on the servant’s blood and replenish his strength. She might never get another chance. Hunting down a weakened, wounded creature, however, was different from killing a rogue in the heat of combat, when her own life was on the line. Could she do that? Could she kill someone in cold blood?

Holding her breath, she crept forward and peered into the mouth of the alley. Victor

was nowhere in sight. The trail of blood ended abruptly, as if he'd vanished into thin air, but she knew a corpse couldn't disintegrate that quickly. Had he scurried up a wall, like a spider? Even dying vampires could sometimes summon bursts of strength.

It didn't matter. She'd lost her chance.

Ashley lowered her Beretta and exhaled a shuddering breath. She thrust the gun into its holster, turned, and jogged to Will's unconscious form. She crouched by his side and pressed two fingers to his throat. His pulse was steady. She gripped his shoulder and gave him a small shake. "Hey. Can you hear me?"

No response.

"Shit." She couldn't leave him in the middle of the street. If she had to, she could carry him piggyback, but if anyone saw them she'd be in an awkward predicament. The sight of a tiny woman hunched over, carrying an unconscious man on her back would attract attention, and she was too tired to make up a convincing lie.

She shook him again. "Come on! Wake up. Please?" Still no response. A cold finger of fear touched her heart. She slapped his cheek, hard. "Will!"

His eyelids flickered. He moaned and touched his cheek.

"Oh, thank God," she whispered. "How do you feel?"

"My head feels like it's going to split in two. But I'll live." He looked around. "Where is he?"

"Gone. I wounded him, but he got away before I could finish the job." She slid her arms around him and helped him to his feet. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Will leaned against her as they walked. He touched his throat and swallowed. "Do you think he'll survive?"

"Probably. The second shot hit his heart, but it'll take more than that to finish off a vampire of his power. He'll need time to recover, though. I don't think we'll be seeing him for awhile."

"Then why are we running away?"

"I don't want to take any chances." She led him to a bench and helped him sit. She pulled a tissue from her coat pocket and wiped the blood from under his nose. Her eyes searched his face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he muttered.

"Not going to pass out?"

"No."

"Good." She crossed her arms over her chest. Now that she knew he was safe, she could afford to be angry with him. "Are you aware that you almost threw away your life in a stupid pissing contest?"

He winced. "That's not—"

"You let him get under your skin." She poked a finger into his chest. "You played right into his hand! He was hoping to piss you off and make you do something stupid, so he'd have an excuse to hurt you."

"He didn't seem to need much of an excuse," he snapped. "He hit me first, remember?"

"Because you accepted his challenge."

"What was I supposed to do? Run away?"

"Yes! That's the smart thing to do when you're faced with an enemy who's much stronger than you are. If he'd really wanted to kill you, I'm not sure I would've been able

to stop him.”

He sighed. “You don’t have to rub it in. I’m already feeling pretty lousy.”

“Not for the right reason, though. You feel lousy about losing the pissing contest. You should feel lousy about putting your pride before your life.”

He frowned. “This wasn’t some kind of macho pride thing.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I wanted to beat him so he’d leave you alone. So he’d leave *us* alone.”

“You wanted to kill him, you mean?”

“No! Jesus. I don’t want to kill anyone. I just wanted...”

“To hurt him a little?” she asked. “Scare him? If you think he would’ve backed down, you don’t know Victor. His pride couldn’t bear the thought of being beaten by a human. If you made him look bad, he would make it his personal mission to break you.”

He glared at her, his jaw clenched.

“Please don’t try to be a hero for my sake,” she said, her voice softening. “If you died protecting me, I’d never forgive myself.”

He averted his gaze. After a moment, he asked, “Why is he after you?” His voice was quiet.

She raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it obvious? He wants into my pants.”

“Is that really all there is to it, though? Somehow, I get the feeling there’s more.”

Ashley sighed. “I guess I owe you an explanation.” She pulled a package of cigarettes from her pocket and flicked her lighter on. Will watched her. Reflected flames danced in his eyes as she lit a cigarette. “But I think you owe me an explanation, too. What have you been hiding up your sleeve?”

His brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“You know what I mean. Whatever you were doing back there, or about to do...I could feel your power crawling all over me like ants. You’re not just a mind-reader. You have some power you haven’t told me about.”

He hesitated. “I can’t explain what happened back there.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t. I didn’t know what I was doing. I was just so angry, and something happened, like a dam bursting inside me.” He touched his forehead, and his eyes lost focus. “I felt like my brain was on fire.”

“Has it ever happened before?”

He shook his head. Then he stared into space, frowning. “Maybe. A long time ago.”

“What happened?”

He hesitated. “I don’t remember much. I just remember that anger, that feeling. But I don’t know what it means.”

She gave him a skeptical look.

“It’s the truth.” He was firm.

She wasn’t sure she believed him, but she was too tired to start an argument. Maybe some other time, she’d try to pry the truth out of him. But not tonight. “Okay.”

“Your turn, then.”

She rolled her cigarette between her first two fingers. A bit of ash fell from the end and drifted to the pavement. “Sorry. I just don’t know where to start.” She looked up at the sky. “Victor is...well, if I were to put it in human terms, I’d say he’s my fiancé, except

I never agreed to the engagement.”

“So he just decided on this himself?”

“Vampires aren’t exactly feminists. The male chooses his mate. If he’s strong enough to make the claim and to kill anyone who challenges him, then that’s that. According to vampire law, she belongs to him. The one advantage in this for me is that any vampire with an ounce of intelligence will leave me alone, because if they attack me, they answer to Victor. Of course, not all vampires are smart. A few others have tried to claim me. They’re all dead now. Victor’s actually saved my ass a couple of times, as much as I hate to admit that.”

“Then you’re...I mean, you and he, are you, or were you...” Will trailed off. “I’m not sure how to ask this.”

“Just ask.”

“Never mind. It’s none of my business, anyway.”

“You want to know if Victor and I have ever slept together.”

“Well, yeah.”

“I’ve managed to avoid that so far.” She rubbed her arms, feeling suddenly cold. “I was sixteen when Victor laid his claim on me. I was asleep in bed. He broke in through the window and bit me.”

He placed a hand over hers and squeezed. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Since that night, I’ve slept with a gun beneath my pillow. Before tonight, though, I don’t think Victor believed I would really shoot him.”

“Why? You’ve killed vampires before.”

“Yeah, but the situation with Victor is complicated.” She took another drag on her cigarette. “Like I said, his claim gives me a measure of protection from other vampires. If he were dead, they’d come after me. He knows that I know that, and he’s counting on my fear to keep him safe.”

Will studied her face. “I don’t understand. What is this claim you keep talking about?”

“A mating claim involves a ritual exchange of blood. The only reason I’m still running free now is because Victor never completed the exchange. He took my blood on the night he attacked me, but I never drank his. It has to happen both ways to form a blood-bond.”

“And what’s a blood-bond?” he asked.

“It’s like a telepathic link, I guess. But it works mostly one-way. The one who initiates the bond—the male, that is—has more power. Victor would be able to read my thoughts, and he’d always know where I was, always be able to control me.” She shuddered. “There’s no way to escape a blood-bond, except death. It’s permanent.”

“So what stopped him from completing the ritual?”

“My mother. It was...strange, really. The door burst open and there she was, aiming a pistol at Victor. She told him to get off me or she’d blow his brains out. He said, ‘Don’t interfere, June.’ It was so weird to hear him call her by her first name, as if they knew each other. I guess that’s the only reason she didn’t kill him on sight. It’s harder to kill someone you know.”

“What happened then?”

“She ordered him, very quietly, to come into the other room with her. She told me to wait in the bedroom, so I waited for almost an hour. I could hear them talking, but I

couldn't make out the words. I don't know how my mother did it, but she made Victor agree to wait ten years before making the claim official. Ten years of freedom for me, ten years in which he wasn't allowed to interfere with my life or my choices." She stared at the cigarette smoldering between her fingers. "For a vampire, a decade isn't a long time. We aren't immortal, but we do live longer than humans. Still, I don't know how my mom convinced him to wait. Victor doesn't respect humans, or women. She must have blackmailed him or bribed him, though I don't know what she possibly could have given him. Victor's already richer than God."

"She wouldn't tell you what happened?" Will asked.

She shook her head. "I asked her if I'd really have to be his mate in ten years, and she said no, that she'd just made the agreement to buy us time while she figured out a better plan. Said she'd tell me everything someday, but she never got a chance. She died a few months later."

"I'm sorry." He squeezed her hand again. "So now your time is up?"

She nodded. "He showed up in my apartment a few months ago—ten years, on the dot, right down to the hour he attacked me that first night—and told me it was time to finish what he'd started. I told him to go fuck himself. That seemed to surprise him. I don't know what he expected. At first he tried to play nice, said he'd give me time to get used to the idea, to get used to him."

"Gee, how generous," Will said dryly.

"The thing is, he believes he *is* being generous. Things aren't done this way in his world. Most female vampires wouldn't think to refuse someone of his power. He doesn't understand that I'm not like them. Maybe he still thinks he can win me over, but he's getting impatient. He won't wait much longer."

A muscle in Will's jaw twitched, and his hand tightened on hers. He stared coldly into space, his pulse drumming visibly in his throat.

"Don't get agitated," she said. "It's not worth it."

"I'm not agitated."

"I hear your heart pounding. And I smell your testosterone level rising."

He raised his eyebrows. "You can smell testosterone?"

She chuckled faintly. "You wouldn't believe the things I can smell. Enhanced senses are part of the whole vampire package."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's just...the whole idea of 'claiming' someone seems so depraved."

"I agree, but it's how vampires have always done things. I guess it's not surprising. We've always been few in number, and for some reason, there've always been fewer females than males. I've never even seen another female of my species."

"Female vampires must be very popular."

"Very. They usually don't remain unclaimed for long. Most are snatched up at birth, or in early childhood. I'm an anomaly, because I was raised human. My mother worked hard to keep my vampirism a secret and to hide me from people like Victor."

"But then, how did he find out about you?"

"I don't know. But I guess it was just a matter of time. I couldn't hide forever." She dropped her cigarette and ground it out beneath her boot heel. Will's hand still rested atop hers, warm and steady. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I never wanted you to get involved in this mess."

“Don’t apologize. I just wish I could have done more. I wish I could have beaten him.”

“You’re not responsible for my safety,” she said.

“I want to protect you,” he said firmly.

She rolled her eyes. “There you go with that white knight stuff again. I’m not some trembling, delicate little flower who needs protecting, you know. I have more experience fighting vampires than you do. And you weren’t even armed. Yet somehow, the fact that you have a Y chromosome is supposed to override all those facts?”

His steady gaze didn’t waver. “I just know if I’d run away I would never have forgiven myself. It would kill part of me.”

“It would kill part of me if you died in some stupid, heroic attempt to protect me. As it is, I’m going to have nightmares about your screams.”

He looked away.

She leaned toward him and set a hand on his arm. “I know it’s hard, but I need you to understand this. You can’t fight Victor one-on-one and win. He’s the most powerful vampire in this city.”

He met her gaze. “Well, what about you? Do you think you can beat him?”

She bit her lower lip. “Not in a direct fight, no. But at least I know he won’t kill me.”

“You can’t avoid him forever. You said yourself, sooner or later he’ll try to force you. What will you do then?”

“I don’t know.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at her feet. “But if you still want to work with me, then you should carry a gun, at least at night.”

“I hate guns. That’s why I studied martial arts. I wanted a way to defend myself without a weapon.”

“I carry a gun. Do you think less of me for it?”

“No. It’s not a moral thing. It’s personal.”

“Well, you tried fighting Victor unarmed, and you saw how that turned out. A gun is the only thing that can protect you from a vampire. Think about getting one.”

He sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good.” She stood. “Can you walk?”

He nodded. “I feel fine now.”

She offered him a hand and helped him up. They walked in silence for a few minutes, not looking at each other. Ashley flinched at every sound. Several times, she heard footsteps and started to reach for her gun before realizing it was just a random passer-by. She exhaled and tried to relax the rigid muscles in her back and shoulders.

“Ashley…”

She looked at him. “Yeah?”

He walked quickly, staring straight ahead. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “For a moment, I really did want to kill him. I’ve never raised my hand to another person. I’ve always believed that violence doesn’t solve problems. But if I’d been strong enough, I would have used my power—my God-given gift—and turned it into a weapon of death. It makes me wonder what I’m capable of.”

“Don’t get caught up in what-ifs. Focus on the here and now. It’s a lot more useful.”

He smiled, though a shadow still darkened his eyes. “Good advice.”

“It’s what my mom always told me.” She stopped and looked up. Her apartment building towered before them. “Here we are.”

"I guess this is where we say goodnight, then."

She hesitated, looking at him from the corner of her eye. "I don't feel right about sending you back to your place alone. Not after what happened."

"You said he'll need time to recover."

"I can't be certain. He might be faking. He might be lurking nearby, waiting to catch you alone."

"What are you suggesting?"

She took a deep breath, wondering if she was being foolish. "Stay here tonight."

His eyebrows shot up. "Here? In your apartment?"

"It's the least I can do." She paused. This was probably a recipe for disaster, but even so...she didn't feel right about leaving him alone. "Will you stay?"

"I'd be honored." He looked into her eyes. "There's something I've been wondering about."

"What's that?"

"Every other vampire I've seen has red eyes. Yours are dark. Why?"

Ashley tilted her head. "Every other vampire? What others have you seen, aside from me and Victor?"

"I've seen pictures. The CPRI has known about vampires for some time. They keep files on every vampire they're aware of."

"Do I have a file?"

"Probably. I've never seen it, though. So, are your dark eyes a trait from your human mother?"

"They aren't really dark." Ashley touched a fingertip to her eye, removing her contact lens, and looked up at him. She put the lens back in and blinked a few times.

He smiled. "I like your real color better."

"Very funny." She turned and walked toward the building.

Will jogged after her and grabbed her arm. "I wasn't trying to be funny. I like your eyes."

"They're red," she said.

"Red is a beautiful color. It reminds me of sunrise."

She scrutinized those dark blue eyes for some hint that he was mocking her. She saw only earnestness. "Most people think of blood first."

"I'm not most people."

"Yeah." A tiny smile touched her lips. "I'm starting to realize that."

Chapter Eleven

Ashley's apartment was dingy and cramped. The off-white walls were bare, with yellowish patches. In all her time here, she hadn't put up a single picture or poster. Trying to disguise the apartment's naked ugliness would just draw attention to it, like too much make-up on a harrowed, aging face.

Will looked around. He didn't say "nice place," which she was glad for. It would have been an obvious lie.

She shut the door and hung her coat in the closet. "I'm afraid I don't have much to offer you in the way of food." An embarrassed flush warmed her cheeks. If she hadn't needed blood so badly, she would have suggested going back to Will's place instead. "There's some cereal in the cabinets. It's really old, though. Actually, I'm not even sure if it's still good, so you might not want to chance it. I only bought it for appearances' sake. I mean, if someone came into my apartment and saw no food in the cabinets, they'd probably find it a bit strange." She realized she was babbling, stopped and cleared her throat. "If you're hungry, I can order you a pizza. Or anything you want."

"Thanks, but I might go straight to bed. I'm exhausted."

She nodded. "You can take the bed in my room. I'll be up for awhile longer, anyway."

He glanced at the window. "It'll be dawn in a few hours. Will you be okay, sleeping on the couch?"

"I'll close the curtains." At the worried look on his face, she added, "I've fallen asleep on the couch before. I'll be fine. As long as I'm not directly exposed to the sunlight, it won't hurt me. Do you want to shower before you go to bed?"

"That'd be great, actually."

"Bathroom's down the hall, first door on the left. There's a spare toothbrush in the top left drawer, and a robe on the door-hook. It might be a little small on you, but you're free to use it."

"Thanks." He paused. "Are you okay?"

She looked away. "Fine."

He touched her shoulder. "Are you sure?"

"I'm just scared and tired. I don't want to lose you."

"You won't," he said.

She rubbed her forehead. A lump rose into her throat, because she knew that was something he couldn't promise her. "We can talk about it later. Go take your shower." She listened to his retreating footsteps, the sound of the bathroom door shutting. A moment later, she heard the hiss of water running.

She opened her refrigerator, removed a pouch of blood and tore it open. After pouring the blood into a bowl, she grabbed a spoon, sat down at the table and began to eat. Sometimes she warmed her meals in a saucepan over the stove, but tonight, she was too hungry and tired to bother.

The shower shut off, and floorboards creaked under Will's footsteps as he walked into the bedroom. She imagined him naked, sliding beneath the sheets, his skin still damp and flushed from the hot water.

She finished the blood and washed the bowl. She walked into the living room and faced her reflection in the window. Her own eyes stared back at her from the pale blur of her face. She drew her Beretta and aimed it at the reflection, then shoved it back into its holster. Her arm moved so fast that to human eyes, it would have been a blur, but still, she wondered if it was fast enough. Over the years, she'd spent countless hours in front of her bedroom mirror, drawing her gun over and over, practicing the simple movement until it was as instinctive as breathing, just so she would be prepared when that crucial moment came—the moment when an instant's hesitation could cost her life.

She drew again, aimed, then lowered the gun and stared at it. It felt cold and heavy in her hand. What did she look like through Will's eyes? He hated guns. He'd said it was personal, not a moral thing, but did that make a difference?

She set the Beretta on the coffee table. She stripped off her gloves and laid them next to the pistol. Had she done the right thing, bringing Will here? At the time it had seemed safer than sending him off alone, but if Victor came after her, Will would be caught in the crossfire again. Maybe he'd be better off having as little contact with her as possible.

But what if Victor went after him? Alone, Will was vulnerable. Even if he had a gun, it would not give him adequate protection against a vampire...not when Victor could crush his throat without even touching him. Any vampire could manipulate a human's mind, but only the most powerful could physically attack them from a distance. This hadn't been any mind trick, it had been the real thing. Victor could have killed him, if he'd wanted. Killed him without even touching him.

Damn it. Why had she let Victor go? If she'd finished the job, she wouldn't be worrying about this right now. Ashley stared out the window, at the clear, night sky, and lit a cigarette. The moon shone through a veil of gauzy clouds, a pale, cold light. A restless energy burned inside her, but she didn't pace. She held herself perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the night, the faint creaks from within the walls and floor, the sigh of the wind outside, the distant roar of car-engines.

She drew the curtains, stretched out on the couch and stared at the ceiling. After a few minutes, she snuffed out her cigarette in the ashtray on the coffee table and closed her eyes.

She was almost asleep when the faint creak of a footstep reached her ears. Her eyes snapped open. She grabbed the Beretta, leapt to her feet and aimed, every muscle taut and ready.

"Jesus!" Will raised his hands, eyes wide. He wore one of her terrycloth robes, which was too small for him, and his hair was disheveled.

She lowered the Beretta and exhaled. Her heart pounded. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I thought you were asleep," he said, his gaze still riveted on the gun. "I didn't want to wake you. I was just going to get a glass of water from the kitchen."

She set the gun on the coffee table. "Sorry. I'm...a little jumpy. After what happened tonight—"

"I understand." He smiled nervously. "You've got incredible reflexes."

"Comes with the territory."

"I, uh...I don't think I'm going to get to sleep for awhile. If you're up too, I might as well get dressed."

She stared at him for a moment and considered telling him not to bother putting

clothes on. But that would probably be a bad idea. She nodded briefly. He retreated to the bedroom and returned wearing his rumpled clothes.

She went into the kitchen, filled a glass from the tap, and handed it to him.

"Thanks." He sat on the couch and took a gulp.

She sat beside him. "I'm not a very good host, pulling a gun on my guest."

"Don't worry about it. I'm a little edgy, myself."

"Couldn't sleep?" she asked, and he shook his head. "Bad dreams?"

"Bad memories."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I shouldn't. There's classified information involved." He ran a hand through his messy hair. "Sometimes, I think that's the worst thing about my job. I can't discuss it with anyone outside the CPRI."

"Well, I'm working for the CPRI now, aren't I?"

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. "That's true. Still, you're not an agent."

"They have no way of knowing what you tell me in the privacy of this apartment," she said. "I don't see what it could hurt."

He hesitated. "Will you promise not to discuss this with anyone?"

"Of course. Who would I tell, anyway?"

"Okay." Will took a deep breath. "You remember me mentioning a girl called Kelly?"

Ashley nodded. "You said she was one of Blaine's victims."

"Yeah." Will tilted his glass back and forth. Ice cubes clinked against the sides. "She was thirteen. He kidnapped her, kept her bound and gagged in a shed for almost a week. He tortured her, raped her." His face was pale and drawn, his eyes distant. "I remember the day Dr. Abel called me to his office and asked me to locate her. He showed me her photo. She looked so innocent. Lots of curly brown hair, freckles, and a big grin. The thought of her at Blaine's mercy made me sick. I made up my mind that I would save her, whatever it took. I visited her home, her school, her friends' homes, trying to get a lock on her thought patterns. Finally, I managed to form a link with her. The first thing I saw through her eyes was the inside of a dirty shed."

His fingers tightened on the glass. "I spent countless hours with my mind linked to hers, trying to figure out where she was. She didn't know, couldn't tell me, since she'd been blindfolded and stuffed into the trunk of a car when he drove her out there. By the time I put the pieces together, it was too late. He'd killed her. He was gone when the police arrived."

Will closed his eyes. "She was so brave. She tried so hard to help us find her, answered all my questions as best she could. All she asked in return was that I stay with her and talk to her. She didn't want to be alone. So I spent every moment I could with her, right until the very end, when Blaine stabbed her in the heart. I felt her death. My own heart almost stopped. For a moment I thought I was going to die with her, but I accepted my fate. It was my punishment for failing her."

Ashley's chest tightened, aching at the thought of what he'd endured. "Will..."

He stared down at the glass in his tightly clenched hands. "I woke up in the hospital wing of the CPRI headquarters. Dr. Abel told me I'd been reckless. But what was I supposed to do? All she asked was that I stay with her in those final moments. How could I refuse?"

Ashley laid a hand on his knee. She didn't know what else to do.

"I failed her. It was my responsibility to find her, to save her, and I couldn't do it." He wiped the back of one hand across his eyes.

"You're not responsible for everyone," she said. "You take too much on your shoulders."

He looked at her and smiled, though his eyes were dark with pain. "Look who's talking. The woman who made it her personal responsibility to hunt down every rogue vampire in the city."

She rubbed the back of her neck. "Okay, you have a point. So what? You're not responsible for the death of that girl. You did everything you possibly could."

"How could you know that?"

"Because I know you," she said. "I know that if you were trying to save someone, you wouldn't let yourself rest until the job was done. But you can't always save the people you want to save. Sometimes you give it everything you have, and it's still not enough."

Hands shaking, he carefully set his half-full glass on the coffee table. "You're right. I know you are. But it's hard to accept."

She laid her hand over his and squeezed. He suddenly looked about twenty years older, his face lined and weary. Ashley sensed that Kelly was not the first person he'd given his all to save, and she probably wasn't the first who had died, either. Did it take this sort of toll on him every time?

"Sometimes I can still feel her in my mind," he murmured. "And not just her. All of them, all the people I've linked to, over the years. Their memories, their feelings, live on inside me. I'm filled with ghosts. The ones that died—the ones I failed to save—they're the most restless." He pressed the heel of one hand against his forehead, his eyes unfocused.

She wrapped her arms around his waist. He hugged her back and buried his face in her hair.

"It's not your fault," she whispered, her face pressed to his chest. "You tried."

He held her tight, and she felt his heart beating hard and fast against her cheek. No wonder there was a shadow in his eyes. No wonder he seemed so tired. He'd borne this burden alone for so long.

"Why do you keep doing it?" she asked. "I mean...if it takes such a toll on you...you have a choice, don't you? You can refuse a mission?"

He pulled back and held her at arms' length, gripping her shoulders. "How could I do nothing when innocent people are dying? How could I live with myself?"

She touched his cheek, felt the roughness of stubble against her fingertips. He was going to burn himself out if he kept going down this road. Yet how could she ask him to ignore the suffering of others? She knew all too well how it felt to witness injustice, that burning rage, like a hot shard of steel embedded in her heart, the desperate need to do something.

"I never wanted this power," he said. "But maybe...if there's a God, He wanted me to have it, wanted me to use it to help people. And if I have to face Him someday, I want to know that I did the best I could. Even if I can't save the people I want to save, I have to know that I at least did everything in my power."

"You did." She smoothed his dark hair from his brow.

He curled his fingers around her wrist, brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her palm. A tingle raced down her arm. She watched, breathless, as he kissed her fingertips one by one. His gaze met hers, and she stared into those deep, dark blue eyes.

His hands framed her face. His gaze lingered on her mouth. Then he leaned forward, and his lips touched hers...soft at first, then firm. She tasted his tongue, his warm, sweet breath. Her eyes slipped shut, and for a moment, she felt as if she were falling or floating. She lost herself in his kiss, clutched his shoulders and pressed her chest to his, hungry for the feel of his body. Nothing else existed. All thoughts of Blaine and Victor slipped from Ashley's mind. Unreal now, distant, as if she and Will were encased in a protective bubble that the outside world couldn't penetrate. She felt the heat of his skin through his shirt, the firmness of muscle. His warm, clean smell enveloped her, and she pulled back, dizzy, to catch her breath.

Her nipples tightened, pushing against the thin cotton of her shirt. His hand slid down to cup her left breast. She'd always been self-conscious about her insignificant, plum-sized breasts. Judging by the burning intensity of his gaze, however, he saw nothing insignificant about them. His thumb traced a circle around her aching nipple, and a jolt of heat shot from her breast to the melting center of need between her thighs. Even through her shirt, his touch was so intense. Her breast tingled beneath his hand, taut and alive.

His breathing had grown heavy. His eyes were hungry, hot with desire, yet soft with tenderness and something that bordered on reverence. No one had ever looked at her that way. "You're so beautiful," he whispered hoarsely. His lips grazed her cheek. "Your skin is so soft. So smooth."

Somewhere beneath the hunger, the need, she felt a twinge of fear. "Will..."

He kissed her again, and the warm touch of his mouth blasted every coherent thought from her mind. Her lips parted, and his tongue slid into her. Its tip traced a slow circle around the inside of her lips, then pushed deeper into her mouth, tangling wetly with hers. Her body arched against his, and she moaned, low and soft.

When at last they separated, panting for breath, she looked up and found herself staring at his throat. She touched his pulse. It beat strong and fast, the blood hot beneath her fingertips. Its salty, metallic scent filled her nostrils. She felt each heartbeat within her own body, in her chest, her throat, even on her tongue, as if she already held his pulse in her mouth. Her fangs lengthened, sharp tips pricking her bottom lip. She kissed his throat and heard his breath catch.

Ashley's hand crept up the back of his neck, gripped a fistful of his hair, and tilted his head back. He didn't resist as the tip of her tongue slipped out between her fangs to touch his thumping pulse.

Her eyes traced the shape of his body: the width of his chest, the slimness of his waist and legs. He seemed somehow bigger than usual, his shoulders broader—so warm, so close and alive, every inch of him begging to be touched and kissed. His shirt was temptingly loose, and she slid a hand beneath it, fingers spread over his flat, firm stomach. The muscles twitched beneath her palm. He looked into her eyes, his face so close to hers she could feel his breath on her lips.

She kissed him again, devouring his mouth. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt.

"Ashley..." Her name escaped his mouth in a soft breath.

Her lips grazed his neck. She undid the last button of his shirt and let it fall open,

exposing his trim, hard upper body. She brushed a finger over one small, pebble-hard nipple, traced the line of dark hair that ran down the center of his chest. Blue eyes gazed into hers, half-lidded and smoky with desire. She rubbed her cheek against his chest, feeling the tickle of hair, and set a hand over the bulge in his jeans. His cock was hard, hot, straining against the taut denim. Her fingers trailed over it, and his breathing quickened.

Impulsively, she straddled his lap and felt that hard bulge pressing against her bottom. She rubbed against it, her hands on his shoulders, kneading his shirt like a kitten. A soft, hungry little growl vibrated in her throat as his large, warm hands slid beneath her shirt and lifted it, exposing her breasts. His lips brushed against one puckered areola, and then his mouth closed around her nipple. The shock of wet heat against her skin drew a gasp. Eyes closed, he swirled his tongue around her nipple, then sucked it.

It had been so long since anyone had touched her like this. So long since she'd tasted intimacy. Her long-starved body and heart soaked it up like parched soil drinking up rain. She wanted more—wanted his hands and lips everywhere. A sweet ache blossomed between her thighs, growing with each gentle tug of his mouth on her breast.

His hand slid along the curve of her waist, over her thigh, and brushed against her mound. She twitched. That soft touch lit her nerve-endings on fire, and need slammed into her, hot and urgent. She rubbed against his hand, panting, grinding her sex against his palm. On some level she knew she was losing control, but she was beyond caring. She needed this too much.

Will's hands slid over her smooth back. Her nipple slipped from his mouth, swollen, bright pink and glistening. He turned his attention to the other nipple—circled it with his tongue, lapped it and sucked it. The gentle pressure of his teeth on that sensitive flesh sent a tremor through her body, and a sweet chill raced down her spine. Her hips ground against his, bringing the bulge of his erection firmly against the place where she needed him most.

A soft moan escaped his throat, and his head tipped back, exposing his neck—warm and vulnerable and so tempting. She pressed her face against his throat and breathed in his scent. It was like a drug; a heady euphoria bubbled up inside her, making her lightheaded. Her tongue slid out to wet her lips. "Lie down," she whispered.

His eyes widened a little at the command. He lowered himself to the couch, to his back, chest heaving with each breath. Still straddling him, Ashley trailed a line of kisses down the center of his chest. She nuzzled his stomach, his thigh, then pushed his legs apart and rubbed her cheek against his hard, cloth-covered cock.

"Oh, Ashley...oh, God..."

Slowly, she unbuttoned his jeans and tugged them down. Pounding heartbeats echoed in her ears. The smell of his blood was hot, alive, so close to the surface, as if it were straining to break free of his body. Hunger rose up in her like some dark beast leaping from the shadows. She bit his inner thigh, hard, and he gave a start.

She pulled back, appalled at herself. "Oh God. I'm sorry. I—I didn't mean..."

He took a deep breath. "It's all right. I'm fine. It just...startled me, that's all."

She'd drawn blood. The salty smell tickled her nostrils, exciting her and filled her with dread at the same time. What was she doing? She slid off of him, shrank to the other side of the couch and pulled her shirt down, covering her breasts. Facing away from him, she curled into a ball, knees pulled tight against her chest, cheeks flushed. She pressed a

hand to her mouth, mortified at her own lack of control.

Will didn't move for a moment. Looking dazed, he slowly sat up. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" She stared at him with wide eyes. "I bit you."

"It was just a little nip. It wasn't that bad."

"Look down."

He did, and his eyes widened at the sight of the bloodstain on his thigh. There were two small, dark holes where her teeth had punctured skin. Mouth open, he touched the wound and rubbed his bloodied fingertips together. "It's not serious. I'll put some antiseptic and a bandage on it. It'll be fine." But his nonchalant tone didn't fool her. She'd seen the shock on his face.

Her gaze strayed to the blood glistening on his fingertips. She wanted to lick it off. Instead, she grabbed a tissue from the box on the coffee table and offered it to him.

"Thanks." He wiped the blood from his fingers, then pressed a wad of tissues to the bite.

She stood. "Wait here." She fetched a tube of antiseptic cream, some gauze and a large bandage from the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. His cock was still rigid, tenting his cotton boxers, but she did her best to ignore it as she spread the cream over the bite and bandaged it. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"It's okay." He pulled his jeans on and buttoned them up. "I mean...it felt good. What you were doing." He paused. "You didn't have to stop."

"Yes, I did. I hurt you."

He smiled. "You need to start giving me more credit. I know that we humans must seem fragile to you, but we're not that fragile. I can handle a few bites."

"I know. I just..." Her voice trembled slightly, and she pushed a hand through her hair. "I don't know what I'd be like during actual sex, how much control I'd lose. It's that, as much as anything else, that has kept me from ever taking a human as a lover. Vampires heal quickly, so it wouldn't matter so much with one of them, but a human? It's so hard for me to judge how much you can take. I could put someone in the emergency room without even trying."

He raised his eyebrows. "So you've never...?" He trailed off, letting the question hang in the air.

She shook her head. "Kind of pathetic at my age, I know."

"Not at all."

Staring into space, she leaned back on the couch. "I would've had sex with Brian, probably, but...well, things didn't work out."

"Brian?"

"My first boyfriend." Her chest and throat tightened. "I never told you about him, did I?"

Will shook his head.

She bit her lower lip, her fangs nearly drawing blood. "Maybe once I tell you, you'll understand why I've avoided getting involved with humans, why I was so reluctant to tell you what I am." Gaze downcast, she hugged her knees to her chest. She'd never told anyone this story...but Will had been so open with her, shared his secrets, his pain. It seemed only fair. She took a deep breath. "I met Brian in my junior year at NIU. He was in my Media Ethics class. We paired up for some class project, and we just hit it off." Though it hadn't been that long ago, it seemed like another life now. She'd been a

different person. Even so, the memories were as sharp and crisp as photographs.

"Most people thought I was weird. I wore sunglasses and gloves all the time, even indoors, and I carried an umbrella for shade whenever I went outside. But Brian didn't seem to mind all that. I think he just assumed I was eccentric." A smile tugged at her lips, then faded. "He loved vampires and werewolves. Not that he really believed they existed, but he loved to read about them and draw them. He was even in this silly vampire role-playing group. Of course, he didn't know the truth, but we made jokes about it. You know, me being so pale, and hating the sun and all. All the things I'd been teased for in high-school, he seemed to find endearing. I started to think that maybe, finally, I had found someone who could accept my differences, even appreciate them. We ended up dating for a few months and I decided it wasn't fair to go any further without telling him what I was, so..." She shrugged.

Will waited for a moment. Then, when it became apparent she wasn't going to say anymore on her own, he asked, "What happened?"

"He attacked me. Stabbed me with a letter opener. Here." She touched her left shoulder. "And here." She laid a hand over her chest, just to the right of her heart.

Will's eyes widened.

"Once he realized what he'd done, he panicked and started to scream. I put him in a trance and spent the night locked in the bathroom, waiting for the wounds to close. I made a real mess. Had to scrub down the floor and tub afterwards to get all the blood off."

"God," he whispered. "That's...that's horrible. That someone who knew you, someone who was close to you, could still believe you were a monster...I just don't understand it. How could anyone be so blind?"

Tears prickled in the corners of her eyes, and she blinked them away. "People fear what they don't understand. I understood that even when I was a kid, but I thought Brian might be an exception. Of course, it's one thing to wear fake fangs and pretend you're a vampire. It's another to encounter the real thing. To be fair, I did a terrible job of breaking the news to him. I should have expected his shock, should have been prepared, but I was too in love to think clearly...and when he didn't react the way I thought he would, I got angry. I yelled at him, called him a hypocrite. Looking back, it's really no surprise he panicked and tried to hurt me. If I'd done things differently, maybe..."

Will squeezed her shoulder. "You can't blame yourself. You never could have predicted that he'd react so violently. What happened afterwards?"

"I erased his memory of that night and broke up with him, gave him some lame excuse about wanting to concentrate on my studies and not having time for a serious relationship. I dealt with it in the most cowardly way possible, but at the time I didn't know what else to do. The experience taught me a valuable lesson, though. Since then, I've been much more cautious about letting humans into my life."

Warm, calloused fingertips touched her cheek. "You can't judge an entire species by the reaction of one person. But you know that won't happen with me. I would never hurt you like that."

"I know. I trust you. But I'm not sure I trust myself not to hurt you. And there's still Victor to consider."

At the mention of Victor's name, Will's eyes burned bright with anger, and the hot, chemical smell of testosterone tickled her nostrils. It made her want to sneeze.

“You can’t live your life in fear of him,” he said firmly.

“If we became lovers, and he found out...”

“How could he know?”

“He’d smell it. He’d smell your body on mine.” She looked away. She felt so tired. Something ached inside her, a bone-deep ache that couldn’t be touched. “Will you hold me?” she asked softly. “Just hold me?”

His arms surrounded her, pulling her close, against the solid wall of his chest. “I’ll hold you all night, if you want.”

She tucked her head under his chin and nestled close to him. His smell and warmth made her ache for more. It felt so natural, so right. “How is it that I feel so comfortable around you?” she whispered. “I met you less than a month ago, yet I feel like I’ve known you for years.”

“I feel the same way about you.”

She rested her cheek against his shoulder, and he rubbed her back, the movement of his hand rhythmic and soothing. After a few minutes, she pulled away. “You should get some sleep. I’ve kept you up too long already. You’re probably exhausted.”

He frowned. “Are you sure?”

Eyes downcast, she nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

She heard the squeak of the couch cushions as he stood. He squeezed her shoulder, leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The creak of his retreating footsteps echoed through the silence. She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her hands into tight fists. Her nails dug into her palms, but she didn’t feel any pain, didn’t even realize she’d broken the skin until she looked down and saw blood oozing between her knuckles. She forced herself to unclench her hands and watched as the ragged crescent-moons in her palms shrank and vanished. “Damn it,” she whispered. Tears stung her eyes. She curled her hands into fists again, hiding the blood under her nails.

She’d thought Will would be safer here tonight, but she’d been wrong. Victor wasn’t the only danger. She dropped her head into her hands.

She missed her mom—that wry, lopsided smile, those warm dark eyes, those strong, caring arms. Mom always made her feel safe. But Mom was dead. A vision of wide, glassy eyes and blood-spattered skin flashed through Ashley’s mind, and she flinched. Even after all these years, the memory still cut deep. She could still hear the rough, growling voice and mocking laughter of the rogue who’d killed her. Ashley had riddled him with bullets, but his gurgling death cries had been a small, cold comfort. June Hunt, the greatest vampire hunter in the city, had died horribly, ripped limb from limb. And it was Ashley’s fault. If she’d acted sooner, been stronger, her mother might still be here now.

With her face buried against her knees, Ashley silently cried.

* * * *

“Chinese food for breakfast?” Will stood in the doorway to the kitchen, his hair still sleep-mussed, staring at the Styrofoam containers and white paper bags on the kitchen table.

“I know,” said Ashley. “It’s a little unconventional. But there aren’t any breakfast places around here that will deliver. If you’d rather have something else...”

“No, no. This is great.” He grinned. “I just wasn’t expecting it. When I woke up and smelled fried rice, I thought I was still dreaming.”

“Well, eat up. There’s coffee too.” She pointed to a Styrofoam cup.

“Thanks.” Will sat at the table, dug a plastic fork out of a bag and opened a container of crab Rangoon.

It seemed rude to watch him eat, so she busied herself disassembling and cleaning her Beretta in the bedroom. Normally, she used the kitchen table for cleaning her guns, but for now, her dresser would have to suffice. The familiar task usually soothed her, but now, she found herself distracted, edgy.

She returned to the kitchen to find him leaning back in his chair, hands over his stomach. He glanced up and smiled. “I’m stuffed.”

“You can take the rest home if you like.” She hesitated. “Listen...about last night...”

“Don’t worry about it. I understand.”

She looked away. She knew he couldn’t possibly understand, but she supposed she should just be glad he wasn’t angry or upset. “Will you be able to get home all right? I can drive you. It’s not too sunny out. I should be fine for a short drive.”

“No, it’s okay. I can walk, or take a cab.” He paused. “I guess I should get going soon. I need to visit some of the places Blaine has been, try to pick up a scent, so to speak.”

“What sort of places?”

“The shed where we found Kelly, for one.” He dropped an empty Styrofoam container into the garbage. “I’ve actually been there once before, during the preliminary investigation, but I wasn’t able to pick up much. Sometimes a second visit reveals more, gives me a deeper look. I’m not looking forward to it, though.”

Not surprising. He’d spent a lot of time linked to that girl. In a sense, Will himself had been tortured and raped in that shed. “Where is it?” she asked.

“In the woods, near a small town called Wolf’s Run. About an hour and a half north of Chicago.”

A quiet, isolated spot. A perfect place to get ambushed. “Wait for nightfall,” she said. “Let me go with you.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Are you sure? Don’t get me wrong. I’d enjoy the company, but there’s really no reason for you to be there, and it’s a long drive.”

“You don’t have a car. How will you get there?”

“One of Dr. Abel’s men can drive me. I won’t go alone, don’t worry. I just don’t want you to trouble yourself with—”

“Are we partners or not?”

He looked at her in surprise and smiled. “We’re partners.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “Then I’m coming with you.”

He nodded. “I’ll meet you at seven?”

“Sounds good. I’ll pick you up.”

Chapter Twelve

Gravel crunched under the wheels as Ashley's car crept up the narrow, dirt road. The headlights cut through the darkness, twin beams of yellow. She saw the flash of eyes in the forest, and a narrow, pointy-eared shape—a coyote or a fox—darted away and vanished in the underbrush. The road twisted and turned, at times dwindling to little more than a path.

She wondered if it was her imagination that made the forest feel alive and menacing. The trees seemed to crowd around and loom over her. Their branches reached down like bony, grasping arms and scraped the car's roof as she drove under.

Will pointed. "There it is."

Ahead, an old house, long abandoned, stood in a clearing. Boards crisscrossed the windows, and the whitewashed walls were faded and streaked with years of dirt. Brown, dead vines covered the walls, tendrils digging between the boards, as if they were trying to drag the house down into the dirt. Nearby stood a small, weathered tool-shed.

She pulled up to the shed, parked the car and got out. A cool breeze ruffled her hair, and goosebumps rose on her arms. The house looked evil. That was the only word for it. But of course, a place couldn't be evil. That was silly. Was she simply feeling the echo of Blaine's madness and cruelty? She didn't have Will's talent for picking up emotional residue...or perhaps, she thought, everyone had the talent to some small degree. People often spoke of places as being haunted or cursed. Maybe they, too, felt the aura of malevolence left by evil deeds.

Her hand strayed to her Beretta and touched the grip. She probably wouldn't need it, but she wasn't willing to bet her life on that.

All around, overlapping boot-prints showed where the muddy ground had been trampled by countless other feet. Bright yellow crime-scene tape surrounded the yard. Will stepped out of the car and walked around it to stand beside her. His expression was unreadable, but she saw his hand tighten on the car door as he slammed it shut.

"Are you sure we're allowed to go in here?" she asked.

He nodded. "They've already gone over this place with a fine-toothed comb. They have all the evidence they're going to get."

She lifted the tape and ducked under, Will close behind. They walked up to the shed. He pushed the door open, and the hinges squealed—an ugly sound, like a small animal in pain. She leaned forward and peered in. Moonlight trickled in through the cracks between the wooden boards, illuminating a square wood floor, about four by four feet. The smell made her nose wrinkle—it stank as if something had died beneath the floorboards. She covered her nose and mouth with one hand.

A thirteen-year-old girl had spent weeks locked inside this thing, with nothing to do but dread her tormentor's next appearance. The thought made Ashley look forward to killing Blaine.

Will stood with his arms crossed over his chest, staring into the shed. His face was ashen, though his expression remained rigid and unrevealing. "Blaine drugged her before locking her in the shed. When she woke up in here, there were photos tacked to the walls, pictures Blaine had taken of his past victims after he killed them. There was a name

written on each one.”

“Jesus.” She moistened her dry lips. “What now?”

“Just wait, and don’t say anything for the next few minutes. I need to concentrate.” He closed his eyes and placed one hand against the shed’s back wall, fingers splayed. For almost a full minute he stood motionless, his shoulders rigid. Then his eyes snapped open. He gasped and yanked his hand from the wall, as if it had burned him.

“Will?” Anxious, she gripped his shoulder. “What is it?”

He sank into a crouch, shaking. A moment later, he looked up at Ashley, his face pale, his brow gleaming with sweat. “Let’s get back to the car,” he whispered.

She held out a hand. He grasped it, and she helped him to his feet. They walked back to the car and sat inside. He slumped forward and pressed his fingertips to his brow, breathing hard.

“What did you sense?” she asked.

“I’m still sorting it all out.” He closed his eyes. “When I pick up something, it’s just a burst of jumbled images in my head. I don’t always know what it means. But it might be enough. I might be able to link with him now. I just...need a few minutes to recover.”

She studied his pale face. “Are you okay? You need water or anything?”

He shook his head. His pulse drummed, the heavy beats resounding in her ears.

“Let’s just get out of here,” he muttered.

She started the car, and they drove in silence for a few minutes. He pulled a tissue from his pocket and mopped his sweat-shiny forehead. “Will you pull over for a minute?” His voice was strained.

After she obeyed, he opened the door, stumbled out and crouched by the roadside, his back to her as he retched. A moment later, he got back into the car and leaned back in his seat. The sour smell of vomit lingered in the air. “Sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right.” She handed him a bottle of water.

He took a swig. “Being in that place, knowing what he did to her...” His hands balled into fists. “I could feel the residue of her fear in there. And his pleasure. He enjoyed every moment of it. Her screams, her blood, her tears, the look in her eyes when she knew she was about to die. It just makes me so angry, so sick.” He stared out the window. “She was just a kid. A harmless little girl. She didn’t deserve this.”

“No, she didn’t,” Ashley said. What else could she say? What else was there?

They drove in silence through countryside and suburbs until the lights of Chicago came into view. Rain pattered against the windshield, and she switched on the wipers.

“Do you want me to drop you off at your apartment?”

“Yeah.”

By the time she pulled into a parking space near his building, it was almost midnight. They sat in silence for a little while, and Ashley watched the raindrops slide down the windshield, turning the streetlights to wet, yellow smears. Will just stared into space, his expression rigid. He was trying to shield his emotions, but she could feel his grief leaking out, thick and dark as a storm cloud.

She set a hand over his and squeezed. “We’ll find him.”

He nodded and looked down so his hair hung in his face, hiding his eyes. He turned his head aside, shoulders hunched. She touched his back to feel him shaking. There was a tension in his shoulders and chest that she recognized. He was fighting back his feelings, his pain and rage, pushing them deep inside where they couldn’t be reached.

A dull ache filled her chest. Her first impulse was to pull him close, hold his head to her chest and stroke his hair, but uncertainty paralyzed her. She'd never been in a situation like this; she didn't know what was right. Should she leave him alone until he regained control? Urge him to let it out? In the end, she just turned away and stared out the window, feeling as if an invisible wall stood between Will and herself.

At last, he straightened. "Sorry. I'm okay. Really." His voice was hoarse, but his eyes were dry. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Are you going to be late for work?" His voice sounded more normal, now.

Ashley glanced at the digital car clock. 11:28. Her shift started at midnight. "I've got time to go home and change. I'll be all right." She wondered if she should just quit. After killing Blaine, she wouldn't have to worry about money anymore. Still, it was difficult to get a job when you could only work night-shifts. Until she had the entire five hundred thousand in hand, she was reluctant to give up what she had.

Her cell phone rang, and she gave a start. "Damn. Hang on." Who could be calling at this hour? She took the phone from her coat pocket, punched the button with her thumb and raised the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hello, my dear."

Victor.

Her sharp intake of breath must have given away her surprise. He chuckled. "Didn't expect to hear from me again so soon, did you? I must admit, you surprised me last night."

"How did you get my number?" Ashley demanded. She sure as hell hadn't given it to him.

"Ashley, Ashley." He clucked his tongue off the roof of his mouth, a playful scolding sound. It pissed her off. "I have watched you for years. I know everything about you."

She ran a dry tongue over dryer lips. Her heart knocked like a fist against the wall of her chest. Will touched her arm, and she looked up, meeting his gaze. His expression was tight with urgency, but he didn't say a word—just waited, looking into her eyes. "So," she said, "did you call just to chat, or what?"

"I want to discuss our situation," Victor said. "We both realize this can't go on forever, and we're beginning to tire of it."

"Speak for yourself. I've been tired of it for quite awhile."

"Regardless," he snapped, "you know that I will not take no for an answer, and I am beginning to understand that you will not accept me willingly, no matter how much time I give you."

"And I only had to tell you a few dozen times and shoot you in the chest before you caught on. What do you want?"

"I propose a truce," Victor said. "I want you to come to my home tonight, as a guest. You have my word of honor that I will not lay a hand on you, or attempt any mind tricks. And in return, you agree not to shoot me. Fair enough?"

"Why?" she asked. "What are you trying to accomplish?"

"I wish to talk to you. That's all." His tone was calm and reasonable, and she didn't trust it a bit. He was up to something; she'd bet her Beretta on that. "I want you to hear my side of the story," he continued, "my reasons for acting as I did when I came to you that first night. You have never allowed me a chance to explain."

“So explain now,” she said. “I’m listening.”

“No, my dear, it must be face to face. Words do not have the same impact over the phone, and you know it as well as I. I don’t think a single evening of your company is too much to ask.”

Her fingers tightened on the phone. She felt Will’s gaze on her, but he remained silent, listening.

“So what am I getting out of this?”

“Aren’t you at all curious about my reasons?”

“Not curious enough to walk into your lair with your word of honor as my only protection. Besides, I have work tonight.”

“Fine. Tomorrow.”

“I haven’t agreed to this.”

“I am offering to bargain with you, Ashley, to converse with you as an equal and reach an agreement. But I will not do it over this human-made device.”

She bit her thumbnail. It was odd that Victor had chosen to call her, rather than deliver the invitation in person. He never seemed to have any trouble finding her. Maybe he was still weak, or maybe he was afraid she’d shoot him on sight if he showed up without warning. “I don’t see what sort of agreement we could reach. I want the claim broken. I won’t settle for anything less.”

He sighed, as if he had expected this. “There is a way to break it, and I will explain. But it must be face to face, and you must hear my side of the story first.”

Her heartbeat quickened. It had to be a trap. Victor wouldn’t offer her a way out. But she was intrigued in spite of herself. Just as he’d probably planned. “When you say ‘there is a way to break it,’ do you mean there’s something I’ll need to do before the claim can be broken?”

“I have made my offer. If you wish to discuss it further, you will meet me tomorrow at nine o’clock.”

“Fine, but I want to meet in a public place.”

“You know better than that. For a discussion of this nature, we’ll require absolute privacy. Either we meet in my home or we don’t meet.”

“I don’t even know where you live.”

“Ah, of course. How careless of me. I’m in the silver high rise next to the little park with the fountain. You know the place, don’t you? You used to sit there sometimes, just before dawn, and feed the squirrels.”

She felt a pang of discomfort. “You were watching?”

“I am always watching over you.”

“Touching.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” He hung up.

She turned off the phone and shoved it into her pocket.

“What does he want?” asked Will, though his tone suggested he already had a pretty good idea.

“He wants to talk. In person, tomorrow night. He invited me over to his place. He says he’ll offer me the chance to break his claim.”

“He’s lying,” Will said.

“Actually, I don’t think he is. That type of trickery isn’t his style. He’s a manipulator, but he’s too clever to risk getting caught in a bald-faced lie.”

Will shook his head. "This is crazy."

She stared out the windshield. Raindrops snaked down the glass, catching glimmers of red neon from a sign. "I have to take the chance."

"That's what he wants you to think. He just wants you in his reach so he can force the blood-bond on you."

"If he wanted to force me, he would have done it by now. He has his own little code of ethics...or maybe 'rules' is a better word. Like he's playing a game. He can menace me, stalk me, and threaten me, but if he forces me, he loses. He's trying to rig this so he comes out looking like the good guy."

Will's eyes searched hers. "You seem to understand him pretty well."

She shrugged. "You know the saying: 'know thine enemy.' This is something I have to do. I've postponed it too long as it is. I've tried avoiding him and ignoring him, and that doesn't work. The longer I run from him, the more aggressive he becomes. I'm sick of watching my back all the time. Sooner or later, this thing has to come to a boil, and if that happens soon, all the better. If he tries anything, I'll kill him. Maybe I'm just looking for an excuse."

"If you're going, I'm going with you."

"No."

His jaw tightened. "I'm not helpless. This time, I'll be ready. I won't let him get under my skin."

"After what happened last time, how can you even consider—"

"He caught me off guard."

She twisted in her seat, facing him. "This is my battle. If this turns violent, you won't have a chance. You know it's true. It has nothing to do with how brave or how competent you are. It's just insane for an unarmed human to go up against a vampire. It's like trying to stop a truck with your bare hands."

"I'll carry a gun."

"Have you ever even fired a gun?" she asked, exasperated.

"Yes, I have. My father taught me to use a rifle when I was a boy. We went hunting a few times, before everything went bad. Just because I don't like guns doesn't mean I can't use them."

She shook her head. "That was a long time ago. Anyway, rifles are completely different from handguns. You have to spend a lot of hours practicing with a semi before you can shoot with any accuracy, and Victor won't be an easy target."

"Okay, so maybe I won't be the world's greatest shooter. Even so, having someone to watch your back is worth something, isn't it?"

"Will..."

"I can't let you go alone. Not when I know you could be walking into a trap. If you get hurt, or worse..."

"Victor won't kill me. He will kill you, if he has the chance."

"Victor isn't stupid. You said yourself he doesn't want to force you, he wants you to accept him freely. He knows that if he kills your friend right in front of your eyes, he'll lose that chance."

She frowned. "You're not going to give up on this, are you?"

He shook his head. "Like you said, we're partners. Partners help each other."

She looked into his determined eyes. "Or maybe you just don't like the idea of me

spending the evening alone with Victor?"

A flush rose into his cheeks. "Maybe. So?"

"Jealousy isn't a good enough reason to risk your life. Especially since you have no reason to be jealous. I find Victor about as sexually appealing as toenail fungus."

He cracked a tiny smile, but it faded quickly. "It's not jealousy." At her skeptical look, he sighed. "Okay, maybe that's part of it, but there are plenty of other, better reasons. I'm afraid for you."

She took a deep breath, crossed her arms over her chest, and looked out the window, at the gray and brown, watery blur outside. After a moment, she turned her face to Will. "Look me in the eye."

He met her eyes, looking slightly puzzled.

She gave a small push with her mind. He blinked. His frown melted and his eyes drifted out of focus. She heard his heartbeat slow. His eyes closed for a moment, opened, then closed again. His head nodded gently, like a flower in a breeze, and drooped until his chin touched his breastbone. She leaned closer and whispered into his ear, "How do you feel?"

"Good. Warm." The words were slurred, fuzzy around the edges.

"This is what it feels like to be under a vampire's power. Lift your right arm."

His arm floated up, as if someone had pulled an invisible puppet-string.

"Now your left," she said.

His other arm drifted up.

"Lower them."

His arms sank to his sides. She released her grip on his mind. He blinked and looked around, eyes unfocused, as if he were emerging from a dream. His brow furrowed. "What happened?" He rubbed his forehead. "Did I fall asleep?"

"No. I took control of your mind for a minute."

His eyes widened. "You what? Why?"

"To prove a point." She crossed her arms over her chest. "All Victor has to do is look in your eyes, catch you in one unguarded moment, and you'll be his. If he asks you to stick a gun in your mouth and pull the trigger, you'll obey without hesitation." He looked stunned, as if she'd slapped him. She leaned toward him. "You weren't even trying to shield yourself. That's why I was able to control you so easily. You need to get in the habit of keeping your shields up all the time, not just when you're around crowds."

His mouth opened and closed; he seemed unable to speak. "Of course I didn't have my shields up," he said at last, his voice tight. "I didn't think I'd need to defend myself against a friend. Jesus, Ashley. You could have asked. You had no right..." He glared at her.

She glared back. "Victor won't ask. I'm trying to keep you alive. I want you to understand what you're up against. Now, look into my eyes again, and this time, I want you to fight me. Resist."

He shook his head, his expression hard and angry. "If this is a game, it's a pretty sick one."

"It's not a game. If you're going to walk into the lion's den with me, I need to know that you're capable of resisting Victor's powers, that he's not going to turn you into a puppet and use you against me. Look into my eyes."

He clenched his fists. For a moment, she thought he would get out of the car and

walk away. Then he raised his gaze to hers. She stared into those blue eyes and let her power flow over him, into him. His eyes lost focus again—then he blinked, and his eyes cleared as he pushed back, pitting his will against hers. For almost a full minute, they remained motionless, staring into each other's eyes, locked in an invisible tug-o-war. Sweat glistened on his brow and upper lip. His breathing quickened. His pupils shrank to tiny points. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

Pain shot into Ashley's head, a sudden, blinding stab, as if someone had thrust a red-hot knitting needle through her right eye and into the center of her brain. She cried out and pressed a hand over her throbbing eye.

"Ashley!" Will gripped her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

She removed her hand from her eye. A part of her expected to see it covered in blood, but of course there wasn't any. She glanced into the rearview mirror. There was a tiny, reddish cloud in the white of her eye, as if the capillaries had burst from strain, but nothing worse. "Don't be sorry." She straightened. The ache had already begun to fade. "You just passed Resisting Vampire Mind-Powers 101."

He took a deep breath. A bead of sweat trickled down his temple. "I didn't want to hurt you."

"You do whatever it takes to break free of a vampire's gaze. Of course, it's better to avoid meeting a vampire's eyes in the first place. Some of them can do the same with their voice, though, and unfortunately you can't do much about that except try to resist the pull."

"Then my shield won't protect me?" he asked, frowning.

"It'll give you some protection, but Victor's powers are strong. You can't let your guard down, not even for an instant."

He took a deep breath. He still looked shaken, his face ashen. "Does this mean we're going together?"

"I guess it does," she said. "If you still want to, that is."

"Of course I do."

She ignored the sharpness in his tone. It had been an exhausting night. They were both on edge. "Then meet me tomorrow at seven, my place. I'll teach you how to use a Glock." She paused. "Go on. Get some sleep. I need to get to work. Jack's going to chew my ear off if I'm late again."

"I'll see you tomorrow." He hesitated. "Have you ever done that to me before? Used your powers on me?"

"Only once, when I fed on you that first night."

He nodded, though he looked uncertain. "Good night." He opened the car door and got out.

* * * *

Back in her apartment, Ashley changed and tugged a brush through her damp hair. Five minutes later, she jogged into Maxine's, breathless and dripping with rain. Jack stood facing her, fists planted on his hips. "It's ten after twelve."

"I know. Sorry." She grabbed her smock from a hook on the wall. "I hit every red light on the way here." It was a terrible excuse. There was only one stoplight between her apartment and Maxine's. Still, she didn't expect Jack's next words.

"Don't bother to put that on."

She froze, one arm through the smock's sleeve. "What?"

"I warned you what would happen if you were late again."

"It's just ten minutes!"

"Late is late." He took the smock from her motionless hands. "Sorry, kiddo." His expression remained hard and cold. "I cut you shit-loads of slack about this, but I've got to draw the line somewhere. If you can't show up on time, you can't work here."

Ashley opened her mouth to protest, then shut it. She lowered her eyes and nodded. "Bye, Jack." She walked out, into the pouring rain, and splashed through the puddles in the parking lot. Rain hammered her head, trickled down her shirt-collar and slithered down her spine like a cold snake.

Maybe this was for the best. She'd been planning to quit after Dr. Abel paid her in full, anyway. She thought about those crisp, new-minted stacks of hundreds and felt a twinge of discomfort. Maybe the money wasn't the only reason she'd agreed to this job, but it was a reason. Was she any better than a common hit-man, after all?

She got into her car and turned up the heat to full blast. For a few minutes she sat motionless, eyes closed, as hot air streamed over her.

She thought about calling Will. She wanted to talk to someone. But no. He was probably asleep by now, and he needed his sleep. She wanted him awake and alert tomorrow.

Victor, Will, and herself in the same room. It was going to be a hell of a night.

* * * *

Will arrived at seven o'clock. "You'll need a gun," said Ashley. "You can use my spare."

He smiled, though there was no humor in his eyes. "Right to business, huh?"

"Sorry, I've been a little on edge. Got fired last night. Between that and this meeting with Victor, I've had a lot on my mind. You want coffee or something?"

"No, I'm...you got fired?"

"Yeah," she said.

"What for?"

Ashley shrugged. "Being late one too many times. It doesn't matter. It was a shitty job. Wait here." She fetched the Glock from the bedroom and set it on the coffee table. "Do you know what this is?"

"Sure. It's a handgun."

"No, I mean, do you know what kind it is?"

"Um...a semi-automatic?" He scratched the back of his neck. "I've never used a pistol. I don't know much about them."

"It's a 10 millimeter auto Glock 29," she said. "Pretty similar to the Glock 20, but smaller. Easier to conceal. And since it *is* a semi-automatic, you don't have to worry about chambering. Just pull the trigger and the gun fires. Go ahead, pick it up." When he hesitated, she added, "Don't worry, it's not loaded right now. I just want you to get used to holding it."

He picked up the Glock.

"Like this," she said, and curled his fingers around the grip. "How does that feel?"

"It's so light." He tilted the Glock. "Not much like holding a rifle."

"No, but it can kill someone just as easily. Here, I'll show you how to load it, though

I don't think that will be an issue tonight." She took the Glock and removed the magazine from the hand-grip. He watched as she loaded it. "I'm hoping you won't have to fire this at all. It might seem simple, but you need a lot of practice to really know what you're doing when you use a semiautomatic. We don't have that sort of time, though, so we'll have to hope for the best. Just don't pull it out unless you absolutely have to. Any questions?"

He shook his head.

"Good," she said. "Let's go."

"You know where he lives?"

She nodded, finished loading her Beretta and shoved it into the holster at her hip. "Let's see. You need a place to put yours, don't you?" She went into the bedroom again and returned with a spare holster and a long black coat draped over one arm. "Here. The coat will hide it."

Will buckled the holster around his waist and shrugged into the coat. He slid the Glock into the holster and followed Ashley to the door. "It's not going to go off on its own, is it? I mean, if I bump it the wrong way."

"No. There are safety mechanisms to prevent that. Don't worry. Pretend you're not even carrying a gun."

He followed her down the stairs, out of the building. "We can take my car," she said and opened the passenger-side door for him.

Will got in and shut the door, moving gingerly, as if he still expected the pistol to go off in its holster. She pulled out of the parking lot. They drove in silence for a few minutes.

"Ashley?"

"Yeah?"

"How often do you use your mental powers on humans?"

"I try not to. When you're a vampire living in human society, you have to cloud a few minds to avoid being discovered, but I don't manipulate people's memories whenever it's convenient, like some vampires I could name."

"But you can control people's thoughts."

She felt his eyes on her. "When I have to, yes."

"You could have kept your job. You could have used your powers to change your boss's mind. But you didn't."

"It didn't occur to me."

"Really?"

"I avoid using my powers whenever possible," she said. "Once you start manipulating people, where do you draw the line?"

"You have a lot of integrity," he said.

"Not really. It's just common sense and a healthy dose of caution."

He smiled. "I don't think many people could resist the temptation to use mental powers to their own advantage."

She shrugged. Heat rose into her cheeks at the implied compliment, and she hoped it was too dark for him to see her blushing. "Well, what about you? You're a telepath."

"I can only hear people's thoughts. I can't control them. Probably just as well. It's a temptation I wouldn't want to deal with."

She nodded. "Power is dangerous. It can get out of hand very easily. Maybe I'm just

more aware of that than most people.” She stared out the windshield, watching the buildings glide by. “We’re almost there. You’ve got your shields up, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Remember, no looking him directly in the eye, and if you start to get that drowsy, complacent feeling, fight it. Think about something else.”

“Like what?”

“Anything. Recite the multiplication tables in your head, or the Lord’s Prayer, or the lyrics to ‘Mr. Roboto.’ And if he attacks you, shoot him. But not before.”

She heard the click in his throat as he swallowed. “Do you think he’ll be armed, too?”

“No, Victor despises guns. He sees them as humans’ compensation for their own weakness. Owning a gun, for him, would be like admitting he’s too weak to defend himself without it.”

Will raised his eyebrows. “You really do understand him.”

“More than I’d like to.”

A moment later, she spotted the building she’d been looking for; a sleek high rise with mirrored silver sides. “There.” She pointed. “Penthouse apartment, I’d wager.”

“Where does he get his money?” Will asked, staring at the building.

“No idea. Family inheritance, maybe.” She pulled off of Lake Shore and turned onto a narrow street, making her way toward the building. She found a spot a few blocks away, parked, and dropped a few quarters into the meter. She glanced at Will and smiled. “Lucky us. We found one of the six functional parking meters in Chicago.”

He smiled back, though his eyes showed a little too much white around the edges. He looked as uncertain as she felt. She squeezed his hand.

They walked to the high-rise and entered a spacious lobby through glass double-doors. The floor—black marble tiles laced with white veins—gleamed as if freshly polished. A massive stone fountain dominated the room’s center, and water spouted from the mouths of four marble swans, their wings spread, the tips touching to form a circle. A mahogany desk stood at the far end of the room, against the wall.

They approached the desk. A thin, blond man in an immaculate gray suit sat behind it, ruffling through papers. Ashley cleared her throat. The man looked up and peered at them over the rims of his small, square spectacles. “We’re here to see Victor Castello.”

“Names, please,” the man said in a dry, crisp voice.

“Just tell him Ashley Hunt is here.”

The man raised a telephone to his ear and dialed a four-digit number. “Mr. Castello? There’s a Ms. Ashley Hunt here to see you. Shall I send her in?” A pause. “As you wish.” He looked up. “Elevator on the right.” He pointed. “Thirteenth floor.”

“Thanks.” Ashley turned and strode toward the elevator, Will close behind her. Their footsteps echoed through the vast lobby. When they reached the elevator doors, Ashley punched the “up” button with a gloved finger, and the doors slid open, allowing them to step inside. The elevator’s progress was so smooth and silent that if not for the blinking light going up, she wouldn’t have known it was moving.

“That was easy,” he said.

“Yeah, I expected to get searched for weapons.” The elevator stopped, and she leaned close to him. “Remember. Don’t meet his eyes.”

He nodded, and the doors slid open.

The room beyond looked glossy, fresh and untouched, like a magazine photo. It had the sort of quiet simplicity that spoke of great wealth. There was nothing blatantly lavish, yet somehow, she knew that each item in the room had cost more than her car. The carpet, white as new fallen snow, looked as if it had never been walked on. A slim, curved sofa, upholstered in black leather, stood facing a bookcase of some matte black material that could have been stone or wood. Books, bound in what appeared to be real leather, lined the shelves. Next to the bookcase hung a Japanese scroll painting of a roaring tiger, its claws outstretched, reaching for a white crane in midair.

A picture window dominated the back wall. The penthouse perched above the surrounding buildings, offering an unobstructed view of the city. The lights of Chicago reflected in the lake, like fallen stars littering the water. To their left, the living room flowed seamlessly into a gleaming kitchen of black enamel and silver chrome. Like the living room, the kitchen looked as though it had never been touched—but of course, Victor wouldn't have much use for the huge steel refrigerator or the matching oven.

Ashley heard movement and gave a start. She turned sharply, shoulders taut, as Victor stepped out of a hallway and into the living room. He wore a black silk shirt, matching slacks, and black leather boots polished to a high luster. His hair was tied back in a tight queue, his beard neatly trimmed, as always. If he was still recovering from the shot to the chest, it didn't show. "Good evening, my dear." His gaze shifted to Will, and his eyes narrowed just a bit. "And good evening to you, Mr. Connor. I had a feeling you would be with her tonight. Do sit down."

"I'd prefer to stand, if it's all the same to you," she said.

Victor hesitated. Something cold flashed in the depths of his eyes, like steel, but he smiled. "Very well." He turned to face Will. "I must warn you, for your own sake, not to touch Ashley in my presence. I find it very difficult to maintain my self-control when I see another male touching her. We vampires are territorial creatures."

Will's hands clenched. He glared at Victor, or rather, at Victor's chest. It was hard to look tough when you couldn't meet someone's eyes. She had faced that same dilemma many times. "She isn't yours," Will said, his voice cold. "You don't have the right to dictate who she can or can't touch."

Victor's eyes narrowed a little more. "You are human. You do not understand the ways of our people."

"She doesn't want you. I know that much."

Victor smiled, showing just a glint of teeth. "You're a naive child meddling in matters beyond your comprehension. If you think you understand what's going on here, you're mistaken."

"What's not to understand?"

"Will," Ashley whispered in a warning tone. Will fell silent, though his jaw remained tight and the cords in his neck stood out. She turned to Victor. "When we spoke over the phone, you said there was a way to break the claim, that you'd tell me what it was. Will you honor your promise?"

Victor sat on the couch, his posture relaxed, loose. It reminded her of a panther lounging on a bough. He lifted one hand and wagged a finger at her. "Talk first. If I give you the information straightaway, you won't hear me. I want to be sure I have your full attention."

"Fine," she snapped. "Talk."

"I don't want the human male present during this conversation," he replied sharply. "This is a private matter which concerns only the two of us. You have my word that neither you nor your companion will come to harm while you are separated from him, and he may return as soon as we are finished."

"Is there any reason why I should trust your word?"

He raised a dark brow. "Have I ever broken it? Come now. You know I am honorable. You trusted my word enough to come here, after all."

She sighed. "Fine. I won't send him outside, but we can go into the other room and talk."

Will looked at her, eyes widening. "Ashley..."

"It'll be okay. Just wait here. Please." She looked at Victor. "But I want him present, as a witness, when you explain this matter about escaping the claim."

"Of course." Victor rose to his feet. "Come with me."

Ashley met Will's gaze and whispered, "I'll be back soon." She squeezed his shoulder, turned, and followed Victor down the hall. She glanced back to see Will standing, watching her intently. She held his gaze for a moment, then looked away.

Victor led her into a large room with wood-paneled walls and glossy wood floors. The wood was dark, with a deep, reddish tint. Mahogany, maybe. A table stood in the center of the room, draped in a white cloth. Two candles in silver holders stood in the center, glimmering. Another picture window nearly filled one wall. "I like looking down on the city," he said.

"I kind of figured," she replied.

He stared at the glimmering lights below and stretched an arm toward the window, fingers spread. "It is my city," he said. "My territory. Do you understand what that means? All those who hunt here hunt only with my permission." He met her eyes. "It could be yours, as well. The vampires of this city understand and respect my authority. I am a master, like my father before me...but I did not inherit the title. I won it through countless struggles, countless victories."

"In other words, those vampires do what you say because they know you can kill them."

"In a nutshell." He closed the door. "Now, then." The candle-flames reflected in his eyes, giving them an eerie glow, like rubies lit from within. "Are you sure you don't want to sit? You'll be more comfortable."

"I don't feel like relaxing right now. We can talk just as easily with me standing up."

He sat and tilted his head back, studying her face. Even when he was looking up, she thought, he always seemed to be looking down on her. "You are afraid to relax around me."

"Does that surprise you?" she asked.

"We have a truce. Remember?" He smiled. "You are my guest here tonight, and I am your host. And, as such, the least I can do is see to your comfort."

She met his eyes. No hypnotic pull, no mind tricks. Just like he'd promised. She sat.

"May I offer you some refreshment?"

She frowned. "You have blood? Here?"

"But of course." He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

A door at the far end of the room opened, and a young woman in a long-sleeved white dress entered. Long blonde hair tumbled down around her shoulders in waves. She

moved like a sleepwalker, her huge, china blue eyes wide and empty, her pale pink lips slack and parted.

Ashley's back stiffened as the woman approached, bent and laid her head on the table, hair spilling across the dark wood, her smooth, white throat exposed. She remained motionless, like a doll, her lovely eyes staring at nothing.

"Feed," said Victor. He sat, hands folded in front of him, a smile on his lips. "Take as much as you wish. She is yours. I have not touched her."

Ashley swallowed. Her heart thudded against her ribs. The girl didn't look like she was old enough to be out of high school. With an effort, she tore her eyes away from that soft throat. "Where did you get her?"

"I picked her up at a club last night."

He said it the same way a human might say, "I picked up a loaf of bread." She glared at him. "Let her go."

"Suit yourself." He glanced at the girl, who remained stone-still, back bent, head on the table, as if she were waiting for the guillotine. "Nichole. Go into the bedroom and lay down." The girl rose, crossed the room, and walked through the doorway. Victor stood and closed the door.

"What are you going to do with her?" Ashley asked.

He sat. "I'll alter her memories, release her from her trance, and send her on her way. No harm done. But there'll be time for that later. Never fear, she will sleep peacefully until I command her to awaken."

Ashley took a deep breath, determined to stay calm. She could feel her pulse drumming in her throat. "You said you wanted a chance to explain. Maybe you'd care to start by explaining why you attacked and bit me when I was sixteen? Why you tried to force a blood-bond on me without bothering to ask me how I felt about it first?"

"If I had not done it, someone else would have."

Her teeth clenched, grinding together. "That's it? That's your reason? Kind of disappointing."

He leaned back in his chair and propped his cheek on one fist, regarding her through calm, guarded eyes. "You were an unclaimed female, and your nature is a difficult thing to hide when you're living in the human world, especially to those who know what to look for. Some other vampire would have learned about you sooner or later. It's a wonder you went undetected as long as you did."

She stood stiffly, arms at her sides. "So you were just a good Samaritan trying to save me from someone worse than yourself? If that's the case, why did you feel it necessary to force me?"

"If I'd offered you the choice, you would have refused." His calm tone never wavered. "At the time, you didn't even know what a blood-bond was. Your mother never taught you the ways of our people. She robbed you of so much."

Ashley ground her teeth together.

"Do you know how many vampires I've kept away from you?" he asked. "How many I've had to threaten, even kill, to keep them from claiming you? Do you really think you could have fought them all on your own? I've been protecting you this entire time. You need me. Had I not laid my claim on you so soon, you would already belong to someone else."

"I never asked for your protection," she said. "You had no right—"

“Rights are a human concept. They are a luxury of fattened, complacent sheep who can afford to quibble about what is and isn't acceptable in a civilized society. We have no such luxury. Has it ever occurred to you that our race is dying? There are fewer of us all the time. Our hiding places are smaller and scarcer in this world of bright lights and cameras. The humans have swarmed over every square inch of the globe. If we do not remain strong, if we do not produce strong offspring, we will continue to dwindle until we vanish altogether.”

“So what?”

Victor's mouth opened, but no words emerged. He stared, jaw hanging. It was the first time, in Ashley's memory, that she had managed to render him speechless. “Did your mother turn you so thoroughly against us, then?” he asked at last, his voice thick with barely controlled anger. “Do you hate your own kind so much, that you'd prefer to see us all die?”

“I don't hate vampires,” she said. “I just don't share your obsession with racial preservation.”

“How can you be so indifferent to the fate of your own people?”

She shrugged. “There's a reason why species become extinct. Some scientists think dinosaurs died out because they just couldn't adapt to the changing climate. Maybe our time is over. If the vampire race can only survive by raping and enslaving its women, then at some point, you have to ask yourself if this way of life is worth preserving.”

“A blood-bond is not rape,” he said, visibly struggling to control his expression.

“When it's forced on someone, it is. That seems to be how things are usually done.”

He shook his head. “Your views are so narrow, so human. If you could look beyond your blind fear and pride, for once, you would see that this bond is as necessary for you as it is for me. It needn't be painful. If you embrace it, I can show you a world of pleasures beyond your imagining, pleasures of the body and mind. I will give you anything you desire.”

“Except freedom,” she said quietly.

“There is more than one kind of freedom.”

“Only one kind that matters, and that's the freedom to live without a gun to your head. Whatever sort of pleasures you're talking about, they could never be worth turning control of my life over to another person. You'll never look at me as your equal.”

He laughed, though his eyes were cold and humorless. “Equality. Another fable of the human world. Do you think you could ever have an equal relationship with a human? Like that boy standing in the other room?” He pointed at the door. “He could never be your match. You are the predator. He is prey. Once he realizes that, how long do you think he'll remain by your side?”

Her chest tightened, and a lump filled her throat, but she swallowed, forcing it open. “I told you we're just friends and work partners. That's all.”

“He's in love with you. I can see it even without reading his mind. It's in his eyes, his voice, his every move.” Anger flashed across Victor's face. “But it is no more than a foolish boy's infatuation. It will end.”

She glared at him, unable to speak past the knot in her throat.

“I understand,” he said, his voice suddenly butter-soft. “Humans have their allure, don't they? We are strong, and they are so vulnerable, so easy to dominate. We are born predators. It is natural to find that vulnerability attractive. But they are not like us. If he

understood the nature of your attraction to him, he would be repulsed. He would turn from you.”

She looked away. “It isn’t like that,” she whispered. “I don’t see him as prey.”

“Oh, really? Don’t you thirst for his blood?”

How easily he seemed to see through her, identifying her private fears and exploiting them. Again, she found herself reduced to a child, trembling in the shadow of a looming, omnipotent demon. “You don’t seem to have any qualms about taking human lovers,” she snapped.

“It’s one thing to use a human for sex. But a lover is not the same as a mate.”

She stared at the wall, trying to shut out his voice.

Nevertheless, it washed over her, cold and ominous, its pull as irresistible as the tide. “Humans are attracted to the dark. Darkness is the unusual, the exciting. But they enjoy a safe, whitewashed version of it. When confronted with the reality, they will lash out in fear and hatred. Those human women I take to my bed are simply meat of a different kind. Humans were created to be our food. They cannot be our equals.”

He smiled, a cool, hard smile, like a knife’s edge—but there was a strange sadness in his eyes. “You still think you have a chance of winning against me. You don’t, and can’t, because the battle is only in your mind. The outcome was decided long ago. Your precious freedom is an illusion. You can run from me, but you can’t run from what you are. Someday, you will realize that, and you will realize that everything I’ve done, I’ve done with your best interest in mind. I am the only friend you have in this world.”

“Oh, you’d love for me to believe that, wouldn’t you?” Her voice trembled, despite her efforts to hold it steady. “You need me to believe that. But you’re wrong. Will is my friend. That’s why you can’t stand to see him near me. It’s not just sexual jealousy. You can’t stand the idea that I might enjoy someone else’s company. Even if he were a woman, you still wouldn’t be able to tolerate the sight of us together. You’re so petty and desperate that you can’t bear the thought of me having a friend.”

“Is that what you think?” Victor asked, his voice very soft.

“Yes. That’s what I think.”

“I am trying to spare you the pain of another rejection. Do you really believe this will end any differently than your relationship with that silly Goth boy?”

Ashley flinched. She wanted to ask how he knew about Brian, but she held her tongue. Of course Victor had been watching her, keeping tabs on her. Of course he would be too controlling to really leave her alone during her allotted ten years of freedom. She tried to tell herself that it didn’t matter, but she felt violated, anyway. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “Will already knows what I am. Brian didn’t.”

“But does he truly know? Does he understand everything it entails? Has he ever seen you kill?”

She didn’t answer.

He stood and took a step toward her. “To them, we are monsters. I can accept you. I understand you, better than you understand yourself. There is already a bond between us. We have but to make it complete. I am your true mate.”

She stepped back. “No. You’re not.”

He strode toward her, forcing her into retreat until her back pressed against the wall. His fingers curled around her wrist, firm as iron. “I am. Whether you can see it or not.”

“Let go of me.”

"And if I don't?" He wasn't smiling.

"I'm armed."

"I know." His thumb brushed across her wrist, lingering over a vein. He stared down at it, lips parted, fangs showing slightly. "Your pulse is racing. Are you afraid?"

"I'll shoot you again if I have to."

"Then do it."

With her left hand, she drew her Beretta and pressed it to his stomach. "You think I won't?"

He stared into her eyes, and for a long moment, neither of them moved. He released her wrist. "I promised not to force anything on you tonight. I intend to honor my promise. Will you honor yours?"

"Yes."

"Then put away your gun. You will not need it."

Ashley shoved her Beretta into its holster, rubbed her wrist, and took a deep breath. "Do you have anything else to say in your favor, or is that it?"

His face darkened. "Do you still refuse me?"

"Did you really think I would change my mind? Or were you convinced you could get past my shields and manipulate my thoughts without me noticing?"

"I promised I would not do so tonight, and I honored my word, as I have always done. I gave your mother my word that I would not touch you or interfere with your life for ten years, that I would give you a chance to 'find yourself,' as she put it, before I made you mine. I ignored my better judgment and watched as you recklessly endangered yourself, time and again. In the history of our people, a female has never before been allowed to hunt rogues. It is madness. But I allowed it, because I made a promise."

"I wonder about that," Ashley muttered. "My mother was human. You don't think very highly of her kind. So why? Why would you respect her wishes?"

Her expression became blank and guarded. "That is between me and your mother."

"Whatever she promised you in return, it must have been something pretty big."

"She did not give me anything."

She studied his face for some hint of the truth, but it was useless. Victor had the world's best poker face. She wondered if he practiced it in front of a mirror. "Why would you make a promise like that if there was nothing in it for you?"

He hesitated. "Your mother was well-known among our kind. It is a rare human who can walk among vampires without fear, but she was such a person. She made some foolish choices when raising you, but still, she was a woman deserving of respect. And that is why I respected her wishes. There was no bargain. I made the promise because she asked it of me."

Ashley stared at him, flabbergasted. "You're kidding."

He shook his head.

She knew, of course, that her mother had not been an ordinary woman. But what could she have done to earn Victor's respect? He saw humans as stupid cattle. "Just how well did you know her, anyway?"

"Well enough. You resemble her in many ways, and not just physically. You have her spark. Her defiant nature." A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I should have known that no daughter of hers would be easy to tame. But that is part of why I want you."

Goosebumps rose on Ashley's skin. The look in his eyes, when he spoke of her mother...it was almost like... "Jesus," she whispered. "You were in love with her."

He only stared at her, his face calm and composed.

"You hypocrite," she said. "All this time, you've been telling me how stupid it is to fall in love with a human, how they can never understand us, and you..."

"Your mother was different," he said. A smile tightened his mouth, but didn't reach his eyes. "Loving her was foolish, all the same. And that is all I will say on the subject."

Ashley's mind whirled. Had her mother returned Victor's feelings? Had they been lovers? No. She couldn't make herself believe that. "Did you know my father?"

"Your mother never spoke of him."

Ashley didn't believe him, but she doubted pressing the issue would do much good. *I can't deal with this now.* She'd think about the implications later. "Fine. I'm going to go get Will, and you can tell us about this offer of yours."

"First..." He took a step toward her. "I want you to do one more thing for me."

Her instincts told her to retreat, to pull away, but she stood her ground, determined not to let him intimidate her again. "What do you want now?"

"Kiss me."

Her shoulders stiffened. "What?"

"One kiss. Then I will give you my offer and you can be on your way."

"Forget it. That wasn't part of the deal."

"It's a very simple request. Why do you refuse? Are you afraid of what you might feel?"

She took a deep breath. She wasn't going to rise to the bait. She wasn't going to let him manipulate her. But Victor had a funny way of twisting a situation, so no matter the outcome, he appeared the winner. If she gave in, he would get what he wanted. If she refused, it would look like she was afraid. Each move, each word, was calculated to put her on the defensive, to take control away from her. She wondered if he practiced that sort of thing, or if it just came naturally to him. "I don't want to kiss you."

"I think you lie." He took a step closer. "Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you feel nothing for me? That a part of you doesn't want my touch?"

She stood her ground. She could feel her nails pressing into her palms. "What have I done or said to make you think I'm attracted to you? Or are you just so full of yourself you don't think there's a single woman on the planet who can resist you?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"Fine. I feel nothing for you."

"Then prove it." He cupped the back of her neck with one hand. His mouth lowered toward hers. She tried to pull away, but his fingers tightened on her neck.

"Let go!" she shouted. "You promised—" Cool lips pressed against hers. She felt hard fangs behind them.

The door flew open. "Ashley, are you all right? I heard..."

Victor released her, and she stumbled backwards, shaking. She looked up, saw Will's stunned expression. She looked at Victor and saw the satisfaction on his face, the smugness in the upturned corners of his mouth.

"Will..." Her chest clenched in a spasm of pain. "It wasn't what it looked like."

"Wasn't it?" said Victor.

Will stared at Victor. One hand still clutched the doorknob, the knuckles white.

Ashley could hear his heart pounding, even from across the room.

"That would be very unwise," Victor said.

"What would?" asked Will. His voice was low, guarded.

"What you're thinking about doing. I wouldn't attempt it."

Will glared at him, but didn't move.

"Smart boy," said Victor. He turned to Ashley. "I promised you that if you came here tonight, you would have the chance to undo the claim. Perhaps you are not aware, but among our people there is something called the rite of challenge."

"I haven't heard of it."

"You are aware, I'm sure, that females are often claimed when they are very young, too young to mate. The blood-bond, however, is not completed until they are old enough to bear children. Strong sexual urges often accompany a blood-bond, and a child could not withstand the passion of an adult male vampire."

"Nice to know that you wait until they're fourteen or fifteen before you start raping them," said Will. "Very civilized of you."

Victor cast a disdainful glance in Will's direction, as if he were a buzzing fly. "The law of our people states that before the blood-bond is complete, any adult male may challenge the claim-holder for the right to his mate. The law was created to ensure that only the strongest and fittest vampires may mate, as it should be. The claim-holder may turn down the challenge, in which case he relinquishes his mate to the challenger, or he may accept...in which case, they fight. If the challenger wins, then the female rightfully belongs to him. Often, it is a fight to the death. I've killed several challengers, myself." His eyes narrowed. "And I can assure you, my dear, none of them would have waited as patiently for you as I have, or allowed you so much freedom."

"I don't see what any of this has to do with..." She stopped. Her eyes widened. "No. You can't mean..."

"A human has never competed in the challenge, and for good reason, but our law does not forbid it. If your pet boy wishes to challenge me for the right to you, I will graciously accept."

She stared, her mouth open. It took a moment for her to find her voice, and when she did, it emerged as a harsh squawk: "That's your offer? You've got to be kidding me! That's a joke! You said you'd tell *me* how to break the claim. You didn't say Will would be involved."

"I'll do it," said Will. "I challenge him. If it's the only way..."

"No. This is insane." Ashley turned to Victor. "*I* challenge you. I'll fight you for the right to myself."

"A female may not issue a challenge. The law is clear on that point."

"I don't give a shit about the law!"

"I'll do it," Will said. "I'll fight him."

She whirled around to glare at Will. "The hell you will!"

Victor smiled, looking like a cat with a mouthful of canary. And Ashley knew all too well who the canary was. "A challenge, once issued, cannot be withdrawn. The law is also clear on that point. He must fight me."

"When?" asked Will.

"One week from tonight," Victor replied. "That should give you a sporting chance to prepare."

“What are the rules?”

“Unarmed combat. No one leaves the circle. The fight goes on until death or surrender...though granting surrender is optional. Aside from that?” Victor shrugged. “Anything goes.”

Will nodded, his expression grim.

“One more thing,” Victor said. “Until we fight, Ashley still belongs to me. If I find out you’ve been doing anything together that I wouldn’t approve of, I will be very displeased.”

Her throat tightened. She felt sick. It had been a mistake to come here. She’d been a fool to think that Victor would really give her a chance to escape him. He would never let her go. He’d just wanted to toy with her. To him, this was all foreplay. She aimed a long, cold stare at him, hoping he could feel her hatred. “You bastard.”

“I believe our business is concluded.” He turned away, faced the window, and stared out at the city.

“Nothing is concluded.” She reached for her Beretta. Her fingers touched an empty holster.

“Looking for this?” Victor pulled the gun from his jacket and held the grip between his thumb and forefinger, as if it were a soiled dishrag. “Careless, letting me get close enough to disarm you. Did you really think I just wanted a kiss?”

Her face burned.

Chapter Thirteen

Ashley glared at the road, her hands tight on the steering wheel. “Why did you accept the challenge?” she said, breaking the silence. “You know you can’t beat him.”

“We’ve bought some time, at least.” Will’s calm tone infuriated her.

How could he be calm in a situation like this? “A week. We’ve bought a week. And once that week is up, he’s going to come for you. How do you expect to get out of this?”

“I won’t. I intend to go through with it. I just have to figure out his weakness.”

“Figure out how to beat the most powerful vampire in the city in an unarmed fight. Sure, that won’t be too hard.”

“Do we have any other options? If I’d refused, what then?”

“Then we wouldn’t be any better off than before, but at least Victor wouldn’t have an excuse to kill you.” She held the wheel in a death-grip. “Do you want to get killed?”

He smiled. His face was pale, but composed. “I’m not suicidal, Ashley. If I didn’t think there was a way to win, I wouldn’t have agreed. If we work together we can figure something out, I’m sure of it.”

“And what makes you so damn certain?” She heard her voice rising to a shout, and couldn’t stop it. “You think because you’re the good guy, fate will stack the match in your favor? I hate to break it to you, but real life doesn’t work that way. You’re not going to get any divine intervention.”

“I know that,” he said.

She growled. “Then why are you so fucking *calm*?”

“Panicking won’t do any good, will it?”

“No, but being a little scared wouldn’t hurt.”

He gave her a sharp look. “Who said I’m not scared? I’m not a fool, whatever you think right now. But if this is the only possible way to break his claim, I have to try. Victor’s powerful, but he’s not omnipotent. There must be a way for me to win this.”

She shook her head. “Victor’s not careless or stupid. He’s not going to leave us any loopholes. He wouldn’t have offered you the chance to challenge him if he wasn’t completely confident he could beat you.”

“Maybe I’ll surprise him.”

“Or maybe he’ll kill you.” She veered into the left lane, sped past three cars, and squeezed in ahead of them. The driver behind her honked. She ignored him. “Don’t you see that this is exactly what Victor wants? I know how he thinks, how he works. He uses the same dirty tricks on me.”

Will studied her face, his expression suddenly guarded. “What did he say to you in there?”

“A lot of bullshit. Nothing important.”

Will didn’t reply, but she sensed the doubt in his silence.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “I know what you saw back there. It wasn’t what it looked like. He grabbed me and I couldn’t pull away. I would never...”

“I know,” he said. “But even if you had kissed him, I’d have no right to be angry, would I? I’m supposed to be just a friend. But you know how I feel about you.”

“I don’t know what to say. I mean, I feel the same about you, but there are so many

things to consider. It's not just Victor. Being a vampire and dating a human is problematic all on its own. I'm not ready to even think about that yet, not when there's so much else going on."

"And if I win the challenge?"

"Then...we'll see. Let's concentrate on getting through this alive, first."

For a long moment, Will was silent. At last he spoke, his voice scarcely more than a whisper. "When I saw him kissing you, I wanted to tear him apart. Knowing that I couldn't, that I didn't have the power, just made it more unbearable."

She glanced at him again, taking in the rigidity of his jaw-line, the steely glint in his eyes. "You're still angry."

"Yes, I'm angry," he said. "I'm angry at him for touching you against your will, and I'm angry at myself for not being able to stop it. Maybe I want to fight him. Maybe I wanted an excuse...not just to fight him, but to prove myself."

Her stomach knotted like a fist at the thought of Will going up against Victor, unarmed. Defenseless. For the rest of the drive, she was silent, her eyes focused on the road. They pulled into the lot of her apartment building. She shifted the car into park and looked at Will. The raindrops cast shadows through the glass, and the shadows slid down his face like tears. "What do you think fighting him would prove?"

He raked a hand through his hair, frustration flickering across his face. "You have to face so many dangers. You deserve someone who can protect you."

"Is that what you think I need most? Protection? If that was all I wanted, I'd be with Victor. He'd keep me safe, all right. So safe I'd never have to make another decision of my own again. An animal in a cage is protected, too. I accepted long ago that freedom means watching your back. I can fight my own dragons."

"I know you can." His voice softened, and he reached out to touch her cheek. "But you shouldn't have to. You deserve a life without fear. I want to give you that."

She sighed. As Will's fingers brushed her cheek, she leaned into the caress, needing the comfort of his touch. Everything inside her ached.

If Will made up his mind to fight Victor, she couldn't stop him. And that terrified her. She found herself remembering the look on Victor's face when he spoke of her mother, and wondered why that frightened her almost as much.

Memories flickered through her head: rough hands pinning her down, Victor's teeth in her neck...the rage on her mother's face as she burst into the room, and Victor's voice, low and calm. *Don't interfere, June*. And her mother, instead of shooting him on sight, had taken him into the other room to talk. They'd known each other. Why had that never sunk in before now? And what did it mean? What, exactly, had gone on between Victor and her mother?

Humans have their allure, don't they?

How much of Victor's obsession with her, Ashley, was just a lingering obsession with her mother? Maybe he saw her as a reincarnation of his beloved—but an upgraded version, because she was a vampire, like him. Was that why he'd marked her? He couldn't have the mother, so he'd take the daughter instead?

Anger bubbled inside her, hot and thick, and her breathing quickened.

"Ashley?" Will's hands framed her face, and his calming scent filled her nostrils. "What's wrong?" His voice was low, gentle. Warm thumbs brushed across her cheekbones, and he leaned closer, his storm-blue gaze holding hers.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Look, why don't you come in? If we're going to talk, I'd rather not do it in the car."

They got out and walked across the rainy parking lot, into the dingy lobby, up the stairs. She stopped in front of the door to her apartment and fumbled with her keys...but as she moved to open the door, Will grabbed her wrist.

She looked up. "What—"

"Something's wrong," he whispered, staring at the door.

The back of her neck prickled. She leaned close to him and lowered her voice. "You think there's someone in the apartment?"

"I don't know." He narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to scan the room."

"Scan?"

"If someone's in there, I'll sense his thoughts." Will closed his eyes and furrowed his brow, as if he were listening intently to something only he could hear. A moment later, his eyes opened. "I can't sense anyone inside. But I still feel like something's not right."

"I'll open the door a crack and look in," she whispered. "Get your gun out. And be ready to use it." Slowly, Ashley turned the knob. She eased the door open an inch and peered through the crack, into the apartment. Darkness and silence greeted her.

"Well?" Will whispered.

"Wait." Ashley pushed the door fully open and drew her Beretta. Her nostrils twitched, scenting the air, and her heartbeat quickened. "Someone's in here." Her gaze caught a flicker of motion at the far end of the room. A dark form rose up from behind the couch and flung an object which whistled through the air toward Ashley's head. She dropped into a crouch. *Thunk*. Heart pounding, she looked up and saw a quivering knife-blade embedded in the door.

"Shit!" Will hissed.

"Run!" she shouted, and prayed that for once, he would just listen. Ashley aimed her Beretta at the dark form—a man, his features obscured by shadow—and pulled the trigger, but a puny click was the only response. "What the *fuck*?" she burst out. How could she be out of ammo? She hadn't fired once that night!

The man drew two more knives. She charged across the room, straight for the invader. A knife sailed toward her shoulder, slicing through her jacket and grazing flesh. A near miss. She flinched, but didn't stop. She swung the Beretta like a club and struck the man across the face. His head snapped to one side, and he stumbled. Blood trickled from a cut on his cheek as he drew another knife. How many of those fucking things did he have?

"Will, shoot him!" she shouted.

Instead, Will tackled the man and grabbed his right arm—the arm holding the knife. They wrestled, staggering back and forth across the living room, and bumped into an end table, knocking it over with a crash. Will twisted the man's arm behind his back. Through it all, the man didn't make a sound.

He elbowed Will in the gut, hard, and Will grunted. The attacker twisted free, spun to face him, raised the knife and plunged it down. Will grabbed the man's wrist, and the knife-point stopped, inches from his face. The attacker pushed; Will pushed back. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

Ashley swung her Beretta again. It hit the man's skull with a loud crack, and the gun came away wet with blood, and still, he didn't go down. Impossible—she'd hit him with

enough force to knock out an elephant. Panting, she swung the gun again and again. *Crack, crack, crack.* Her hand had gone numb when finally, the man dropped and hit the floor with a thud. She rolled him onto his stomach with a rough kick and straddled him.

He'd begun to stir as Ashley shoved the bloodstained Beretta into its holster, grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the floor.

The man's eyes twitched beneath his lids. He was young, in his early twenties, with a blond buzz-cut and a lip-ring. He wore a sleeveless white shirt and ragged jeans. "Who sent you?" Ashley shouted. His eyes opened. They were blue. "Who are you working for? Talk, or I start breaking bones."

His eyes looked straight through her. His face was blank and calm, the face of a doll. She bent his wrist back, and his ulna snapped like a twig. Will drew in his breath sharply, but the man on the floor didn't flinch, didn't react. He had the same empty eyes as the girl in Victor's apartment.

"Damn," Ashley whispered.

"What's going on?" Will stared at the man. "What the hell is he?"

Ashley drew her Beretta again, gripped the barrel in both hands and slammed the grip down on the man's crown. *Crack.* He went limp. "He's a vessel," she said. "A puppet." At Will's bewildered look, she continued: "His personality has been wiped out. He has no thoughts of his own, just programmed orders. That's why your scan didn't pick him up."

Will pressed a hand to his stomach. He looked sickened. "Who did this to him?"

"I don't know. Only a powerful vampire could do it...or a powerful telepath. But he won't respond to questions, no matter what we do, so there's no way to find out."

Will took a deep breath. "It might still be possible to get information out of him. Let me try."

"Be careful."

He placed his hands on either side of the man's head and closed his eyes. His brow furrowed. "There's *something* there. But..."

The man writhed and groaned.

"Watch out," said Ashley. "He's waking up."

Will's hands jerked away from the man's head. The man grunted, and his eyelids flickered. Ashley grabbed a knife from the floor.

"What are you doing?" Will demanded.

She didn't answer; just pressed the blade against the man's throat.

"Wait!" he shouted.

She sliced the assassin's throat open. His body jerked. Blood drenched her hand and poured onto the carpet as he went limp, his head bent at an odd angle. His throat wound gaped like a mouth. She wiped her hand on the man's shirt, leaving a wet, dark smear.

"Jesus." Will's voice was hoarse with shock. "You didn't have to do that."

She dropped the knife, stood and turned to face him. She felt blood sliding down her hand, dripping from her fingers. "The part of him that mattered was already dead. I just stopped his body."

"You don't know that. You don't know that it was permanent. What if he could have been saved?"

She stared at him, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. "He tried to kill us. Look at the knives in the wall, if you need a reminder."

“He was being controlled. You said so yourself. He’s just another victim.”

“So what was I supposed to do?”

“You could have knocked him out again and called the police.”

“Look, I’ve fought vessels before. They’re unstoppable. They don’t feel pain or fear, they just keep coming at you, no matter how badly you wound them. I couldn’t afford to take any chances.”

He looked down at the blond kid’s gushing throat. “Don’t you give a damn whether the people you kill actually deserve it or not?”

She stiffened. “Of course I do! But I had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice!”

“No, there isn’t,” she snapped. “Not when there’s no time to think. If you stop to think, you die, like we would have died if I hadn’t killed him.”

“You don’t know that.” He pressed his fists to his temples, still staring at the body on the floor. “Christ, he was just a kid.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t you dare pull this self-righteous shit with me. If a man comes at me with a dozen knives and lethal intent, I kill him. You try living in my world under any other code, and you die. How is it that you’re fine with me killing rogues, but you can’t accept this? Is it because rogues aren’t human? They’re monsters, so it’s fine to hunt them down in cold blood, but I’m not allowed to kill a human in self-defense?”

“That’s not—”

“Look at me.”

His eyes met hers. She raised her hand, and blood dripped from her fingertips. He averted his gaze with a quick, angry jerk of his head.

“No,” Ashley said through clenched teeth. “I want you to look at me. Really look. This is who I am. If you can’t even look at me, you may as well walk out that door right now.”

Will looked at the dead man on the floor, then raised his eyes to hers, his expression closed off and unreadable. She smelled his sweat, heard the thump of his heartbeat.

This was it, she thought. She had pushed him too far. She clenched her fists and turned away, so he wouldn’t see the tears in her eyes. She waited for him to walk out the door, but he didn’t move. She turned to face him. “Well, what are you waiting for?” she asked, her voice husky.

“I’m not going to leave. I just...I’ve seen so many people killed. I’m sick of it. But I shouldn’t have said those things to you.”

Her throat tightened, and she blinked back tears. Her knees felt like water. He wasn’t leaving. She wanted to weep with relief at that revelation, but somehow, she managed to hold onto her self-control. “I need to wash my hands.”

He nodded.

She went into the kitchen and scrubbed the blood from her hands using the hottest water she could stand. Steam rose from the sink as she scraped the blood out from under her nails and watched the pinkish water swirl around the drain. Once her hands were clean and dry, she walked back into the living room.

Will sat on the couch, hands on his knees. He was pale, his face drawn. “Should we call the police?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “No. Either this man was sent by a vampire or

he was sent by Blaine. Either way, there's not much the cops can do. They don't deal with the supernatural. And right now, a police investigation will just slow us down and make it harder for us to do our job."

"You think Blaine might have sent this man?"

She nibbled a thumbnail, thinking. "It's possible. If his mental abilities are as strong as a vampire's, he could mind-wipe someone and send them to do his dirty work. Maybe he wanted to get us before we could get him."

"But how would he even know about us?"

"I don't know. It's possible he's been keeping tabs on Dr. Abel, watching him. If so, he'd know if Dr. Abel hired an assassin to kill him." It was also possible, she supposed, that a vampire had sent the vessel. Plenty of vampires didn't like her. But most wouldn't dare try to kill her, knowing what Victor would do to them. She met Will's gaze. "Were you able to get anything out of him? Any information at all?"

"I got...something. A flicker. But I don't know if it will be any help to us. Like I've said, when I absorb information, it's just a rush of images and feelings. My mind needs time to digest it before it starts to make any sense. Maybe something will come to me later." He wiped his forehead with one sleeve. "So what do we do now?"

"What do you mean?"

His gaze drifted to the bloodstained corpse. "Well, there's a dead body in the middle of the floor. We can't just leave it there."

"I think we should call Dr. Abel."

Will's gaze lingered on the corpse. Despite his calm expression, there was a glassy look in his eyes, as if some part of his mind had checked out. "You know, the police may show up whether we want them to or not. Some neighbors might have heard the commotion."

"This is a bad neighborhood. People hear things all the time, but they don't usually bother calling the cops. No one wants to get involved. Anyway, there were no screams or gunshots."

"That reminds me. Your gun...why didn't it go off?"

She checked the Beretta's magazine compartment. Empty. "Victor unloaded it while I wasn't looking." How had he managed? There hadn't been any time. Unless, of course, he'd clouded her mind. He could have done it when he kissed her. She'd been off guard for a brief moment. She scowled. "And I trusted that bastard to keep his word. I can't believe I trusted him even for a moment." She took a deep breath. Now wasn't the time to get pissed. "I'm going to call Dr. Abel. Tell him what happened."

Will was still staring at the body, his eyes unfocused. "Why knives? A gun would have been easier."

"Maybe Blaine is like Victor. Maybe he thinks guns are for cowards. Or maybe he just wanted to kill us in a more artistic way." She shrugged. "I don't know how a serial killer thinks." There was an unpleasant irony in that statement. Ashley herself had killed multiple people without the approval of the law, so technically, that made her a serial killer as well. "I'll be right back." She walked through the living room. As she passed the body, she paused and looked down. A chill raced down her spine. Had she seen him blink?

Impossible. No one could survive having his throat slit. The sudden loss of blood and resulting drop in cranial pressure would kill anyone within seconds. Then again...

She crouched and picked up the bloody knife. Better safe than sorry.

“What are you doing?” Will asked.

“I’m going to cut his head off.”

He blinked. “Why? He’s dead...isn’t he?”

She looked over her shoulder at Will. “Vessels are something more and less than human. They’re soulless husks, controlled by a vampire’s power—like zombies, except they don’t rot. I’ve seen them survive wounds that would kill an ordinary person. The only sure way to kill one is to remove the head, or burn the corpse.” She leaned closer and placed the blade’s edge against the man’s neck. “You might want to look away.” She hesitated.

Was Will right? Did she kill too easily? This man probably didn’t deserve to die. He was only a pawn, after all. A victim.

She looked into his empty eyes, and her resolve hardened. She doubted this poor, mangled puppet could ever be made whole again, and even if he could, that slim chance wasn’t worth jeopardizing Will’s life and her own. She pressed the knife’s edge against the man’s neck.

A hand shot out and gripped her throat. Tight. The man sat up, ignoring the gush of blood that poured from his throat, down his chest. His broken hand reached into his jacket, fingers awkwardly closing around the handle of a knife.

“Will! Help—” She let out a short, strangled cry as the knife slid between her ribs. Her vision began to fade as she stared into the empty, unseeing eyes.

Then the blood-slimed tip of a knife sprouted from the assassin’s throat. He stiffened, and for a moment, he was perfectly still...then he slumped forward, a knife’s hilt protruding from the back of his neck.

Will had shoved the knife through his throat.

The vessel’s hands went limp and slid away. Ashley gasped, lurched to her feet, staggered backwards and bumped against the wall. She slid down, the knife-hilt sticking out of her chest. It looked odd, there. Wrong. Her vision grayed out for a moment, then cleared.

She looked up and saw Will’s face, his wide eyes staring into hers. “Ashley. Oh God. Just hold still. I’ll call an ambulance.”

“Don’t.”

“I—”

“Cut its head off.”

“But you—”

“Cut its fucking head off!”

Will gulped and dropped to his knees. He wrenched the knife from the back of the man’s thick neck and hunched over the motionless body. He gripped the knife’s hilt in both hands and pressed the blade into ragged flesh. He slid the knife back and forth, like a saw. Blood spilled out onto the carpet in a dark, spreading stain. Blood splattered his shirt and face.

She glimpsed the pale, wet gleam of vertebrae through the blood and gore. Will’s face screwed up in a tight grimace, his teeth clenched, until at last, the severed head rolled away, and he dropped the knife and stood, panting, eyes glazed.

She looked down at the knife sticking out of her chest. She gripped the handle and braced herself. Slowly, she pulled it out. It slid free with a wet, sucking sound, and she let

out a choked gasp at the hot rush of pain. She tossed the knife aside and leaned back against the wall, panting. A wash of gray swallowed her vision. Hot, wet blood poured down her chest. So much blood. Had she ever been wounded this badly? She couldn't remember.

She blinked and looked up. Will crouched beside her, staring at her with wide eyes. "Ashley..."

"Help me lay down." She forced the words out between clenched teeth.

He gripped her under the arms, carefully turned her body and lowered her to the floor. The breath hissed between her teeth as the movement sent a flare of pain through her, and fresh blood poured from the opening. If Will could just staunch the flow until the wound closed, she'd be okay. "Press down on the wound, hard, with both hands." It was a struggle to speak, but she forced the words out.

He gulped and obeyed. She felt his hands pressing down on her chest and had to swallow a scream. Dizziness washed over her. Her vision dimmed. She held grimly to consciousness, knowing that she had to stay awake and aware. If she passed out now, she might not wake up.

"I need to call a hospital," he said. "You're still losing blood."

"No. If you let go now, I'll bleed to death." Dear God, this hurt. The knife may have missed her heart, but she suspected it had hit a lung. She couldn't seem to draw a full breath. It would heal soon, but she had lost so much blood already, and it wouldn't stop. Blood seeped between Will's fingers. His hands were covered with it. It drenched his sleeves, her shirt, the carpet. She would never have guessed there was so much blood in her.

Blackness crept across her eyes like fog. Cold. So cold. Her eyes slipped shut.

Will's hands framed her face and lifted her head. Her eyes opened, and she saw his throat, inches from her face. "Take my blood." His other arm slid around her waist and held her body close, pressed against his. "Take it. Now."

She licked her lips.

Some tiny, inner voice cried out in protest, but the warning was lost in a hot surge of hunger. Her mouth clamped over his throat. His body jerked, then relaxed as she began to feed. Strength flowed through her. The exhaustion, the coldness, receded as his warmth, his life, filled her belly. She felt the wound in her chest closing, flesh knitting. She kept sucking, unable to stop.

She realized that he had grown limp and cold against her, and panic finally brought her back to her senses. She pulled her mouth away from his throat, and Will slumped against her, his eyes closed. He was very pale. "Oh God. Will. Can you hear me?"

He opened his eyes, and slowly, they focused on hers. "It's okay." He tried to smile, a weak twitch of his lips. "I'll be fine."

Ashley looked down at her chest. Only a ragged hole in her shirt remained. The skin beneath was smooth and unbroken, save for a thin, shiny white scar, almost invisible. She touched it, awed. "You saved my life."

"Thank God." His eyes sank shut.

"Will?"

"Tired..." His voice was small and soft, faraway.

She slapped his cheek lightly, and his eyes flickered open. "Don't you dare leave me now. Stay with me, do you hear me? Now is not a good time to take a nap."

He nodded, his eyes hazy and distant.

She helped him to his feet and slung his arm around her shoulders. He leaned against her, a warm weight. "Come on. You need to lie down."

"Kay."

Ashley led him to her bedroom and lowered him to the bed. She still tasted his blood on her lips. She wanted to lick them clean. Instead, she grabbed tissue from the box on the bedside table and wiped her mouth.

He looked up at her, his throat smeared with blood. "Are you okay?"

For a moment she thought she was going to laugh, or cry, but whichever it was, the sound lodged itself in her throat. She'd nearly drained him, and he wanted to know if she was okay. "I'm fine." Her mind raced. What to do? Fluids, he needed fluids. "Wait here, I'll bring you some water." She filled a glass from the kitchen sink, brought it to him and helped him drink. Water dribbled down his chin as he gulped. She wiped the dribbles away with a tissue. "Do you need anything else?"

"Cold," he murmured.

She pulled a blanket over him and tucked the edges in around his body. "I'm going to call the hospital. You need a blood transfusion."

He reached out and grabbed her wrist with surprising strength. "No."

"Are you sure?"

He looked up at her, his eyes clearer. "Call Dr. Abel. Tell him about the assassin." His hand dropped to his side. His eyes closed. "I'll be fine. Just...need to rest."

She hoped he was right. She would have rather called an ambulance, but she'd have a hell of a time explaining how Will had lost so much blood. And, of course, there was the decapitated corpse in the middle of the living room and the bloody knife with her fingerprints on the handle. If the paramedics saw this, she'd be finished. She could cloud minds, tweak memories, but it would take more power than hers to make them forget something like that.

Ashley took her cell phone from her pocket and dialed Dr. Abel's number. The phone rang once, then someone picked up. "Hello?"

"It's Ashley Hunt. We need some help. There's a dead body in my apartment."

A pause. "Explain."

"When we came back to my apartment tonight, there was a man waiting for us here. He tried to kill us. I killed him."

"Us? Is Will with you?"

"Yeah. I don't know which of us was the target. Could've been both. The assassin was mind-wiped. He might have been sent by Blaine, or a vampire."

"I see. Wait there."

"You think we should call the police?"

"No, don't do anything. I'll send some agents to clean up the body. Is Will all right?"

"He's fine." She hoped that wasn't a lie.

"Wait there. My men will arrive shortly." He hung up.

Ashley shoved the phone into her pocket. She glanced at Will. He remained motionless, eyes closed, his breathing slow and shallow.

* * * *

Ashley spent the next half hour pacing the apartment, checking Will every few

minutes to make sure his vitals were still steady. She gave him another glass of water, wishing she had something more to offer him—soup, juice, something with nutrients.

Someone knocked on the door, and she gave a start. Her hand flew to her Beretta.

“Agent Burke and Agent Carson,” said a deep, male voice. “We’re from the CPRI.”

She opened the door. Two large men in gray suits stood outside, holding bulky leather bags. Both were broad-shouldered, with big chests, mirrored shades and blank expressions. One man was white, with buzz-cut blond hair, the other black, with a shaved head that gleamed like a doorknob. The blond pulled an ID from his suit pocket and held it up. The plastic card looked tiny in his sausage-sized fingers.

“Come in,” she said.

They walked past her. The bald man crouched beside the corpse, took a digital camera from his pocket and snapped a few photos. If the sight of a mutilated, decapitated man in a pool of blood bothered him at all, his face didn’t show it. “Any particular reason you cut the head off?”

“Just a precaution. I’ve had dead people get up and attack me too many times.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You must lead an interesting life.”

“I guess so.” She wished, not for the first time, that it was a little less interesting.

The bald man tucked the camera back into his jacket pocket, unzipped his leather bag and pulled on a pair of latex gloves. “Dr. Abel probably told you this already, but don’t call the police. That’ll just complicate things. This is a paranormal crime. Our department will handle the investigation.”

“Am I charged with anything?”

“You? Don’t worry about it. Just concentrate on doing what you were hired to do.”

He pulled a rolled-up, canvas body bag out of the leather pouch. The men loaded the corpse, head and all, into the bag.

The bald man glanced at the rust-colored splotch on the opposite wall. “Is *all* this blood his?”

“That’s mine. I was injured.”

“You need a doctor?”

“No. I heal fast.”

“Where’s Connor?”

“Will? He’s in the bedroom. Why?”

“We just need to ask him a few questions,” said the man. He walked past her.

The blond inspected the stain on the wall. He pulled a tiny, metal chisel from his pocket and scraped some dried blood into a glass tube, which he sealed with a plastic cap and slipped into his jacket.

“I told you, that’s my blood. What do you need that for?”

The blond looked up. “Dr. Abel instructed us to take samples of any blood we found here.”

Ashley frowned, but said nothing.

She heard the bald man’s voice asking Will questions. Will replied, his voice fuzzy.

The man emerged from the bedroom and nodded to his partner. “We’re going to run some tests on the body.”

“What about...all this?” Ashley swept an arm out, indicating the drying bloodstains on the floor and wall.

“Don’t touch anything. Someone will be here shortly to clean up the rest of the

mess.”

“Thanks.”

“No reason to thank us. It’s in our best interest to take care of this quickly and discreetly. Keep any curious neighbors out of the vicinity, but if anyone starts getting suspicious or sees something they shouldn’t, just call us. We have a specialist who can alter memories. In the meantime, we’ll take this guy to the lab.”

The men lifted the body-bag and carried it out of the room. She wondered how they were going to explain that if anyone saw them, but that wasn’t her problem.

She closed the door behind them, then walked into the bedroom. Will sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. “You okay?” she asked.

He nodded. “Are they gone?”

“Yeah.” Ashley sat on the edge of the bed. “How do you feel?”

“A little groggy. But otherwise okay.” Some of the color had returned to his face.

That was probably a good sign.

Ashley looked away. “I could have killed you.”

He squeezed her hand. “You stopped soon enough.”

“But I almost didn’t. I wanted to keep going.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over what might have been. There’s no point.”

“I know. But it scares the hell out of me.” Her hands trembled. She curled them into fists and took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. She’d managed to hold onto her composure in front of the CPRI agents, but now it was crumbling. Exhaustion had worn down her mental guards; she felt shaken and somehow violated. Her apartment was supposed to be a safe place, the only place she could let down her guard. She’d been attacked in the streets plenty of times, but having it happen at home was more personal, more frightening.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She gave him a tight smile. “After what happened, do you really need to ask?”

His gaze searched her face. “Something else is bothering you.”

Damn it. He was too perceptive. Ashley stared at the floor. “I need to ask you a question. And I need you to give me an honest answer, even if you think the truth will hurt me.” She took a deep breath. “Are you repulsed by what I did tonight? I don’t mean taking your blood. I mean that man I killed.”

He hesitated. Only for an instant, but he hesitated. “It was self-defense. You were within your rights.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Yes or no.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “I can’t answer a complicated question with a simple yes or no. I can’t tell you that I wasn’t affected, that it didn’t horrify me to see a man killed in front of my eyes. But I’m not repulsed. Not with you.”

She stared at the wall, unable to meet his gaze.

“Ashley?”

“I’m afraid,” she whispered.

He touched her shoulder, very lightly. “Of what?”

“I’m afraid you’re going to turn away from me. If that’s going to happen, I’d rather it be now. I’d rather just get it over with.”

"I won't turn away from you." He pulled her into his arms and rubbed her back. "I promise."

She wished she could believe that, but she knew that was something he couldn't promise her. She rested her cheek against his chest and breathed in his cinnamon and wood-smoke smell. His cheek brushed her forehead, and she felt the scratch of his stubble, rough and real.

After a moment, she pulled back. "I'm going to go scrub the blood off the walls."

"The agent said someone will clean it up."

"I know, but that might be awhile, and I don't want to spend the night in an apartment with blood all over the walls. I don't think I could stand it."

"Why don't you spend the night at my place? It might be better. Safer. Whoever sent that assassin might send another when he finds out the attempt failed. You shouldn't stay here."

She looked into his blue eyes. "I don't want to put you at risk."

"Who says you are? We don't know who the target was. It could have been either one of us."

"They sent him to my apartment."

"Maybe they knew I'd be with you. What does it matter, anyway? I just want you to be somewhere you can feel safe." He touched her cheek. "Stay with me."

Ashley leaned closer, hid her face against his shoulder, and nodded.

* * * *

She didn't know how long she'd be staying, so she threw a few changes of clothes and a toothbrush into a duffel bag, along with both guns, her gun-cleaning kit, and all the extra ammo she could fit. After dumping ice into a cooler, she loaded it with the bagged blood from her mini-fridge.

They took her car to Will's apartment. As soon as they arrived, Ashley asked if she could use his shower.

She shut herself in the bathroom, stripped, turned on the water and adjusted the temperature until it was almost too hot to bear. She scrubbed every inch of herself with soap, as if she could wash away the whole horrible night. By the time she turned the water off and stepped onto the bathroom rug, her skin was flushed and pink as a human's.

She emerged from the bathroom in a fresh set of clothes, toweling off her hair. Will sat on the couch, eating a bowl of soup. She sat next to him, the towel draped around her shoulders, and waited. He finished the soup, set the bowl on the coffee table, and glanced at the window. "It's almost dawn."

She nodded. "You're probably even more tired than I am. You've been awake since morning."

"We could both use some sleep. You can have my bed. I'll take the couch."

"Sleep with me." The words leapt out of her mouth before she knew what she was saying.

He looked at her.

"I mean..." Heat flooded her cheeks. "I mean, we can share the bed. It's big enough."

"You'd be comfortable with that?"

"I don't want to be alone right now."

His eyes searched hers. "All right."

She followed him into the bedroom. Her duffel bag already sat beside the bed; Will had brought it in. She unzipped it and rummaged through the contents until her fingers closed around the Beretta's cool, steel grip. She pulled it out and put it on the bedside table, within easy reach.

Will sat on the edge of the bed, took off his shoes and socks and slid beneath the sheets, still wearing his clothes. She crawled into bed and curled up next to him. He spooned her, his chest against her back, his arms around her waist, and rested his chin atop her head. At any other time, she might not have trusted herself to be so close to him, but right now, she was too tired and too scared to even think about sex. She suspected he felt the same way. Right now she just wanted his warmth, his closeness, wanted him the way a child might want the comforting arms of a parent.

Something small and quick leapt onto the bed, and the mattress-springs creaked. She gave a start.

"It's just Lily." His arms tightened around her. His hand smoothed her hair. "You're safe here. Sleep."

She knew it was a lie. Nowhere was safe. But she couldn't fight her exhaustion. Her eyes sank shut. She felt heavy, so heavy she couldn't move, couldn't think.

He kissed her temple. "Sleep," he murmured.

Chapter Fourteen

Ashley's eyes opened. Late afternoon sunlight, warm and reddish, shone between the window blinds. Her nostrils twitched. A strong, sharp smell filled the room. It wasn't blood, but it smelled good. Exciting. Her fangs lengthened, pushed against the inside of her mouth, and her tongue slid out to wet her lips.

She heard a low moan. Distracted, she looked at Will. He lay on his side, curled into a semi-fetal position, eyes closed. Another pained moan slid from his throat. "Will." She sat up, gripped his shoulder and shook him. "Wake up."

He gave a start. His eyes flew open, and he stared at her, breathing hard.

"Are you all right?"

He took a deep breath. Sweat glistened on his brow. "I'm fine," he murmured. "Just a bad dream."

The intoxicating smell hadn't gone away...and she realized with a shock that it was coming from Will, seeping from every pore on his body.

Realization crashed over her. It was fear she smelled. His fear.

Her breathing quickened, and she pressed a fist to her mouth.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing." She looked away as horror washed through her in a cold tide. Beads of sweat welled on her brow. Even now, the smell pierced her with a longing so sharp it was almost pain. She wanted to press her mouth to his throat and sink her teeth into that warm skin. "I—I've got to go." She lurched to her feet.

"Are you sure you're all right?" He touched her shoulder. "You're acting strange. Why don't you just lie down and talk to me for a minute?"

"I can't. I'm sorry."

She dashed into the bathroom and slammed the door. She leaned back against it, feeling sick to her stomach. Now that the high was fading, the full implications of her reaction slammed into her like a punch in the gut. This was how vampires went rogue. They smelled fear and couldn't resist...and after that, they needed more, kept striving for greater and greater highs until they couldn't get their thrills without torturing their victims before feeding.

A soft moan escaped her throat as she slid to the floor, trembling. For several minutes, she just sat there, hands pressed to her nose and mouth.

Sometime later, she heard a knock on the bathroom door. "You've been in there for fifteen minutes. I know something's wrong. Come out."

She took a deep breath. "Just give me a minute."

Moments later, she entered the bedroom. Will sat on the edge of the bed, his hands resting on his knees, his hair and clothes still sleep-rumpled. The smell of fear had faded. She sat next to him and forced a smile. "I'm fine now. Really." She cleared her throat.

"What was your nightmare about?"

"Something that happened when I was a child. It doesn't matter now. Are you going to tell me why you left so quickly?"

She bit her lower lip. She didn't want to tell him, but she knew she owed him an explanation. "I smelled your fear. And it made me hungry. I thought I might bite you."

She was afraid to look at him, afraid she might see horror in his expression. "If I had waited a moment longer, I might have lost control."

A long pause. Then: "Well, you resisted the temptation, didn't you?"

"Yes. But—"

"That's what matters," he said.

She stared at the floor. She knew it wasn't that simple; she was dangerous, regardless of what he thought. But there were other things to think about right now. She took a deep breath and faced him. "Have you gotten anymore leads on Blaine?"

"I know where he is."

She looked at him in surprise. "You do? Where?"

"Leland. Little town, just under a thousand people. Here, let me show you." He pulled a map and a pencil from the drawer on the nightstand, then unfolded the map on the bed and circled a dot. "Way out in the countryside. This is the address." He scrawled it in the white space above the map.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

She chewed her bottom lip. "Did you find it in the vessel's mind?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I absorbed it back in the shed we visited. I'm not sure. Suddenly, I just knew. It was like remembering something I'd forgotten. You know that feeling? When something reminds you of a time or place you haven't thought of in years, and it's all there again, in your head?"

"Yeah." She stared at the map and smoothed out the folds with her fingertips. "I guess there's no reason to wait then, is there?"

"Are we going after him tonight?"

"Not we. Me."

He frowned. "No way. You aren't going alone."

"Dr. Abel hired me to kill Blaine," she said. "You were supposed to locate him for me. That's all."

"What happened to us being a team?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "You aren't an assassin, Will. You've never shot someone. Going on a mission like this means being ready and able to kill someone without hesitation, because even a split second's hesitation could cost you your life. Do you think you could do that?"

"I think I could."

She shook her head. "Not good enough. You have to know."

His expression hardened. "I won't let you go alone."

"I can handle this. I've killed before."

"You've never faced a telepath."

"Neither have you."

"But I know more about how his power functions."

"Then I'll take any advice you have to offer, but I'm still going alone. Let me do my job. Do you think Dr. Abel would really want you to put your own life on the line? You're way too valuable. If you die..."

"I don't give a damn what Dr. Abel would or wouldn't approve of!"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Getting pissed wouldn't help. "Listen to me. This is a one-person job. I have to get into his house without being noticed and kill

him before he has a chance to retaliate. Two people are more conspicuous than one. Having someone else at my back won't make things easier."

Will stared at her. There was frustration in his eyes, and something else, something she hadn't expected: hurt. "You don't trust me. It's because of what happened yesterday. You don't think I can handle this. Is that it?"

"That's part of it."

He looked away, his jaw clenched.

"I don't think you're a killer. That's nothing to be ashamed of. Some people just aren't."

"I guess I can't blame you. I haven't given you much reason to believe in me."

"Don't be like this. This isn't personal. I'm just better suited to the job."

"I can't let you risk your life while I sit at home. I wouldn't be able to stand it."

"You mean your pride wouldn't be able to stand it."

He met her gaze. "My heart wouldn't."

"Will..."

He stood. "I'm not staying here. At the very least, I can help you find the place."

Ashley braced herself. She'd hoped it wouldn't come to this, but he wasn't going to back down. He'd left her little choice. She stared hard into his eyes. When he realized what she was doing, he stiffened, eyes widening. The muscles in his jaw bunched. Beads of sweat welled on his brow, and his pupils dilated and contracted as he fought her...but in the end, she won.

He sank to the bed, eyes unfocused. She gave him an extra push with her mind, sending him into a deep sleep. His eyes slipped shut. She lifted his feet onto the bed. Her mouth was filled with the hot, bitter taste of shame.

He'd resent her for this, but it was the only way to keep him safe. He'd sleep for the next few hours, at least, enough for her to find Blaine and do her job.

She unzipped her duffel bag and dug through her clothes until she found the outfit she was looking for; a close-fitting, long-sleeved black shirt, black jeans, a pair of supple, black leather gloves and calf-high boots...and of course, her holster. She checked the Beretta's ammo and slid the gun into place. It rested comfortably against her hip. She removed a few extra clips of ammunition from her bag and shoved them into a compartment on her belt.

Normally she'd wear her long, black coat to conceal the holster, but she'd left that at home. Instead, she slipped into an oversized black hoodie and zipped it up. The sweatshirt hung almost to her knees.

She paused and glanced over her shoulder at Will. She smoothed his shaggy, coffee-colored hair, leaned down and kissed his lips. "Forgive me," she whispered.

She grabbed the map and walked out.

Chapter Fifteen

Two hours later, Ashley stood in front of a small, white house with brown trim and a freshly mowed lawn. A white Nissan was parked in the gravel driveway.

The house stood on a sleepy street. The houses were spaced a respectful distance apart. Trees grew thickly in the yards, offering shade and privacy. Here and there, a window glowed with warm, yellow light. She could envision moms and dads watching TV in the living rooms, little kids sleeping peacefully in their beds.

It wasn't the sort of neighborhood where she'd expected to find Blaine. She didn't know what she'd expected. Maybe a creaky, dilapidated old house, or some shitty apartment, a place reflecting the ugliness of his diseased mind, not this gentle, quiet neighborhood, where most of the people probably knew each other by name.

She glanced at the mailbox. The name printed across the side was Weiss, not Blaine, but that meant nothing. Of course he would have changed his name. For a man with his gifts, adopting a false identity would be easy. Still, she was putting a lot of faith in Will's psychic talent. She wouldn't know for sure until she saw the target's face...and if it was the wrong guy, she'd be in a very awkward position. A little late to worry about that now.

She took a deep breath and looked up and down the street. No one in sight. She darted across the front lawn. A wood fence enclosed the backyard. She jumped it easily.

The backyard, like the front, was small, square, and neatly tended. Rows of wooden tulips in alternating shades of red, yellow and white bordered a tiny vegetable garden. A stone birdbath stood nearby. What sort of serial killer had a garden, or a birdbath, for that matter?

Stupid, she thought. What had she expected? Swastikas painted on the grass in blood? Goats' heads mounted on spikes? Piles of corpses with flies buzzing around?

She checked beneath her coat to make sure her Beretta was still in place. The house was only one story, so the bedroom window would be easy to access. He would probably be asleep.

She'd never killed a sleeping man. She imagined pressing the gun to his head as he dreamt peacefully in bed, unaware that he'd never wake up. Could she do that? Yes, she thought—the capacity was within her, but it would cost her something. At least he wouldn't suffer. Somehow, the thought didn't make her feel better. Dying in one's sleep seemed to be the preferred way to go, but it had never held much appeal for her. Besides, it seemed only fair to look into a man's eyes while you blew out his brains.

She tip-toed along the wall, to the nearest window. For a moment, she stood motionless, holding her breath. She heard nothing, no movement from inside. She craned her neck and peered in. The bedroom was empty.

The window stood open a few inches, as if to let in the cool night air. There was a screen, but that was easily taken care of. She pulled a switchblade from her pocket and cut a ragged hole just large enough to stick her hand through. The piece of screen fell to the grass. Biting the inside of her cheek, she reached in and worked her fingers under the bottom edge of the screen's frame. Slowly, carefully, she removed the entire screen from the window and lowered it to the grass.

She climbed in, dropped to the floor and landed in a crouch, silent as a cat. She drew

her Beretta and looked around. The naked, white walls and gray carpeted floor encased a bed, a dresser, and little else. The room gave no clues as to its occupant's personality, except that he was neat. There were no dirty socks on the floor, no boxers hanging out of half-open drawers. The bed was even made. It looked and felt like a hotel room waiting for the next guest.

She sneaked out of the bedroom, down the hall, listening. She could hear the faint hum of a refrigerator from the kitchen, but nothing else.

Then the soft creak of a footstep reached her ears. Ashley pressed her back against the wall, her Beretta clutched tight in both hands, close to her chest. Her heart hammered as she stood motionless, listening. The seconds ticked by.

Then a voice spoke behind her. "Well, my goodness. What a pleasant surprise."

She gave a start and spun around to face the voice's owner. A man stood in the hall, smiling. He was tall and thin, with pale, blond hair and large, gray eyes, and he wore a white, neatly-pressed cotton shirt.

Blaine.

She pointed the gun at his head. Before she could pull the trigger, a wave of dizziness swept over her. She swayed on her feet, nauseous. Hot bile surged into her throat. Her vision went gray as her knees gave out from under her, and she sank toward the floor, landing on all fours. A soft moan escaped her throat. Her thoughts felt sluggish, as if they were trying to move through some thick, viscous liquid.

She heard footsteps as he walked toward her. His shadow fell over her as he leaned down. "I'm surprised," he said. "I didn't think you'd go down so easily."

She realized she had dropped her Beretta. She could see it on the floor a few feet away, glinting in the moonlight from a nearby window. She reached for it, and the yard of carpet between her hand and the gun seemed to stretch like taffy. Her fingers closed on empty air. *Damn it!* Illusion, it was only illusion. The gun was right there, if only...she reached again, and the Beretta seemed to jerk to one side. No, the whole room moved.

Blaine chuckled.

The hallway tilted and swayed like some crazy carnival ride as she strained to focus her eyes. She crawled toward the Beretta and reached out, fumbling. She squeezed her eyes shut, and the feeling of vertigo vanished. Carefully, she felt each inch of floor, her fingers creeping forward like the legs of a crab, until they touched cool, slick metal. A surge of triumph shot through her, and her hand closed tight around the gun's grip.

Then suddenly, the Beretta wasn't there anymore. It wasn't like someone had pulled it out of her hand; it was simply gone.

Her eyes opened, and she looked up to see Blaine standing over her, holding the Beretta. He dangled it over her head, swinging it back and forth. "Looking for this?" She stared, and he smiled.

Move! Ashley told her body, but her muscles wouldn't obey. She was as weak as a newborn. No, she thought, Blaine was making her think she was weak. If she could just push past it...

Another wave of vertigo swept over her and dragged her down into darkness.

* * * *

She woke with the smell of old blood in her nose, and her eyes snapped open. She was in a dingy, cement basement, lit by a naked bulb, and she was sitting up, her back

against a metal pole running from floor to ceiling. Her hands were bound behind the pole. She tugged, and cold, steel handcuffs bit into her wrists. Thick rope bound her legs at the knees and ankles.

Blaine sat in a chair in front of her, his legs crossed, his hands folded together over one knee. He was dressed in a white shirt, white slacks, and white tennis shoes. Under the glare of the light, his white-blond hair almost glowed. A little smile curved his lips, and his gray eyes held an eager shine: an almost childlike glee which looked decidedly creepy on the face of a grown man. “You’re awake,” he said. “Good.”

Ashley looked past him and saw a rickety table standing against one wall. Light glinted off the barrel of her Beretta where it rested, next to an old hammer. Anger burned in her chest. He’d left her gun within sight, but out of reach, as if to tease her with her own helplessness. If she could just find a way to reach it...

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” said Blaine. “I’m in your head. I can anticipate your every move. In fact, I knew you were here the moment you stepped onto my property. Did you really think your puny shields could protect you from a telepath of my powers?” He chuckled and shook his head. “I knew that foolish old goat Dr. Abel would try to kill me sooner or later, though I didn’t expect him to send a common hit-man. Pardon me, hit-woman.” His eyes moved down the length of her body. “And such a pretty, delicate little creature, at that.”

She stared at him, shoulders stiff. She could feel her heartbeat through her whole body, down to her fingertips and toes. “If I’m such a non-threat, why did you send your vessel to assassinate me?”

His brow creased. “Vessel?”

“Blond kid with a lip ring? Come on. Who else could have sent him?”

“I assure you, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She frowned. Why would Blaine lie about such a thing? “But if it wasn’t you...” She fell silent. Her jaw dropped as realization crashed in.

Victor. Of course. Victor had sent the vessel. Not to kill her—he knew Ashley would be more than a match for a human armed with knives—but to force *her* to kill *him*. He’d known Will would be with her. He had wanted Will to see her kill and be horrified. He had sacrificed a human pawn simply to drive a wedge between them.

Rage erupted within her. She trembled, hands clenched into tight fists behind her back. *Of all the dirty, cruel, manipulative...* She took a deep breath and forced all thoughts of Victor from her head. Victor wasn’t the problem right now.

Blaine stood, head tilted to one side, watching her like an alert dog. “I’m curious about you,” he said. “I’ve never had the chance to study a vampire up close.” He turned to the table and slowly picked up the hammer. “I want to see what you’re made of.” His smile widened, just a bit. The tip of a pink tongue emerged to wet his lower lip as he approached, wrapped both hands around the hammer’s wooden handle, and slowly raised his arms.

The hammer swooped down in a blur of motion and hit her kneecap with a deafening crunch. She managed to choke down a scream, but she shut her eyes tight at the blinding pain in her knee. For a moment, she could think of nothing except the pain. It swallowed her world, blanked out her thoughts. Nothing else was real. Then the pain faded just enough for her surroundings to seep back into her awareness. Panting, drenched in sweat, she looked up at Blaine.

He crouched, bringing himself to eye-level with her. “Your kind heals very quickly, I’ve heard. You could probably take a lot of damage without dying.”

A bead of sweat trickled into her eye, and she blinked it away. Her knee throbbed with a dull, red agony. She wriggled, trying to loosen the restraints, as her mind raced in frantic circles. This wasn’t the way she wanted to die.

“Don’t worry. You won’t die. Not for awhile, anyway. Though I daresay, before long, you’ll wish you could.” He straightened and raised the hammer again, grinning. The whites of his eyes showed all around.

He brought the hammer down again. *Crunch* went her other kneecap.

This time, she *did* scream, and kept screaming until she lost consciousness.

As she swam up from the blackness, through the pain-reddened, murky waters of semi-consciousness, a voice spoke in her mind.

Hold on, Ashley. I’m coming.

Her eyelids flickered as her head rolled to one side and came to rest against her shoulder. She licked her lips, tasted salt; sweat and tears. *Will? Is that you?*

I’m almost there. Just hold on.

The murky clouds of pain had begun to clear, just enough for her to be afraid. He was coming here? *No! He’ll kill you!*

I won’t leave you.

Please! Go back!

Just hold on.

And then all at once, she couldn’t sense his presence anymore.

Blaine leaned closer, his eyes wide with interest. “Is your friend coming to join us?” He pressed the tips of his fingers together. “Good. Two is company, but three, that’s a party.” He snickered.

Blood had soaked through her jeans in spreading patches. Her legs didn’t hurt so much now. They just felt numb.

He slid a hand beneath her shirt. The muscles in her stomach tightened, and her skin crawled. His fingers were warm, almost hot. Cold would have been easier to deal with. The heat made her aware of just how excited he was. He pulled her shirt up, exposing her breasts, then reached back and lifted a long, serrated knife from the table. Smiling, he dragged the blade’s edge across her left breast. A strangled gasp escaped her throat. She trembled, her body rigid with tension, as the cut slowly shrank. The edges drew together and closed, becoming a puckered pink scar, which faded to white and then vanished entirely.

Surface wounds always healed quickly. What he’d done to her knees would take longer, but as long as he didn’t pierce her brain, heart or lungs, she wouldn’t die. Under the circumstances, she didn’t know if that should relieve or worry her.

He leaned closer until his hot breath puffed against her cheek. His pupils were dilated, his lips gleaming with spittle. “You know, I was once terribly squeamish about pain and death. When I worked for the CPRI, they made me mind-link with killers and track them down. It’s funny, now, to think how much it disturbed me to see them torturing their prey. Soon, I began to realize that these men were not monsters. No, they were *better* than ordinary people. They’d thrown off the chains of society, shed their own fear and weakness to become beings of incredible power.” His eyes glowed with excitement. “I admired them. I wanted to be like them. And now...”

She lunged and bit him, hard, on the cheek. He jerked backwards and pressed a hand to his face. His palm came away glistening with blood. He stared at it a moment, eyes huge. Then he backhanded her, and her head snapped to one side. "Do that again, my sweet, and I'll pull those teeth," he said through clenched jaws.

She glared at him, breathing hard. The hot, salty taste of his blood filled her mouth.

He loomed over her, his dripping knife in one hand. He raised the knife to his lips, poked his tongue out and licked the blood from the edge. A soft sigh escaped his lips. "So sweet." He crouched and stroked her cheek with the flat of the blade. "You taste of cherries." His voice was low, breathy, as if he were whispering to a lover. His tongue curled out to trace the rim of her ear.

She jerked her head away. He gripped her chin and leaned closer. His breath hit her in the face, hot and sour. "How does it feel to be completely helpless? To know that I could snuff out your life at any moment of my choosing?"

"Why are you asking me? I thought you could read my mind."

"I want to hear you say it." He squeezed her face, fingers pressing into her cheeks with bruising force. "Say it."

She spat. A thick glob of saliva landed on his cheek and oozed down. He wiped it away with a finger. "How are your knees?" he asked. His calm, pleasant tone belied the manic look in his eyes.

"Fine, thanks."

"Really?" He touched one with a single finger and pressed. She gulped down a scream. Blaine lifted the finger, and she went limp, panting. "Who are you trying to impress? No one is watching you, grading you on your bravery. Scream."

She said nothing.

The knife's tip circled her left nipple. "Your kind has such amazing regenerative powers. If I cut something off, do you think it will grow back?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice hoarse with pain. "Never tried it."

He gripped her chin between a thumb and forefinger, lifting her face. "When I'm speaking to you, my dear, I want you to meet my eyes." A bead of sweat rolled into her eye, and she blinked it away. It occurred to her that he sounded like Victor, and she laughed; a shrill sound, teetering on the brink of hysteria.

His eyes narrowed. He gripped a handful of her hair and jerked her head up. "I wonder. What is a vampire afraid of?"

Cold, mental fingers picked at the edges of her mind, and she flinched. Jagged shards of pain slid through her brain as he peeled away the outer layers, leaving her raw and exposed. She tried to tighten her shields, but he ripped them away like paper.

She shut her eyes tight, as if that would somehow protect her. Her breath came fast and hard. She could feel Blaine digging into her mind, his tendrils winding deeper, like roots pushing through soil. A tiny mewl escaped her throat. A thousand hot needles pierced her brain, and she twisted, yanking her chains. "No! *No!*" Tears slid down her face, and a hoarse, choked sob burst from her throat.

He laughed. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Fragments of memory spun through her head like bits of debris in a whirlwind. She felt herself thrust backwards, hurtling through the years, toward a tiny point of light.

* * * *

Ashley is ten.

She walks down a hall, her school books clutched to her chest. As she passes, the other children shrink away from her and whisper to each other. Their features seem to twist and distort until they aren't children at all, but demons, their faces scrunched and piggish, their malevolent eyes watching her with cold suspicion. Their glares and whispers burn her like drops of acid.

Someone sticks out a leg. She trips and sprawls across the floor, skinning her elbow. Her books scatter, and laughter erupts around her. Trembling, she reaches out to pick up her English book, and someone steps on her hand. She looks up to see a brawny, freckled boy grinning down at her. His heel grinds down on the bones of her hand until she squirms with pain, and his wide mouth frames the word *freak*.

A wash of red fills her vision. Anger boils up inside her, scalding hot, and bubbles over. Then there is a blank, a moment of nothingness.

She looks down and sees the freckled boy on the floor, squealing, hands pressed to his bloody throat. Everyone is looking at Ashley, faces filled with shock and horror. Hushed voices fill her ears with a single word, echoing and resounding over and over in her head.

Monster.

The hallway blurs and melts into blackness. She hurtles forward through a tunnel of memories, then jerks to a halt...and suddenly she is sitting in a cold, sterile-smelling office, where a man with thinning hair and a white coat sits behind a desk. "Ms. Hunt, your daughter is deeply disturbed," he says, his expression grim.

Ashley's mother sits hunched in a chair beside her, crying, ashamed, scared. Arms surround Ashley, hugging her tight, but Ashley knows her mother cannot protect her. Not from this.

The memory shatters into fragments, and she spins forward through the blackness.

She looks down. Her mother lies motionless at her feet, blood pouring from her torn throat and soaking into the dirt. Ashley screams, "Mom!" but her mother does not move. The realization that she is dead crashes down on Ashley like a cold wave, and she falls to her knees, dizzy. A low chuckle breaks the silence, and she looks up to see a dark shape looming over her, eyes gleaming red. The rogue's fangs have grown too long to fit in his mouth, and they stick out in every direction like yellowed ivory knitting needles. His lips are mangled and bloody, cut up by his own teeth. A thick froth of spittle, tinged pink with blood, coats his chin.

The rogue reaches out, fingers tipped with broken, blood-crusting nails...

Then an unseen force sucks her downward, out of the memory and into blackness once again.

* * * *

Ashley opened her eyes. For a moment, she didn't know where she was...then she took in her surroundings, and a chill penetrated her bones.

She was back in her old dorm room, sitting on the edge of the bed with a tall, skinny boy sitting next to her: Brian. He smelled warm and clean, and his long, dark hair had been freshly washed. She ran her fingers through it, leaning toward him...then he kissed her, and his tongue flicked against her lips. She heard herself moan softly, but she had no control over her own body or voice. Of course, Ashley thought—this was a memory. She

could only watch helplessly from within herself.

His lips brushed her neck, and he must have felt the tension there, for he pulled back. Dark eyes searched her face. “What’s wrong, Ash?” Warm fingers massaged the back of her neck, and Ashley’s present self watched in horror, locked behind her own eyes. *Not this. Please.*

“Nothing’s...wrong, really,” she heard her own voice whisper. “It’s just...well, there’s something I should probably tell you before we go any further.” Deep breath. “It’s a little hard to talk about.”

He smiled. “You can tell me anything. You know that.”

No more.

“You might think I’m crazy.”

“Try me,” he said, his smile widening.

Don’t! she screamed at herself, but she couldn’t stop this: it had already happened.

“I’m a vampire,” she said.

Brian laughed. “Really? Me too! What a coincidence.”

“I’m not joking.”

He raised his eyebrows, still smiling. “So where are your fangs?”

“They’re retracted now. They come out when I smell blood.”

His smile began to fade.

“You remember when that beaker broke in chemistry class, and that kid got cut, and I had to run out of the room? It wasn’t because I was squeamish. I was afraid people would see my fangs.”

The smile was gone. “Be serious, Ash.”

“I am serious. I’m a vampire. That’s why I can’t be out in the sun. It’s not just a skin condition.”

As he stared at her, his expression slowly shifted from confusion to alarm.

“Brian...what’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “There’s no such thing. Vampires, werewolves...that stuff is all fantasy. Just for fun. I mean, you don’t think that *I* really believe in vampires, do you? Just because I play one in a game? You can’t expect me to take this seriously.”

“I can prove it.”

“No.” His face was white, scared. “Stop it, Ash, I mean it.”

“Look!” She grabbed a letter-opener from the desk and made a long cut down her forearm. Blood welled up and dripped onto the bed-sheets.

Brian sprang to his feet. He stared, jaw hanging, as the cut shrank and vanished, healing smoothly within a minute. A tiny sound—almost a whimper—escaped his throat. He pressed a fist to his mouth and took a step backward.

She wiped away the blood with her fingers. “Look.” The skin was smooth and unbroken. “Do you believe me now?”

He shook his head, his eyes wide and dazed. “This isn’t real.”

“It’s real. But you can’t let anyone know. I’m only telling you this because I trust you, because I know you’re not like the others.” She felt her fangs growing long and sharp, a reflex triggered by the smell of blood. “Still don’t believe me? Look.” She bent her head, removed one of her contact lenses, and looked up. “Do you know any human that has red eyes?”

“Oh my God,” he whispered. He took another step backward. “What are you?”

"I told you. I'm a vampire."

"You drink people's blood?"

"No, I get my blood from hospitals." She could hear the hurt creeping into her own voice. This wasn't the reaction she'd expected. "I don't hunt people, I swear."

His breathing quickened. "You've been lying to me this whole time. Ever since I met you."

A band of muscle tightened in her chest, squeezing her lungs, making it difficult to draw breath. She leapt to her feet. "What choice did I have? Do you think I like keeping this a secret?" She took a step toward him. "Please, don't be afraid of me. You know me. You know I would never hurt you." She reached out.

"No!" He shrank away and pressed his back against the wall. "Don't touch me!"

She stared, stunned. "Brian, it's me. It's Ashley. Nothing has changed."

He shook his head, his eyes panic-glazed. "Everything has changed. I...I can't take this. Get out. Just go away."

She recoiled as if he'd slapped her. Her hands curled into fists as hot rage suffused her body. "You fucking coward!" Her voice broke. "I can't help what I am! All my life, I've been afraid to tell anyone. I thought you were different. I thought you could accept me."

"Just go," he whispered.

She walked toward him. "You said you loved me."

"I...I didn't know."

She grabbed his shoulders. Tears blinded her. "You said you loved me!"

"No!" He was almost screaming. "Don't touch me!" He shoved her away, spun around and grabbed the letter opener from the bed. He lunged. Metal flashed, and a jagged lightning bolt of pain shot through her as he buried the blade in her shoulder. She tried to crawl away, but he stabbed her again and again. His face was white, clenched tight with rage, with loathing.

Monster.

The blade descended once more...

Then, with a jolt, Ashley was back in the present, shaking and gasping for breath. Blaine stood over her, laughing. "Oh, very good. Very good." He wiped tears of mirth from his cheeks with that back of one hand.

An ache filled her chest, and she closed her eyes. Being forced to relive the worst moments of her life had drained her strength. Her body felt heavy, numb.

He leaned down until he was at eye-level with her. "You loved that boy. The one who tried to kill you. But there was another name in your heart. Another face. Who is this Will Connor? Hmm?"

She didn't reply.

He gripped her hair and jerked her head up. Cool gray eyes stared into hers, and his thoughts wriggled into her mind like worms. She squirmed as memories rose to the surface of her consciousness like bubbles in a champagne glass: Will's smile, Will's arms around her, his storm-blue eyes gazing into hers, his voice speaking her name.

Blaine released her hair and straightened. "So this Will works for the CPRI," he said, staring thoughtfully into space. "Dr. Abel found someone to replace me, did he? Interesting. Perhaps Mr. Connor and I need to have a chat."

She looked up, panting and blinking away sweat. "What do you want with him?" she

whispered hoarsely.

“Why, just to play. What’s wrong? Are you afraid for him?”

She struggled to keep her expression neutral. “Why would I be? He’s much stronger than you.”

“You’re lying. You’re not sure how strong he is. You’re terrified for him. That’s why you don’t want him to come here. You’d prefer to die alone, rather than let him risk himself to save you. How sweet.” He pressed his hands together, eyes dancing. “We’re going to have fun, we three.”

She glared at him. Her hands, bound behind her back, clenched into fists. “If you hurt Will, I’ll slit you open and pull out your guts with my bare hands. While you watch.”

He licked his lips. “Yes. Let me feel your hate. I love the taste of it.”

“You won’t like it so much when I’m free of these ropes.”

“Big words from a helpless little girl.”

“This little girl has killed monsters worse than you. I wonder how brave you’d be if I wasn’t tied up. You wouldn’t dare face me in a fair fight. You need me helpless, because if I wasn’t, you’d be pissing yourself with fear.”

His eyes narrowed. “I would advise you to keep your sweet little mouth shut,” he said, “or I will stitch it shut. I quite enjoy needlepoint. One young lady kept giving me such defiant looks, I had to stitch her pretty blue eyes shut, as well.” A smile twisted his face. “The punctures became infected. It was quite a mess. She wasn’t so pretty by the time I killed her.”

“You’re a piece of work. Your parents must be so proud of you.”

“You aren’t going to behave, are you? I suppose I’ll be needing that needle and thread after all.”

He turned to an old wooden chest, opened the top drawer, and pulled out a gleaming silver needle and a spool of thick, black thread. A small, cold twinge of fear went through her. He was really going to do it. This was all really happening. She was probably going to die here, in this dirty basement, alone with this grinning psychopath, all because she’d made the same stupid mistake that rogues made when they saw her: she had underestimated her opponent. She’d thought that a human, even a telepath, would be easy prey compared to the vampires she’d hunted. Now, she’d pay for that arrogance with her life.

He approached, holding the needle between a thumb and forefinger. “Hold still, now. The more you squirm around, the more it will hurt.” He leaned closer and pressed the needle’s point against her lower lip, giving her a small, sharp jolt of pain. She gulped.

The needle pressed harder...then withdrew as he raised his head. His gaze focused on the door at the top of the basement steps. “Ah.” He set the needle and thread on the table. “Your friend has arrived.”

The door burst open and Will emerged, Glock held tight in both hands and aimed at Blaine’s head.

“Will!” cried Ashley. “Shoot him, now!”

“Why hello,” said Blaine. “So good of you to join us, Mr. Connor.”

“Let her go, Blaine,” he said, “or I pull the trigger.”

“Just kill him!” Ashley shouted. Damn it, why was he hesitating?

Blaine faced Will, smiling. “I’m willing to negotiate, but first, put down the gun. Guns don’t solve anything. You’ve always known that.”

The Glock trembled in Will's hands. He tightened his grip and shook his head. "Untie her."

"Put it down." Blaine's voice had the same cadence Victor used on her when he was trying to control her mind.

Will's eyes lost focus. The Glock lowered an inch.

"That's it." Blaine sounded soothing. "There's no need for weapons here. We are both rational men. Put it down and let's talk, shall we? We'll come to an agreement."

Ashley tried to shout to Will, but her voice wouldn't work. It was as if an invisible hand wrapped around her vocal cords and squeezed.

"Put it down," said Blaine.

Will's brow furrowed, as if he were trying to work out a difficult math problem in his head. His eyes were half-lidded, unfocused.

"Put. It. Down."

Will blinked, then shook his head, hard. His eyes cleared. "No." He raised the gun and fired.

The bullet tore through Blaine's shoulder. He stumbled backwards. Blood soaked through his shirt. He pressed a hand to the wound and stared at the blood on his palm. "That hurt." He raised his head.

Ashley felt an unseen power bubbling, like a volcano about to erupt. It filled the room. Her hairs stood on end, and her skin crawled as if she were covered with invisible ants. The power was coming from Blaine.

"Will, look out!"

A soundless eruption filled the air, as if a dam had broken, and Blaine's power flooded out. Her body arched as pain seared through her nerves. She felt as though she was being boiled alive...and the attack hadn't even been aimed at her. "Will!" she screamed.

Will dropped the gun, and his body crumpled. He tumbled down the stairs and hit the floor, where he curled into a ball, gripping his head with both hands. His legs kicked in spasms. Blood bubbled from his nose and ran down his lips and chin, a bright ribbon.

Blaine stalked toward him. "You shot me! You actually shot me!" He sounded hurt, indignant, as if they'd all been playing a game and Will had broken the rules. "Do you know how much this hurts?" He kicked Will in the ribs. Will convulsed, gasping.

Ashley sat up straighter and tried to think through the dense, red fog of pain and exhaustion filling her skull. She had to distract Blaine, to take his attention off Will. She clenched her hands until her nails bit into her palm, and the pain cleared her head, blasting away the clouds.

She glared at Blaine's back and summoned her best disdainful tone. "Disgusting."

Blaine looked over his shoulder, his mouth frozen in a sneer.

"You can't even take a flesh wound without squealing like a little girl," she said. "People like you make me sick. The minute someone stops playing by your rules, you throw a tantrum. You're weak. Worse, you're stupid."

He turned toward her, breathing hard. Sweat shone on his brow as he glared at Ashley, eyes narrowed to slits, and she could feel the hatred emanating from those eyes, like waves of heat. "Oh, really. How am I stupid?"

"You think you're a big, scary boogeyman? Give me a break. You're pitiful. The easiest way to avoid feeling weak is to dominate someone else. You torture helpless

children because deep inside, that's exactly what you are. A sniveling child."

He smiled. "I'm going to kill you slowly. Very slowly."

"It won't change anything. No matter how many people you kill, you'll still be a worm."

His face flushed a bright red. He shook with rage, teeth grinding audibly together. "You little bitch," he spat.

"Oh, what's wrong? Did I hurt your feelings? I thought you liked anger. Not used to your victims talking back, are you? You want me to cower and whine and beg you for mercy. But I'm not going to. I'll die before I beg you for anything."

He lunged, grabbed her throat and squeezed. His breath hissed in and out. "Oh, I think you will beg," he said through clenched teeth. "I'm going to break you into pieces. I'll teach you the true meaning of fear. I'll give you a taste of hell, and I'll see those defiant eyes fill up with tears. And then who'll be the weak one?" His mind pushed through her shields, and she gasped as a tide of blistering, red pain washed over her. She'd never felt such pain. It was like someone had ripped all her skin away and poured acid over the raw, exposed nerves. Somehow, she found the presence of mind to scream, "Will, now!"

Will raised his head. His eyes glowed a bright, electric blue.

Ashley felt the surge of power as it poured out of him, warm and alive. Another silent explosion shook the room, and Blaine screamed. He released her and spun to face Will.

She felt the pulse of power, like a second heart beating within her. Every hair stood on end. Blaine trembled, his chest heaving. He coughed blood into his hands, then stalked toward Will, fingers arched like claws. "I'm going to rip you apart," Blaine snarled.

"Shoot him, Will!"

Will dropped to his knees and fumbled for the Glock. His fingers closed around it. As Blaine reached for him, he raised the gun and fired. The bullet blew out the back of Blaine's head in a spray of blood and brains, and he crumpled to the floor and landed with a thud, his eyes wide and blank. Blood pooled beneath his head.

Will stood, clutching the Glock tightly in both hands. Sweat gleamed on his face and neck as his shuddering, heavy breaths echoed through the silence. Slowly, he lowered the gun. He approached in shaking steps and crouched beside Ashley. The blue glow faded from his eyes. They darkened to a shadowy gray blue, and seemed to sink deeper into the sockets. His face was a white mask, tight with pain. "Are you okay?" he whispered, his voice rough.

"Yeah," she whispered back. "All things considered."

He glanced at her knees and horror flashed in his eyes. He took a slow, deep breath, as if trying to bring himself under control. "What did he do to you?"

"It's okay. I'll heal." She licked her parched lips. "I need you to undo these cuffs."

He nodded. "Where are the keys?"

"Check his pockets."

Will crouched beside Blaine's motionless body. He slipped the Glock into its holster and patted the corpse's pockets. With shaking fingers, he pulled a ring of keys from the right pocket of Blaine's pants.

He tried the keys, one by one, in Ashley's handcuffs, until they snapped open with a click. "Thanks," she said, rubbing her wrists. She tried to stand, and her legs gave out.

Will caught her. "Don't," he said. "I'll call an ambulance."

She shook her head. Her legs trembled beneath her. "They wouldn't know how to treat me." That, and her secret would be out once they saw how fast she healed. She didn't think she'd have the strength to cloud that many minds, not in the state she was in. "Just help me up the stairs."

He helped her to her feet, and she slipped an arm around his shoulders. Slowly, they made their way across the room. Her knees still throbbed, but it was bearable. She felt so tired. She just wanted to lie down in her bed and sleep for the next three days.

The door at the top of the stairs led into a kitchen with yellow and white checkered wallpaper. A row of cat-shaped porcelain jars stood on the counter, grinning at her, and plastic food magnets decorated the fridge. This cute, inoffensive kitchen should belong to somebody's grandmother, she thought, not a freak like Blaine.

Will helped her into one of the chairs, and she sat, catching her breath. Sweat trickled down her face and dripped from the tip of her nose. "You saved my life."

"I got lucky." His face was grim as he wiped her brow with a dishtowel. "If he'd had another second to react, I would've been dead."

"It looks like we both underestimated Blaine." She leaned back, her whole body sagging into the chair. She felt like a rag doll, too weak even to sit up straight. "How did you get here so fast? I didn't expect you to even wake up for another two or three hours."

"I'll explain later. Let's just get out of this place."

"Give me a minute." Her fingers trembled as she reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She slid one between her lips, lit it, and took a slow, deep breath. The taste of smoke in her mouth reminded her that she was alive. She lowered the cigarette and looked up at him. "You fired the killing shot. The five hundred thousand is rightfully yours."

He shook his head. He looked ill. "I don't want it."

"Think about it before you say no," she said. "It's a lot of money. And I don't feel right taking payment for a job I didn't finish."

He shook his head again and turned away from her. He faced the wall, shoulders rigid. "How can you even talk about something like that? You could have died tonight. Christ, Ashley, you could have died! And you're talking about the goddamn money!" He punched the wall, hard. Plaster cracked.

She stared, her eyes wide.

He turned to face her. The anger drained out of his expression, and he just looked tired. "Don't ask me again. Don't ever mention the money to me again."

"Okay." She licked dry lips. "I'm going to call Dr. Abel."

Will nodded without meeting her gaze.

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed Dr. Abel's number. The phone rang once before he picked up. "Blaine is dead," she told him.

A soft sigh. "Good. Where are you?"

She recited the address, then hit the off button and set the phone on the table. She stared down at herself. Her shirt and jeans were stiff with drying blood. Slowly, she zipped up her sweatshirt, covering herself. The pain in her knees had faded to a dull ache.

"Are you sure you don't want to call an ambulance?" Will asked.

"Positive. I've been hurt worse than this. I'll be fine. I'll need you to drive me home, though. How did you get here, anyway?"

“Cab.” He turned to face her. He didn’t look angry anymore, just very tired. “Can you make it to the car? If not, we can wait. I can carry you to the couch and you can lie down.”

The idea of lying down was appealing, but she didn’t want to crash on a killer’s couch. Seemed wrong, somehow. “I can walk.” She pulled her keys from her pocket and handed them to him. “Just help me up.”

Chapter Sixteen

Getting to the car was more difficult than she'd anticipated. When she finally collapsed into the passenger seat, exhaustion swept over her. Her vision went hazy, and for a moment, she couldn't think, couldn't move. She felt Will's hand on her forehead. "You're ice cold," he said.

"I've lost a lot of blood."

"Take some of mine." His wrist brushed her lips, and the hot, salty smell of blood filled her nostrils. Saliva filled her mouth, and her fangs lengthened. She looked at his wrist and saw the prominent veins just below the skin, veins filled with rich, life-giving fluids. It would be so easy to sink her teeth into his wrist and take what was offered.

Somehow, Ashley found the strength to push his arm away. She wouldn't feed on him again, not after what happened last time. "I'll be fine."

"You need to feed."

"Later. Please." Her voice trembled. "I just want to go home."

He opened his mouth, as if to protest. Then he looked at her expression, sighed and nodded. He started the car.

She slept for most of the drive back. More than once, she woke with a start from dreams of darkness and pain, only to drift off again a moment later, too exhausted to stay conscious for more than a few seconds. At last, the car stopped, and she opened her eyes.

"We're here," he said.

She looked up, groggy. "This is your apartment."

"I can take you back to your place later, if you like, but you should rest and have something to eat first. I'm not going to leave you alone in this state. You can barely stand."

"Eat? But..." Oh, right. She'd brought her bagged blood over to Will's place. The cooler was still in his kitchen.

"Do you have a blanket in here?" he asked.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. There's one in the trunk."

Will popped the trunk and removed the folded wool blanket. He wrapped her in it and lifted her into his arms. The blanket's old, musty smell was somehow comforting. "I can walk," she murmured.

"No. You can't." He carried her across the parking lot, to the door. Ashley didn't have the strength to protest. She rested her head against his chest and closed her eyes. She must have drifted off again, for the next thing she knew, Will was lowering her to a bed. His hands smoothed back her hair, unwrapped the wool blanket. He unbuttoned her jeans.

She flinched.

"Easy. I just need to see how bad the damage is." Slowly, he peeled off the blood-stained jeans, and her breath hissed through her teeth as the pain flared.

Bracing herself, she raised her head and looked down. Her knees were bruised and swollen—discolored, lumpy knobs of flesh—but it could have been a lot worse. A human would have needed surgery, possibly knee replacements, but she would heal without any complications. Just a very nasty memory.

Will pulled a blanket over her and put a hand on her brow, gently pushing her head

back to the pillow. "Just relax. I'll be right back." He left the room and returned a few minutes later with a bowl of blood and a spoon. Steam rose from the dark red liquid. He must have heated it. He sat on the edge of the bed and lifted a spoonful to her lips.

She sipped it and froze. "This is fresh," she said. "How..." She saw the linen bandage on his wrist, and a cold jolt of shock made her sit up. "Will! You didn't..."

"This is better for you," he said firmly. "Lay down."

Dizzy, she sank back to the bed. Ashley rested, eyes half-closed, as Will fed her. After the first few bites, hesitation vanished and instinct took over. Each time the spoon slid between her lips, she licked and sucked it clean. When the bowl was empty, she drifted off again.

* * * *

When she woke, he was sitting in a chair next to the bed. His face was white, his eyes ringed by dark flesh, but he smiled. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Better." She lifted the sheets and looked down at her knees. No more swelling, no more bruises. She looked up. "What about you? You look...drained."

He chuckled. "That's an apt way of putting it."

She winced. "Will, I..."

He touched her lips, gently silencing her. "Don't apologize. It's nothing compared to what's happened to you. I'm just glad you're all right."

Ashley stared at him. After what she'd done, she'd been prepared to face his anger, resigned to the possibility that he might never want to speak to her again. She'd been ready to accept that, if it was the cost of keeping him alive and safe. This was the last thing she'd expected. "You aren't mad?"

"About what?"

"I knocked you out and left you here to chase after Blaine on my own."

He shook his head. "After the way I acted when that vessel attacked us, you had every reason not to trust me."

Guilt, hot and bitter, rose inside her. "It wasn't like that."

Will smiled tightly. "Yes. It was. You thought I'd blow it. Hell, maybe you were right. I almost missed my chance to shoot him. I hesitated, just like you said I would." Pain flickered across his face. "God help me. He tortured you, he almost killed you, and still, it took everything inside me to make myself pull the trigger."

She looked away, unshed tears burning in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

"That you had to do that. That you had to become a killer for my sake. If I'd done my job right, it wouldn't have been necessary."

He set a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "There's nothing you need to be sorry for. I just wish I had gotten there sooner."

"I'm amazed you came at all. You were supposed to be asleep. What woke you?"

"I felt your pain."

She frowned, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. I woke up and I was in terrible pain, and I knew that it was yours. I knew you were in danger. I'd never been so afraid in my life. When I thought that you might be dying...God, Ashley..." He climbed onto the bed, pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly, fiercely. "I can't lose you," he whispered, his face buried in her hair.

She couldn't bring herself to pull away. Slowly, her arms slipped around his waist, and she went limp against him, surrendering to the comfort of his embrace. They lay, their bodies pressed close together.

His hands moved up to frame her face, palms against her cheeks. Warm thumbs caressed her cheekbones. He touched the corner of her mouth and traced the curve of her lower lip. Ashley's breath caught in her throat. Her eyelids fluttered, and her lip tingled under the gentle pressure of his thumb. For a moment, her vision lost focus, and her awareness narrowed to that point of contact. Every nerve ending was hyper-attuned to his touch, his presence.

He leaned toward her, his gaze locked on her mouth. Then his lips were on hers, soft and firm at the same time. A shiver rippled through her body, and chills danced up her spine. His tongue teased the entrance to her mouth, and a faint moan escaped her throat. The steady thump of his heartbeat echoed in her ears as his scent enveloped her, a wintry-sweet smell, like wood-smoke and cinnamon: unique, special, his. She wanted to bury her face against him and breathe him in, wanted that scent deep inside her.

His fingers pressed gently against the nape of her neck, massaging the sensitive skin in tiny circles, and a light, pleasant buzz filled her head. Ashley had never been drunk, but surely this was how it must feel. Will was in her blood, making her thoughts fuzzy and her heart beat hard and fast. He filled her senses, tingled in her skin, in her lips and tongue, in the hard points of her nipples.

A voice in her mind cried out that this was dangerous, this closeness, this wanting. She shut her eyes tight, hiding in the darkness behind her lids. "We can't do this." Her lips tightened, resisting the words, but somehow she forced them out.

"Look at me," he said firmly. Her eyes remained closed as she pressed her face against his chest. Warm, gentle fingers touched the underside of her chin, lifting it. "Look at me. Open your eyes."

Tears stung behind her lids. "I can't," she whispered.

His fingers remained under her chin. She felt his mind against hers, a gentle pressure. His thoughts slipped past her shields, winding softly deeper, and before she knew what was happening, her eyes opened and she was trapped in his gaze. Storm-blue eyes stared into hers. She felt defenseless, her heart open before him. Her breathing quickened, and panic fluttered in her chest. "Stop it."

"Don't push me away." His gaze remained locked on hers. He was inside her, thoughts intimately twined with hers...yet his own feelings lay bare in those eyes, as well, and she knew he was just as vulnerable as she was, just as open. "I know you feel something for me," he whispered. "You must."

Her throat tightened, and the bands of muscle in her chest constricted. She couldn't breathe. A part of her wanted to retreat, to withdraw behind her shields, back inside herself. Still, his gaze immobilized her. "What I feel isn't the point," she said, desperation edging into her voice. "We're different, Will."

His blue eyes burned bright. "Why should we let that matter?"

Her chest hitched, and she shut her eyes again, fighting for control. "Because it does matter. I used to believe that it didn't, that love breaks all barriers and all that shit, but life has proved me wrong again and again."

"Vampires take human lovers all the time. You told me that."

She shook her head. A bitter taste filled her mouth, thick and hot. "They use humans

for food, for sex. It's not the same." Her fingers reached toward his throat and brushed his pulse. "I sometimes wonder if what I feel for you is anything like love, or just some sick blend of attraction and hunger. I am a predator. It's in my blood. And humans are my prey."

"Maybe I wouldn't mind being your prey." He leaned closer.

"Stop it, Will." She placed a hand on his chest, holding him at bay. "Don't make light of this."

"I'm not. I mean it."

"You don't know what you're talking about." She swallowed, her throat tight. Panic squeezed her lungs and heart. Did he have any idea what he was doing to her? "I couldn't use you like that. I can't demean you like that."

"Please believe me, I wouldn't feel demeaned. If you need to feed on me sometimes, if that's what it takes for us to be together, then that's what it takes." One finger traced her lips, leaving a trail of tingles in its wake. "I'll do whatever it takes to make you trust me. I'll never turn from you, no matter what."

She looked away.

She wanted to believe him. Ached to believe him. When he pulled her close again, she pressed close against him, unable to resist the comfort he offered, the warmth of his body. His pulse beat against her cheek in a steady, soothing rhythm. If she concentrated, she could hear the blood rushing in his veins, like a distant river. His blood sang to her, called to her, triggering a response in her body as ancient and primal as sex.

Would he ever understand the nature of her desire for him? She wasn't sure she understood it herself. She looked up, into the warm, deep blue of his eyes as she caressed his jaw, felt the prickly roughness of stubble, and touched a single fingertip to his full lips. Her gaze drifted to his throat. She leaned closer, her heartbeat quickening as her tongue slid out to caress the pulse jumping just beneath his skin. His scent changed, warm vanilla sweetness mingling with the salty tang of desire. The smell filled her lungs.

She pulled back, her breath shuddering in her throat. A small, choked sob escaped her.

"Ashley?"

"I can't control myself around you. I want you too much." She buried her face against the pillow. He touched her shoulder, and she flinched away, her back rigid. "I won't be able to resist you for much longer. I'll give you this one last chance, and if you have any sense of self-preservation at all, you'll take it. Leave me. Walk away and never come back. I'm begging you, Will. Save yourself. I won't resent you for it. Leave me."

He pulled her into his arms and held her tight. "Never."

She pressed her face to his chest. "Idiot," she whispered. Her tears soaked into the front of his shirt as she clung to him, aching inside, ashamed that she did not have the strength to push him away in earnest. She wanted him too much.

Ashley tangled her fingers in his hair, pulled his face toward hers, and pressed her lips to his. She kissed him, slowly, tenderly—kissed his lips, his throat, his collarbones, tasting the warmth and salt of his skin. His arms tightened around her. She savored the heat of his lean, firm body as she stared into his storm-blue eyes. Just the sight of him made her weak with need. Her fingers touched his racing pulse again. She'd resisted her feelings for so long. She was tired of resisting.

Her hand trailed down his chest, over his stomach. She brushed her fingers over the

hard bulge in his jeans and heard his quick intake of breath. He tilted his head back, exposing his throat, and closed his eyes, offering himself to her. Her breathing quickened. What had she done to deserve such a gift?

She buried her face in his throat and breathed in his scent, sweet as apples, rich as wine. Her mouth closed around his pulse, teeth sinking into his skin. His body convulsed, and he let out a small gasp. He went rigid, and for a moment, it seemed he would pull away. His chest hitched as he drew in two sharp, quick breaths. Then his arms slipped around her waist and tightened. He clung to her as she fed, his fingers pressing into her back.

She took only a mouthful of blood. It took everything inside her to stop, but she stopped. A wave of relief washed over her at the knowledge that she could control it, that she was the master of her desires. She pulled back and licked his blood from her lips. He stared at her, his eyes wide and stunned. Blood ran in trickles from two small punctures on his neck. He touched them and held his wet, glistening fingertips in front of his face. The look in his eyes was not shock or horror, but wonder. He closed his eyes, curled his hand into a fist and pressed it against his heart.

She leaned toward him and lapped up the last trickles of blood. The punctures closed beneath the healing strokes of her tongue. Slowly, she unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off. Her eyes moved over his chest and shoulders, lingered tenderly on the shadowed hollow between his collarbones. For a moment, she watched his broad chest rise and fall with each breath. Her gaze drank in the sprinkling of dark hair, the small, firm buds of his nipples. She brushed her finger over one, and it felt like a pebble. Will moaned softly at the touch.

Heart racing, she leaned forward and rubbed her cheek against his broad chest, feeling the steady thump-thump of his heartbeat echo her own. Lightly, tentatively, her tongue flicked against his nipple. His fingers slid into her hair and rubbed her scalp, a gentle, encouraging pressure, as she nuzzled his other nipple, then eased down to kiss his taut stomach.

A part of her whispered that this was moving too fast, but she couldn't stop now. Biting her lower lip, she unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them down, freeing his long, lean legs. She hesitated, looking into his eyes, and he nodded. She reached beneath the waistband of his boxers and found the smooth, rigid shaft of his cock. He groaned, his eyes half-closing.

She licked her lips. Slowly, carefully, her fingertips explored the surface of his erection from base to tip, memorizing its shape. They wandered lower, brushing against the rough surface of his balls. Then she curled her fingers around the stiff column and just held it for a moment. It pulsed in her hand. She released him long enough to slide his boxers down and off, and her gaze moved over the long, thick shaft jutting from the patch of dark curls between his thighs. A vein meandered along the underside, and a bead of clear liquid clung to the slit at its tip. She started to reach out again, then stopped, keenly aware of the intimacy of the moment.

She'd gone this far with Brian when they were together, but still...they'd just been kids fumbling around. This felt different, more intense, more real. Every touch, every movement, was like walking deeper and deeper into some beautiful, dangerous new territory.

"Please," he whispered.

Her fingertips grazed his shaft, then caressed the head. With her thumb, she brushed the drop of moisture from its tip, and his cock twitched under her touch.

Panting, Will slipped his hands beneath her shirt, over her breasts. Her nipples hardened beneath his warm, hard palms, and electricity danced under her skin. He leaned closer until she felt his warm breath on her neck. "Let me undress you," he murmured.

Breathless, she nodded, and he slid her shirt off, exposing her breasts: small and pert, tipped with berry-red nipples. His thumb circled her pale pink areola, and it puckered in response, the nipple pushing upward. He squeezed the taut flesh lightly between a thumb and forefinger, and the touch sent a jolt of need straight to her clitoris. She shivered. Heat pooled between her thighs, wetness tickled her folds, and her clit tingled. When she shifted, the rub of her cotton panties against that tiny nub sent another hot jolt through her.

Will's long, deft fingers unbuttoned her jeans and slid them off, so only her panties stood between her and the cool air. He cupped the mound of her sex through the thin cotton, and her breath caught in her throat.

Everything that came after this would be uncharted territory. His gaze pierced hers, his eyes heavy-lidded and smoky with desire. He leaned closer, and his lips touched her ear. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

"Yes," she whispered back. Her fingers tangled in his dark hair. "Don't stop."

Slowly, he slid her panties down, exposing her completely. He stared at her, and it seemed she could feel the heat of his gaze on her naked, aroused flesh. His fingertips pressed lightly against the lips of her pussy, and they plumped under his touch. Every nerve-ending had become remarkably sensitive, responding to the pressure and heat of his fingertips. She had never been so aware of anything; his touch burned into her, and she felt it throughout her entire body. His gaze remained focused on the shadowed juncture between her thighs.

Lightly, he stroked her plump labia. Then one finger slipped between them, and the shock of that contact sent tremors through her body. "You're wet," he said, his voice deep and husky. His thumb grazed the hood of her clit, the barest brush of flesh against flesh. Fresh wetness seeped through her folds, and the tingling in that node of flesh increased as it swelled.

Normally, her clitoris remained hidden completely under its hood. Only when she was very aroused did the tiny, pink nub poke out enough to become visible. Seeing it now made her feel strangely vulnerable. Then the rough ball of his thumb was on it, rubbing against it, and a soft gasp escaped her throat. The contact was so intense it was almost painful. His thumb left her clit and slid back and forth along the moist slit of her pussy. More sticky wetness seeped out, onto her thighs and the bed.

"Lie down," he whispered hoarsely.

She lowered herself to the bed, heart pounding, and he spread her thighs wide open, leaving her aroused pussy fully exposed. His head lowered, and his tongue poked out. With the very tip, he traced the cleft of her sex. A soft, breathless gasp escaped her at the shock of heat and wetness against sensitized flesh. His fingers parted the thick outer lips to expose her folds.

Ashley's fingers clenched the bed-sheets as he stared into her. She had never felt more vulnerable, as though all her secrets lay exposed to his eyes. "It's all right," he whispered, as if he had heard the thought.

Then he kissed her clitoris, and her hips arched off the bed, pushing upward against his lips. His thumb rubbed back and forth across the sensitive spot just above her throbbing nub as his tongue slid from his mouth. The tip caressed that silky little bud, then moved down to tease the opening below. She clutched the bed-sheets tighter, panting, as his tongue moved up and down, exploring her. It darted like a flame, touching here, then there, always returning to stimulate her clit, a blazing center of pleasure.

Her hips twitched and bucked. "Mmm...oh...Will..."

His tongue moved more firmly against her, up and down in slow, wet licks, and her thighs shuddered and clenched. She couldn't remain still any longer. She needed to touch him. She sat up, placed her palms on the broad wall of his chest, and pushed him down to the bed, onto his back. Her hands slid over his slim, firm thighs. She bit his belly, not quite hard enough to penetrate the skin, and thrilled at his sharp gasp, the contraction of his muscles. His heart pounded. She could feel the pulse against her tongue, as if she held his heartbeat in her mouth.

Struggling to control her breathing, she trailed kisses down his stomach, along his thigh, then rubbed her cheek against his erection, making his breath catch. He was so hard, like heated iron wrapped in silk. Slowly, her fingers curled around his cock and stroked. She kissed the head, then ran her tongue over it, tasting salt and heat.

He groaned, low and deep. His hands skimmed over her breasts. He pulled her forward so her taut nipples were directly over his face. His lips brushed one, then closed around it and tugged, his mouth hot and wet. She gasped, arching her back as his mouth tugged harder, sucking hungrily at her nipple until she teetered on the thin, bright line between pleasure and pain. Her eyes closed as his hand moved lower, stroked her belly, then slipped between her thighs.

One long finger delved between the lips of her pussy, through her slick folds, then found her opening and pushed. Ashley tensed. There was a momentary resistance, then his finger slid inside her, disappearing up to the knuckle. She bit her lower lip. That finger felt so long and thick inside her. What would it feel like when he penetrated her with his cock?

The nerves in her soft, slick walls crackled and danced as he moved within her. His fingertip found a sensitive spot and pressed, giving her a small, sharp jolt. Her toes curled. He added a second finger, and she felt a tiny twinge of pain as he stretched her open.

His fingers left her, and his mouth returned to her pussy. He licked, kissed and sucked every bit of it, paying special attention to her clit, first stroking it with his tongue, then sliding his thumb over and around it until white starbursts filled Ashley's vision. "Will," she whispered, her cheeks burning hot. Sweat dampened the sheets beneath her.

His fingers plunged into her again, rubbing, stretching, opening her. Then his eyes met hers. "Please," she gasped out. "I need it." She could feel her heartbeat in her throat.

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"Please, Will."

He withdrew his fingers and lowered her to the bed, onto her back. He retrieved a wrapped condom from the top drawer of his dresser, tore the wrapping open and slid the translucent latex over his cock. He gazed down at her, eyes burning with need. She could see him trembling with the effort of controlling himself as he slowly, slowly lowered his body onto hers. For a moment, the round, blunt head of his cock remained pressed against

her entrance...then his hips surged forward, and he drove into her. The small, sharp pain faded into a pleasurable ache as he began to move, hips rocking against hers.

Ashley's eyes closed, and she moved beneath him, pushing upward to meet his slow, deep strokes. Her hands wandered over his shoulders, down his back, nails raking his skin lightly. She bit his shoulder, feeling his muscles tighten as she sank in her teeth.

Blood trickled from the small wound, and she licked it away. Her hands slid down to his ass, squeezed, and pushed down to bring him deeper into her body. She bit his left nipple, startling a gasp from him. "God," she breathed, "I love the taste of you."

He kissed her, sucking her lower lip. A bead of sweat trickled down her neck, and his tongue traced its path. "I love your taste, too."

She wrapped her legs around him. His hips pushed against hers; she rose to meet his thrusts as their rhythm quickened. She watched his face as he moved within her. His eyes were half-closed, his lips parted as he panted for breath. Tendrils of dark hair clung to his brow.

"Don't stop." Her hands tightened on his ass. "Please, I'm so close..." A tiny whimper escaped her throat. She thrust upward with her hips until at last, she felt the sharp, sweet sting of orgasm, and her body tightened around his cock.

He came with a sharp cry, his eyes rolling back, and collapsed next to her, panting. She nuzzled against his shoulder. Slowly, he slid the condom off his cock and dropped it into the garbage can next to the bed. Then he wrapped his arms around her and held her close, as if trying to meld their two bodies with his willpower alone.

"I don't want to be alone anymore," she whispered

His arms tightened around her. "You won't be."

She slowly stroked the length of his body, shoulder to hip. She wanted to memorize every inch of his body, his skin. She tucked her head beneath his chin.

"I love you, Ashley," he said.

"Even though I'm a monster?"

"If you're a monster, you're the most beautiful, wonderful monster I've ever known."

She tried to laugh, but the laughter lodged in her throat, cutting off air and voice. She couldn't speak.

They cuddled together for a few minutes longer. Then, slowly, Ashley sat up. Will looked down at the small, bright bloodstain on the bed sheets. His eyes strayed to her thighs, which were sticky with blood. "Are you okay?"

She smiled drowsily. "That's nothing compared to the blood I've drawn from you."

He touched her inner thigh. "Did it hurt?"

"A little. But it was so, so worth it." She smiled, then glanced down at herself. Her skin was damp with sweat. "I could use a shower. What about you?"

He wrapped his arms around her again. "I want to stay like this a little longer."

How could she refuse? They nestled side by side, their bodies pressed close together. Ashley's tongue slipped out to taste the sweat on his chest. It was salty, warm and sweet, carrying a hint of cinnamon and smoke. Her eyelids drifted shut. "I love you too, Will," she whispered.

She dozed off, feeling safer than she had in years.

Chapter Seventeen

Ashley woke to orange knives of light shining through the blinds, and she opened her eyes, squinting. Sunset. She'd slept through the day.

She rubbed the back of her wrist across her eyes and looked around. For a moment, she couldn't remember whether she was in her own apartment or Will's. The memories emerged slowly. Will wasn't in bed, but she could still see the faint indentation of his head on the pillow. He'd probably just gone to the bathroom, or to start a pot of coffee. She rolled out of bed and stretched, savoring the tightness in her muscles. A drowsy smile spread across her face as she remembered last night...the pleasure and heat, Will's scent and taste...his skin against hers, his body within hers.

Her cell phone rang. She blinked and looked around. For a moment, she couldn't recall where she'd left it, then she remembered; it was still in the pocket of the hooded sweatshirt she'd worn to conceal her gun.

God, had that really been just last evening? It felt so long ago, like another lifetime. The cell rang again. She grabbed it. "Hello?"

A nasal voice spoke: "I sent an agent to deliver payment to your apartment, but no one answered the door. Where are you?"

She blinked and rubbed her forehead. "Dr. Abel? I'm at Will's...I mean, Connor's place. Why?" She sat on the edge of the bed. "Is something wrong?"

"May I ask what you're doing at Mr. Connor's apartment?"

"That's none of your business."

"I see." His voice was tight, cold.

"What's your problem? I finished the job. I took care of Blaine. Are you just upset that I wasn't there when your guy showed up? I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I've had a lot to deal with lately."

"Let me give you a word of advice, Ms. Hunt. Stay away from Connor."

A chill swept through her. Goosebumps rose on her skin. "Is that a threat?"

"Of course not. Simply a word of advice."

"Why do you want me to stay away from him?"

"It is unnecessary for you to remain in contact with him. Your job is over. You no longer need him. Correct?"

"Why do you care?"

"Will Connor is one of our most valuable agents. I am simply looking out for his well-being."

"Will is a big boy and you're not his father. I think he can decide what's in his own best interest."

"Ms. Hunt, please—..."

"This conversation is over." She pressed the off button and tossed the phone aside. She blew out a sigh, stood and paced the room. "Who does that nosy little mouse-man think he is?" she muttered. It occurred to her that she hadn't told him where or when he should deliver her payment, but at the moment, she didn't care.

Will poked his head into the bedroom. His hair was still disheveled. It stood in a stiff peak on top, like a rooster's comb. "Ashley? Who were you talking to?"

She flopped down on the bed. "Dr. Abel."

"Is anything wrong?"

"He doesn't think I should spend time with you now that Blaine is dead."

Will's eyebrows arched. "What? Why?"

"I don't know. Talk to him. Probably thinks he's protecting you from the evil vampire seductress."

He approached and sat on the edge of the bed. He wore a long, rust-colored robe that looked as if it would be silky soft to the touch, and his face was freshly shaved. "Don't worry about it. It's probably just a misunderstanding. I'll talk to him and clear it up."

"It's none of his business," she muttered.

He stroked her hair. "Last night was wonderful."

She looked up and felt her irritation fading. "Yeah. It was." She slipped her arms around him. "Where were you?"

"I'm sorry." He kissed the corner of her mouth. "I wanted to be by your side when you woke up, but I got a call and I didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful."

"A call?"

"Yeah, someone from the CPRI. They have some questions they want to ask me, and they want me to take a look at the body."

"Blaine's? Why? He's dead. Isn't that what they wanted?"

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "They're hoping they can learn what went wrong with him, why he went insane. They're performing tests on his brain. Or what's left of it, anyway. They probably want me to scan him, see if there's any information I can salvage before the tissue starts to deteriorate. They're going to pick me up in about half an hour."

She groaned. "Can't it wait?"

He kissed her again, slowly and thoroughly. "I won't be gone long. Just a couple hours, I hope. You can stay here and rest if you like." His gaze searched her face. "Will you be okay, on your own? If you really want me to stay..."

She forced a smile. "Go on. I'll be fine."

He kissed her once more, then left the room.

She sighed and rolled onto her back. Blaine was dead. Her job was done. She should be relieved...but a greater threat loomed in the near future. Victor. A chill crawled up her spine. Victor still expected Will to fight him—but damned if she'd let it happen. She'd find some way to protect Will, even if they had to flee the country. They could hop on a plane to Europe or Australia, someplace far away, and live off their newfound money. She just had to convince Will to leave his job at the CPRI.

She straightened and turned to the window, separating two of the blinds with her fingers to peer out at the sky. The orange glare of sunset had faded, and the sky was a mellow shade of indigo, the horizon still streaked with orange and yellow clouds. A long, dark car was parked near the front of the building. The boys from the CPRI were here to pick up Will.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, he poked his head into the bedroom again. His hair, still wet from the shower, had been smoothed back and combed. "I've got to go now."

Ashley stood, walked up to him and gave him a quick, firm hug. "Be careful."

He looked puzzled. "I'm just going to headquarters."

"I know. Just be careful."

"Okay." He kissed her, slowly and softly, then pulled away.

She watched him go and wondered why her stomach felt so tight.

* * * *

For an hour or so, Ashley lounged around the apartment. She watched TV, played with Lily, daydreamed about last night and breathed the occasional heartfelt sigh, wishing Will would get back faster. She glanced out the window. The last trace of sunlight had faded from the sky. Maybe she'd go for a short walk. Maybe that would help settle the inexplicable, jittery, uneasy feeling in her stomach.

She put on a black sweater and a pair of jeans. Will had left her a spare key on the kitchen table. She grabbed it, tucked it into her pocket and made her way down the threadbare, carpeted stairs, outside into the chilly night. A cold breeze ruffled her hair as she walked across the parking lot.

"Going somewhere?"

She froze. For a moment, she didn't move, didn't breathe. Even her heart seemed frozen between beats.

Victor.

"What do you want?" she asked, without turning to face him.

"I smell him on you," Victor said. His voice was low and tight with rage. "Did he fuck you?"

"That's none of your business."

Iron-hard fingers seized her arm and yanked her around. She found herself staring into a pair of burning red eyes. "*Did he fuck you?*"

"No!" She stared at him, terrified. He looked as if he were prepared to commit murder, and she realized that Will's life might depend on what she said next. "I swear, we didn't do anything!"

"Then why is his filthy human stink all over your body?" He dragged her closer, until she could feel his hot breath on her face.

"We held each other! That's all!"

"You are lying." He flung her to the pavement and stood over her, chest heaving. His eyes glowed like flame. "How could you do this? How dare you?"

"I don't belong to you! Leave us alone!"

Victor's eyes narrowed. He was breathing hard. "He will pay. I warned him. I warned him that you were not to be touched." His hand clenched slowly into a fist.

"I swear to God, Victor, if you hurt him—"

"If you cared about him, you would have stayed away from him. Now it's too late. He will pay the price for your stupidity." He stalked into the shadows and vanished.

"No!" Ashley ran after him. She stopped at the end of the street, looking around wildly, but Victor was nowhere to be seen. "Victor!" she screamed. "Leave him alone!"

The only reply was the mournful whistle of the wind.

Ashley's heart thundered. She had to warn Will. Shaking, she grabbed her cell phone from her pocket and dialed his number. The phone rang twice, then went to voicemail.

"Hi, this is Will Connor. I'm not here right now..."

"Shit," she hissed.

"Leave a message and I'll get back to you." *Beep.*

“Will, listen,” said Ashley. “Don’t come back here. Victor is looking for you. Do you understand? *Don’t go home*. If you’re at headquarters already, just stay there. You’ll be safe there. Call me back whenever you can, okay?” She took a deep breath, trying to control her racing heartbeat.

She had to stop Victor, somehow. A desperate moan escaped her throat. How could she have let this happen? How had she let herself get close to Will? She’d known the risks, known she was endangering his life, but she’d done it anyway. Tears welled in her eyes, and she squeezed them shut. How could she have been so stupid, so selfish?

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She had no time to wallow in self-loathing. She had to find some way to warn him. She ran back down the street, to her parking lot, and got into her car. She pulled out of the lot and slammed on the gas. Her fingers were tight on the steering wheel as she raced down the street at twice the speed limit. She didn’t know where she was going, just that she couldn’t stay still.

Headquarters, that was it. She had to get to headquarters. Will was probably still there...she hoped. She veered around a corner and through a red light, ignoring the angry honks that followed her. Heart thumping, she wove through the crush of traffic. She needed to get out of the city, onto 55.

She hadn’t been driving longer than twenty minutes when her cell phone rang. She gave a start and raised it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Ms. Hunt?” It was Dr. Abel, and he sounded close to panic. “Are you with Will right now?”

The knot in her stomach tightened. “No. What’s going on?”

“I just got a call from one of my agents. They were taking Connor back from headquarters when the car was attacked by a group of men and a vampire. One of the agents was killed, and Connor was taken. We don’t know where he is.”

Shit. Shit. Victor and a handful of his vessels—it had to be. She never would have guessed he’d be able to find Will so quickly. But then, Victor had servants all over the city. “Listen, I’m going to find him. I’m going to bring him back.”

“You know about this, don’t you?” Dr. Abel demanded. “What the hell is going on?”

“I’m sorry. I have to hang up. I can’t waste time talking.”

“No, you listen to me. You—”

Ashley pressed the cancel button, cutting off his voice, and shoved the phone into her pocket. She pulled into a gas station parking lot and leaned her forehead against the steering wheel. *Think*. She had to think. Where would Victor take Will? To his high-rise? No. He’d take Will somewhere secluded, somewhere no one would hear the screams. But where?

Her phone rang again. She pulled it out of her pocket and stared at the number on the screen. It wasn’t Dr. Abel. She raised it to her ear, heart thudding. “Who is this?”

“Hello, Ashley.” Victor’s voice was cold and hard.

Her hand tightened on the phone. “Where is he? What have you done with him, you bastard?”

“Don’t blame me for this. You’re the one who broke our bargain. The agreement was that he not touch you until the time of the challenge. Well, there’s been a little change of plans. The challenge is tonight.”

“I swear, Victor. If you don’t tell me where he is, I’m going to skin you.”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, my dear, I wouldn’t want you to miss this show. I

thought someplace private and remote would be best, so I'm taking Mr. Connor into the countryside. You remember the forest clearing where your mother used to give you shooting lessons?"

"How do you know—"

"Never mind. Do you remember how to get there?"

"Yes. But—"

Victor hung up.

* * * *

Ashley's car crawled down a narrow, dirt road, between looming pines. She'd driven the whole way with her heart lodged just beneath her jaw and her stomach a tight, cold knot. It felt as though someone were squeezing it with a steel fist.

Ahead, a clearing came into view, a wide, flat circle of earth surrounded by a solid wall of trees. Moonlight gave the earth a silver sheen.

She parked the car at the clearing's edge and got out. She drew her Beretta.

"Put it away," said Victor. "It won't do any good." He stood at one end of the clearing, hands on his hips. He was shirtless, wearing only black boots and black, baggy pants held up with a drawstring. His long, unbound dark hair hung down around his shoulders. His body appeared to be sculpted from marble, his muscles white hills and valleys. Will stood at the clearing's other end. He, too, was shirtless, wearing his faded jeans. She saw no hint of fear in his face, though his brow glistened with sweat.

"Will!"

He looked at her, and a strange expression flickered through his eyes. "Ashley."

Victor glanced at her. "You should feel privileged. Women are not usually allowed to observe the challenge firsthand. Now, put your gun away. I have not threatened Mr. Connor. He is here of his own free will, to fight the challenge, as we agreed."

She slipped the Beretta into its holster, but kept her hand on the grip. She looked around the clearing. "Isn't there any kind of judge? Someone to make sure that no one cheats?"

"Why do you think I told you to come here? I want you to see with your own eyes. When the challenge is over, I want there to be no shred of doubt in your mind. Besides, do you really think I would need to cheat?"

Her jaw clenched. She turned to Will. "Don't do this," she called. She could hear the raw desperation in her own voice. "What will it prove?"

"I don't have a choice, Ashley." His tone was grim. "This is something I need to do."

"Remember," said Victor, "the fight continues until one opponent is dead or surrenders."

"Wait." A spark of hope leapt. "Does that mean if he gives up, you won't hurt him?"

Victor glanced at her. "If he surrenders now, I will spare him. But he must promise never to touch you again. And if I find he has broken the promise, I will kill him."

She took a deep breath. "Can I have a chance to speak to him alone before the match?"

"If you think you can stall the match until dawn and buy yourself some time, you are mistaken."

"I'm not trying to stall. I just want to talk to him. Give me five minutes."

Victor scowled. "Very well. But that is all. In five minutes, the match begins."

She walked across the clearing to Will. He followed her into the forest. They walked until she was sure they were out of Victor's hearing, then she turned to face Will and gripped his hands tight. "You have to surrender."

He looked exhausted and pale in the dim moonlight. He was probably still suffering from the effects of blood-loss, but his eyes held a steely, determined glint. "I can't do that. I won't. You think I'm going to just stand back and let him take you? I'd rather die."

"You will die if you go out there. Victor won't play fair. He'll use mind tricks. He'll use every vampire power he has. Please." Her voice broke. "If you die for me, I won't be able to bear it."

"I can beat him," he said firmly. "This power I have, whatever it is—it comes to the surface when I'm angry or desperate, and I've never been more angry or desperate than I am now. And you're forgetting I have one big advantage over him. If I can survive until the sun comes up, he'll be forced to surrender or die. He won't be able to fight in sunlight."

"Dawn is a long time from now. How are you going to delay that long?"

"I'll manage."

She grabbed his shirt in both hands. "This is insane!"

"I have to try." Behind the determination in his voice, she heard a faint note of fear. Despite what he'd said, he fully understood the risk he was taking and how slim his chances were. He intended to die fighting Victor.

Tears burned in her eyes. "Why?" she whispered.

"Because it's the only chance for you. The only chance for us. If I give up, he'll force the blood-bond on you and it will all be over. I can't let that happen."

Ashley hugged him tight and pressed her face to his chest. She savored the feel of him in her arms, the solid warmth of his body, knowing this might be her last chance to hold him. He hugged her back, just as tightly. Then she heard approaching footsteps and looked up.

Victor stopped a few paces away and looked from Ashley to Will. "It is time."

"Another few minutes. Please."

But Victor shook his head. He turned and walked away. Will followed, and Ashley walked behind him, her heart sinking deeper into her stomach with each step.

They entered the moonlit clearing. Victor stood, facing them. "Put down your gun, my dear. I want to be sure that you don't try to shoot me when my back is turned."

"Yeah? Well, I don't entirely trust you either. Sorry, but the gun stays with me."

Victor sighed. "I had a feeling you would be difficult about this."

A low growl rippled from the shadows, and the hairs on her neck stood on end. A long, sleek shape emerged from the surrounding vegetation: a cougar. Muscles shifted beneath its dun-colored coat. A pink tongue flicked out to caress long fangs.

"My servant," said Victor. "Her mind is linked to mine, and she will obey my slightest wish. If you reach for your weapon, or try to interfere, she will stop you. Put down your gun."

Ashley glared at Victor. The cougar stepped forward, and a low growl trickled from between its lips.

"It's all right," Will said. He sounded oddly calm. "I can do this on my own."

Ashley hesitated. The last thing she wanted was to throw away her gun, but with a hundred-pound carnivorous cat staring her down, she didn't have much choice. She

unbuckled her holster and tossed it aside. The cougar stood, motionless as a statue, and watched her with flat golden eyes.

Victor bent and picked up a stone. "The challenge will begin as soon as this stone strikes the ground." He flung the stone into the air.

Her eyes followed the stone as it rose and fell. It hit the ground and bounced.

She expected Victor to charge Will. Instead, he stood motionless, arms crossed over his chest, expression flat and hard, like a stone slab. She felt the hum of power in the air. Power crawled over her skin and into the hollows of her body. Her nerves tingled.

Will stood, his back rigid. She watched the small, almost imperceptible movements of his chest as he breathed, and she felt his power rise to meet Victor's. She couldn't see his eyes, but she knew they glowed a brilliant blue. Two energies, two wills, swirled through the air, invisible and silent, yet real as the ground beneath her feet: scorching heat, penetrating cold. Fire and ice.

Victor's jaw clenched. Veins stood out in his forehead.

Something burst from him and rushed toward Will like an invisible train. In the same moment, Will's power exploded outward. The air crackled and buzzed. She heard a thin whistle in her ears, then felt a soundless explosion as the two streams of power collided in midair. The force shook the earth. Will fell to one knee, but made no sound. He panted for breath, chest heaving.

"Will!" She ran toward him. The cougar leapt in front of her and snarled, teeth flashing white. She tried to run around it, but it blocked her path and swiped at her with one huge paw, claws extended. She backed away.

Slowly, Will straightened. Sweat trickled down his brow and neck, and his chest heaved as he clenched his fists. A sharp, burnt smell filled the air as his power pushed against Victor's. The hairs on her nape stood on end.

"Give in," Victor said. "This is your last chance. Surrender now, and I will spare you. Continue to fight me, and you will die."

Will said nothing. His eyes remained focused on Victor. He trembled with effort, jaw clenched, skin gleaming with sweat.

Victor's power sliced through the air like a blade. She saw the air ripple and blur, distorting the trees behind it, as a thin wedge of energy hurtled toward Will. He let out a hoarse cry and staggered backwards. Blood ran from the long, thin cut across his chest. It looked as though he'd been slashed with a sword.

She watched, her guts in a knot. Victor could cut him to ribbons without even touching him. She had to stop this. She darted forward, and again, the cougar blocked her, forcing her back. Its jaws snapped together on air like a steel trap.

Her mind flashed back to the night she'd watched Star Wars in Will's apartment, to the tiny black housecat.

Bring the mouse, Lily.

Ashley drew in her breath sharply. It had worked once. Maybe...

She stared, hard, into the cat's eyes. "Go," she whispered. "Go away."

The cat stopped growling, but didn't move. It stood motionless, mouth open, teeth bared to the gums.

"Go on!" She gave a firm, mental push. "You heard me, kitty. Get lost."

The cougar shook its head, as if trying to dislodge a fly, then pawed at one ear. Its eyes clouded over. "Go!" She thrust the message into its mind, reinforcing the command

with all the power she had. As she'd hoped, Victor was too busy holding back Will to fight her for control of the cougar's mind. The cat gave a low, coughing growl and continued to paw at its head, as if it were trying to scratch an itch in its brain. Its tail lashed.

"Go!" She pushed with everything she had.

The cougar let out a low, strange sound, somewhere between a moan and a whine, more doglike than catlike. Head down, it slunk away into the forest.

She made a dive for her holster, grabbed her gun and pointed it at Victor.

Victor must have seen her moving from the corner of his eye. He spun to face her. His eyes met Ashley's, and his mind slammed into hers. A hot, red pain divided her brain like an axe. Her vision grayed out, and the Beretta slipped from her hand as she sank to her hands and knees.

Dirt crunched beneath Victor's approaching footsteps as she stared at the ground, willing the world to stop spinning. He grabbed her by the shirt collar and lifted her, like someone lifting a kitten by the scruff. For a moment she dangled in midair. Then he threw her, as easily as he'd throw a rag doll. Trees and ground flew past in a blur. She crashed into a tree and slid to the ground, head buzzing.

She staggered to her feet. Nausea rolled over her like a wave. She doubled over, panting, and put her hands on her knees. As the nausea subsided, she straightened and raised her head. She saw Victor and Will facing each other, their faces less than a foot apart, their hands locked together as they pushed, but she knew she was seeing more than a contest of strength. Their wills, their minds, clashed together like two swords, charging the very atmosphere with electricity.

Will sank to one knee, hands still locked with Victor's. A bright bubble of blood burst from Will's lips and ran down his chin. Another thread of blood ran from one nostril.

"I gave you your chance, human," Victor said through clenched teeth.

She took a step toward them, stumbled and sank to her hands and knees. Another wave of dizziness washed over her. Her eyes slid out of focus. Did she have a concussion? She pushed her fingers through her hair and touched something warm and wet. Blood. She'd hit her head harder than she'd thought. Nausea bubbled up in her again. She pressed a hand to her stomach and heaved. Blackness washed across her eyes.

When her vision cleared, Victor had Will by the throat. He held him in midair, both hands locked around his neck. Will's feet dangled above the ground, kicking, as he tried to pry Victor's hands from his neck.

"No." She tried to stand and sank to her knees. Dizzy, panting, she crawled toward Victor. "No."

Victor didn't look at her. His hands squeezed Will's throat. Will's struggles slowly grew weaker, until he hung limp. His eyes sank shut.

Victor released Will. He dropped and hit the ground with a thud.

She stared at the motionless form. The cold emptiness spreading through her body was like the numbness she felt after a heavy blow; as if all the nerve endings had gone to sleep. Then something flickered inside her, something small, hot and bright, like a spark in the darkness. She thought of Will, warm and alive and smiling. She stared at the limp body. A scream welled up in her throat...but when she spoke, her voice emerged calm and flat, strangely lifeless. "You killed him."

Victor stood facing her, arms at his sides. Sweat dripped from his brow and down his neck. "He gave me no choice."

She rose to her feet. Hot pain clenched her chest, and bands of muscle tightened around her lungs, suffocating her. Her vision went red as she struggled to breathe against the crushing weight. Memories of Will flashed through her mind, one after another, and with each image, the pain and pressure in her chest increased. A low, animal moan slid from her throat. She stared at his blank face. His eyes were closed, as if in sleep. She thought of those storm-blue eyes heated with passion as Will's body moved within hers, and the pain sharpened to a hot, throbbing point inside her ribs. Then, all at once, it evaporated. Calm settled over her.

Will was dead. Nothing mattered anymore.

"You should have left us alone," she whispered.

"This was not how I wanted it to end." Victor's voice slipped into a hypnotic cadence. It washed over her, wrapped around her, trying to drown out her mind. "I gave him every chance to surrender, but he forced me to kill him. Had I not, he would have killed me. He was enraged. He wanted me dead."

"That's a lie, and you know it," she said. "You wanted this, because you wanted an excuse to kill him."

His eyes narrowed. "Ashley, you must listen to me."

"No. I'm done listening to you." Deep inside, below the numbness, a cold rage awakened, like a beast opening its eyes after a long slumber. She picked up her Beretta and aimed it at Victor's chest. Tears blurred her vision. She blinked them away.

"Ashley—"

"Shut up," she said through clenched teeth. "You think that because he's dead now, I'm going to throw myself into your arms out of loneliness? You're a monster."

His back stiffened, and he bared his fangs. "If I'm a monster, then so are you."

"Maybe you're right." Her finger was on the trigger. "But I don't care anymore."

He stood his ground, but fear flickered in his eyes. "Ashley, listen—"

She fired. He staggered backwards. She walked toward him, arms out stiffly, Beretta in both hands. Victor's eyes met hers. His power slammed into her mind.

Her vision went gray and her legs gave out. She dropped to her knees, then dragged herself back to the edge of consciousness and slowly straightened.

She fired again, and the bullet ripped through his throat. Blood poured down the front of his chest. He let out a gurgling cry and sank to his knees. His wide eyes stared at her in shock. She walked toward him, reached out and dug her fingers into his wounded throat. Her nails sank into the hot, slippery gore as she pressed the gun to his forehead.

His face gleamed with sweat. The whites of his eyes showed all around, and the smell of his fear washed over her, making her giddy. She breathed it in, licked her lips.

"Don't," he mouthed. He couldn't speak through the mangled mass of flesh that had once been his throat.

She pulled the trigger. Victor's brains sprayed out the back of his head. His body dropped to the ground with a thud.

She raised her bloody fingers to her mouth and stared at them. Slowly, she began to lick the blood off. She couldn't help herself. She slid one finger into her mouth and sucked it clean.

Her eyes closed, and she shuddered. His blood was hot, salty, still spiced with fear.

Nothing had ever tasted so good.

Her eyes opened, and she stared at his corpse. It hadn't started to disintegrate yet. The Beretta slipped from her fingers. She dropped to her knees and breathed in the smell of blood. Mouth open, she lowered her head and licked his wrist. She bit down on his hand and bones crunched between her teeth. Blood burst on her tongue, sweet and hot. She swallowed.

When she bit his stomach, the skin gave way beneath her teeth. She pulled away a chunk of flesh, like a lion ripping at a carcass. She swallowed, growled and buried her face in the warm gore of his belly.

"Ashley!"

She looked up.

Will sat up, holding his throat, and coughed. His breathing was raspy and labored. "Ashley, stop." He sounded pained. His face was pale, his eyes wide.

She stared at him, and a tremor ran through her. She knew she should feel something, seeing him alive, but she felt only hunger—a deep, gnawing hunger like nothing she'd ever known. She lowered her face to Victor's stomach.

Will crawled closer. "You know what will happen if you do that. Stop. If you keep going, you'll lose yourself."

He was trying to steal her kill. She hissed and hunched over Victor's corpse. A low growl curled up from her throat.

Will's gaze held hers. "Let it go."

She flinched, shuddered and tried to look away, but Will's gaze held hers. As she stared into those eyes, something pushed at the edge of her mind, trying to get in. She resisted, but his thoughts broke through, into hers, and awareness flooded her like a blinding light. *What am I doing?*

Dazed, she looked down at the ragged hole in Victor's abdomen. Something bulged through the hole, pinkish and glistening with blood.

Intestines.

Cold horror lanced through her, and she jerked her gaze away, breathing hard, even as the smell made her mouth water. "Oh God," she whispered, and pressed a hand to her stomach as bile surged into her throat. She scooted away from Victor, panting. His corpse began to disintegrate at last, vapors rising from his skin as he dried to a husk.

Will crawled closer, and she whimpered and curled into a ball. "Don't come any closer to me. Please. I don't know what I'll do right now."

"Ashley—"

"Don't!" With shaking fingers, she pulled her car keys out of her pocket and threw them at him. "Take my car and get out of here."

"No. I can't leave you out here alone. How will you get home?"

"Don't worry about me! I...I have to..." She lurched to her feet, stumbled into the bushes and retched. Blood and small, ragged chunks of pink flesh splattered to the ground. She moaned as a wave of faintness passed over her, then retched again.

She wiped her mouth with one sleeve and looked over her shoulder. Will stood in the center of the clearing, staring at her.

"Go," she croaked. "I'm begging you. If I turn on you..." She struggled to control her breathing. Will's rapid heartbeat echoed in her ears. He was trying very hard not to run, she knew, fighting every instinct within him. He stood, his body rigid, his eyes huge.

“I can’t be around anyone right now. Please believe me, the forest is the safest place for me.”

“But what will you do when the sun comes up?”

“I’ll hide under something.”

“There’s no way…” He took a step closer.

She rose into an animal crouch, balancing on her toes and fingertips. A low, rippling growl rose from her chest, and her lips peeled back from teeth grown too long and sharp to fit into her mouth. She crawled toward him, but it wasn’t a human crawl. No human crawled so easily, so fluidly, on toes and fingertips.

He took a step back. “Jesus,” he whispered. His chest heaved. Sweat shone on his brow.

“Go.” Her voice was a low, thick growl, no longer human, or anything close to it.

He turned, grabbed the keys off the ground and ran. He got in the car and drove away.

* * * *

The next few days were a fever-dream.

Ashley wandered the forest by night, hungry for blood, for flesh. When dawn peeked through the trees, she dug a shallow pit and curled up within, covered by a blanket of dirt and leaves and breathing through a hollow reed. Her stomach hurt. An angry buzz filled her head, as if a nest of hornets had built a hive out of her brain.

Hunger gnawed at her belly, a constant, torturing hunger, a desperate need for the slippery, hot taste of meat. Once, she encountered a lone doe in a forest clearing, its eyes silver with moonlight. She tackled the doe and ripped its throat out. In her delirium, she didn’t remember or care that vampires couldn’t drink animal blood. She lapped at the sticky puddle like a dog on a hot day, then threw up.

She staggered through the woods and wondered, through the fog of hunger—was this the beginning of madness? Was she going rogue?

If that was the case, the best fate she could hope for was to die of starvation in the wilderness.

She woke one evening and clawed her way up through the mat of damp earth and leaves. She stood and swayed. Her vision went black for a moment. She leaned one shoulder against a tree and took deep breaths until her head cleared.

For the first time in days, she looked down at herself. Her clothes were stiff and caked with dirt. Her jeans were ragged, the knees ripped, and one shirtsleeve dangled by a few threads. There was a hole in the tip of one sneaker, and her toe poked through, pale and dirty. She picked a leaf out of her hair.

Her head had stopped buzzing. Her insides were no longer on fire. It was as if a fever had broken. She felt clear-headed and more or less normal, but very, very weak, and cold. Her joints were stiff, almost numb. It hurt to move her fingers. She wanted to lie down and close her eyes—right now, the forest floor looked like the world’s softest bed—but she knew she couldn’t afford to waste time. If she didn’t feed soon, she would continue to weaken until she could no longer move.

Ashley turned in a slow circle, but the forest looked the same in every direction. She brushed the dirt from her clothes and began to walk. Within a few hours, she came to a narrow footpath, almost invisible amidst the dense, green foliage. The path led to a broad,

dirt road. She walked alongside the road, stumbling occasionally. As dawn approached, she heard the crunch of gravel under wheels and looked over her shoulder to see a tan car approaching. The words "FOREST PRESERVE POLICE" were stenciled onto the side in green. The headlights shone into her eyes. She blinked and squinted.

The car pulled up beside her and stopped. The driver's side window rolled down, and a man with a sandy brown mustache peered at her through small, round glasses. "Excuse me, ma'am. May I ask what you're doing alone out here so late?" His eyes swept over her dirty, torn clothes, and he raised his eyebrows. "Everything all right?"

"I was hiking. I got lost." She was surprised at how calm, how normal, her own voice sounded.

"That so?"

"Yes. I was wondering if you could help me." She stepped closer and stared into his eyes.

He blinked. "Well, I could give you a ride back to..." He trailed off. His eyes slid out of focus, and his jaw sagged. She leaned toward him, eyes fixed on his thick neck.

She slid her teeth into the pulsing artery. The man sat calmly, his face as blank and open as a newborn's, as she fed. Warmth and strength flowed through Ashley's body as his blood filled her stomach. She forced herself to pull back before he passed out, licked the punctures in his neck, and got into the car. "Take me to the edge of the nearest town, please."

His head turned slowly toward her, and he blinked. His brow furrowed. He touched his forehead and frowned. "I...well, sure. Okay." He rubbed his neck absently, then turned his eyes to the road.

She leaned back in the seat as they drove. The meal had helped, but not much. Her limbs felt like sandbags. She wanted to go home, take a long, hot bath, then fall asleep in her own bed. After that...well, she'd worry about that when she got back.

The cop dropped her off at a gas station next to an all-night diner. She cleaned up a little in the gas station bathroom, washed the dirt from her face and hands and scrubbed the worst of the filth from her hair. She reached into her pocket, fingers searching for her cell phone, but it was gone. It had probably fallen out during her night wanderings. God knew where it was now. She went to the pay phone outside, dug a few quarters from her pocket. She started to call Will's cell, then stopped.

After what Will had seen her do, would he even want to talk to her? Would he dare face her? Hell, she wouldn't want to talk to her, if she'd seen what he had.

Ashley took a deep breath. She should at least let him know she was alive. She dialed his number. It rang twice, then went to voicemail. His phone was off. Not surprising, considering the hour.

A recorded voice told her to leave a message after the tone.

"It's me." Her voice emerged hoarse and faint, as if she had a bad cold. "Just want to let you know I'm all right. Don't try to call my cell, I lost it in the woods. I'm calling from a pay phone right now. I'll get in touch later." She hung up. For a moment she stood, staring at the phone. She still didn't know how she was going to get back to her apartment.

She went into the gas station and walked to the front counter. "Excuse me," she said to the cashier, a young man with a shaved head and a goatee, "do you have a phone book here?"

Without a word, he handed a thick, tattered phone book to her. She looked up the number of a local taxi service and dug around in her pocket. Her wallet was still there. She had forty-one dollars in cash and her credit card.

She bought a package of cigarettes, called a cab and waited outside, arms wrapped around herself. Her breath plumed in the chilly night air. The gray light of dawn frosted the horizon. If the cab didn't arrive soon, she was going to have to face the sun, and she didn't feel strong enough to bear that right now. She felt small and cold and miserable. Her body ached like one big bruise. She felt every stinging scrape, every sore muscle.

She took the package of cigarettes from her pocket and lit one.

"Hey, baby." She heard approaching footsteps and glanced up, the cigarette dangling from one corner of her mouth. A pair of big men walked toward her. One had a buzz-cut, a stained, sleeveless white shirt and muscular arms covered in tattoos. The other was in a hooded sweatshirt, with a broad, flat face and pimples on his chin.

The tattooed man grinned. "What's wrong? Need someone to take you home?"

"We'll take you home," Hoodie said.

They sniggered.

Ashley removed the cigarette from her lips. "Get lost."

"Aw, don't be like that, baby."

"Yeah, we're trying to help you out. C'mon. Take a ride with us."

"I said go away."

The grin vanished. "That's not real friendly." Buzz-cut reached out.

At any other time, Ashley would have clouded their minds, planted suggestions until they left her alone. Right now, she was in no mood to waste time with Jedi mind trick shit. She grabbed the man's hand and bent the first two fingers back until they snapped.

"Holy shit!" He jerked his hand back. His eyes were round, his mouth open. "You fucking bitch!" He grabbed a switchblade from his pocket. She slammed the heel of her hand into his nose and heard it crunch. He squealed and dropped the switchblade. Tears ran from the corners of his eyes, and he pressed his hands to his face. She extinguished her cigarette on his forehead, twisting it, and he let out a choked gasp.

His companion backed away, eyes wide. The color drained from his face, and his pimples stood out like blood-spots on snow. "Fucking psycho!"

She dropped her cigarette. "Get lost."

They ran.

Ashley stared at the blood on her hand. She wanted to lick it off. She wiped it on her coat instead. It was already filthy. No one would notice another stain.

The cab arrived, and she got in.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

She gave him her address. After that, he didn't say a word to her. She was grateful for the silence. She sat, arms crossed tightly over her chest as she stared out the window.

She wondered what Will would think if he'd seen how she'd handled those two men. She knew Victor would have liked it. He would have had a good, hard laugh. It bothered her that she had done something Victor would approve of. Maybe, in the end, she and Victor weren't as different as she wanted to believe.

No, she thought. If a pair of humans ever crossed Victor like that, he wouldn't simply injure and frighten them. He'd see to it that they wound up dead. Or was she just trying to rationalize it to herself? Wasn't she, too, a killer by nature? Hadn't she proven

that back in the clearing?

The bleached light of dawn spread across the sky, devouring the night. The sun glared over the horizon and rose until golden blades of light sliced through the clouds. Ashley rubbed her dry, sore eyes.

The drive took over an hour, but at last, the cab pulled up in front of her apartment. She paid the driver, got out, and winced as the sun hit her. She pulled her coat over her head like a hood, walked up to her building, unlocked the door and went inside.

Chapter Eighteen

Ashley spent the next few days in her apartment with the curtains drawn. At night, she watched TV, soaked in the bathtub until the water got cold, or stayed in bed and stared at the ceiling for hours at a time. During the day, she slept curled into a ball beneath the covers, hugging a pillow against her chest. She left the apartment only once, to pick up some fresh blood from the hospital.

She didn't want to go outside. She couldn't face the world. She'd promised Will she would try to get in touch, but she found she was afraid to call him, afraid of what he would say.

Of course, she knew what he would say. He would tell her it was over, that they couldn't be together anymore. He had seen the darkest side of her. Nothing could ever be the same between them.

It was one a.m., and Ashley was stretched out on the couch watching some dreary late night talk show when she heard a knock at her door. She gave a start, turned off the TV, and lay still, holding her breath.

"Ashley? Are you home? It's Will. I need to talk to you."

Her heart leapt into her throat. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

"Let me in. Please."

She swallowed. Slowly, she stood, approached the door, and opened it. Will stood in the hall. It had been a few days since he'd shaved, and his face was scruffy with stubble. Though it had been less than a week since she'd last seen him, he looked even thinner and paler than she remembered, the circles beneath his eyes darker, more pronounced.

"Come in." She tried to sound as normal as possible, but her voice trembled slightly.

He stepped inside, and she closed the door. "You told me you'd get in touch. I waited and waited."

"I'm sorry. I wanted to, but..." She trailed off, unable to speak past the tightness in her throat.

He sighed. "It's okay. How did you get back home?"

"A forest ranger found me, drove me to the nearest town. I took a cab from there."

Pain tightened his face. "I didn't want to leave you there."

"If you hadn't, you probably wouldn't be alive right now, and I'd be a crazed animal well on my way to a nasty death. I don't think any vampire has ever come so close to going rogue and then come back again. I'm not even sure I've come back all the way. I don't know if I'm really myself anymore."

For a moment they stood, facing each other, not speaking.

He took a slow, deep breath. "I've been trying to come to terms with what happened back there."

She waited.

"I don't think I've ever been so scared as I was in that clearing. Seeing you like that..."

"Don't. I understand." She looked away. A hard, bitter lump filled her throat, but she would not cry. "After what you saw, I can't blame you. I guess this is goodbye."

He grabbed her arms. There was something wild and raw in his face. "What do you

mean? What goodbye?"

Her mouth fell open. "You...you aren't leaving?"

"Is that what you thought? That I'd come here to say goodbye?" He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, hard and fierce.

She felt his heart slamming against his ribs as his arms tightened around her, and she went limp against him, stunned.

Will broke the kiss, framed her face between his hands and stared into her eyes. "You're precious to me," he said, his voice rough. "Nothing will change that. What I saw scared the shit out of me, but it doesn't change how I feel."

Ashley stared back at him, dazed, as those words echoed in her heart. She'd been fully prepared for rejection; prepared to return to the loneliness and emptiness which she'd come to accept as normal. Surely, this couldn't be real; he couldn't be speaking those words. "But how can you ever feel safe around me after that? How will you ever be able to forget the sight of me crouched over him, *eating* him, like a wild animal?"

"I won't. I can't."

"Then how..."

"Love isn't safe. No one ever said it is. There's darkness inside all of us. But that doesn't make us monsters, it makes us human. You're a whole person. You have both darkness and light in you, and I don't love you any less because of the darkness. You wouldn't be yourself without it."

She took a deep breath. She was almost afraid to believe what she was hearing, afraid it would somehow turn out to be a trick. "You still want me? You'll stay with me?"

"You're the only one I want. After all we went through to be together, did you honestly think I'd just turn around and leave? Did you have so little faith in me?"

She buried herself against his chest and clung to him. Her tears dampened his shirt. "I've never been so happy to be wrong," she whispered. "But I'm ashamed. I should have known better."

He stroked her hair. "It's okay. I'm just happy you're safe. We can be together now. There's no one to stop us. Victor's gone now."

"I guess that idea is still sinking in. I should be happy, I know, but..." She looked away, remembering the terror in Victor's eyes, the sharp, sweet smell of his fear, the pleasure of licking up his blood. "I came so close to the edge. I killed him, and I enjoyed it. I never knew joy could be so ugly, but at the same time, it felt so good. I'm afraid to think about what might have happened if you hadn't pulled me back. I have you to thank for the fact that I'm still alive and sane."

"You would have pulled back on your own."

She shook her head. "No. When I saw you lying there, I thought you were dead. With you dead, there would have been nothing for me to come back for. What kept me from losing it was the thought that if I went rogue, I might hurt you...might lose you. You brought me back from the darkest place I've ever been. I can't even begin to describe what it was like, coming that close. You can't understand it unless you've been there."

A strange look slipped across his face, like a shadow. "I have."

"When?"

He took a deep breath and met her gaze. His mouth opened, closed, then opened again, as if he were struggling with how to say something. At last, he said it: "I killed my

father when I was fifteen.”

Her jaw dropped. She stared at him, unable to speak. At last, she forced out a single word: “Why?”

“He always blamed me for my mother’s suicide. She killed herself around the same time my powers started to emerge, and he got it into his head that I’d done it somehow. Compelled her to do it. He didn’t understand my powers, and they frightened him. Started calling me a demon...and as time went on, he became violent, as if he thought he could beat the demon out of me. Then one night, I was in bed and he came into my room and aimed a gun at my head. The look in his eyes...I was so sure he was going to pull the trigger. I panicked and killed him with my power. Gave him a stroke. I don’t know how I did it, and I’m not sure I could do it again if I needed to. But I’m sure it was my doing.”

“But that was self-defense. You did the only thing you could have done to save yourself.”

Will shook his head. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he stared into space, his gaze unfocused, his eyes dark with memory. “I could have hurt him without killing him.”

She touched his cheek lightly. “I doubt you had that much control over your power yet. Besides, it’s hard to think about all your options when someone’s aiming a gun at you.”

He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “You’re right. I know. But somehow, there’s a part of myself I can’t convince. I keep telling myself that it wasn’t intentional, I just panicked, but the truth is, I wanted to kill him. I hated him, hated how afraid he made me feel all the time. Maybe I was just waiting for an excuse.”

Ashley sat next to him and interlaced her fingers with his. “I don’t think that’s the case. You’re a kind person.”

“I wonder sometimes. But I know there’s no sense in dwelling on something that’s already happened. What’s done can’t be undone. I just wish...” He trailed off, staring into space. “I wish things had been different.”

She didn’t know what to say. There was nothing she could say to erase such an old, deep pain. All she could do was be close to him.

“That’s why I don’t feel comfortable carrying or using a gun,” he said. “I don’t trust myself. I’m afraid I might lose control again. And I know what it feels like to have a gun aimed at your head, to look down that dark barrel and know that your life could end in the next few seconds. I wouldn’t inflict that on anyone if I had a choice. I don’t want to become a monster, like my father.”

“I don’t think you’ll ever become a monster.”

He looked into her eyes. “I don’t think you’ll ever become one, either. You proved to yourself that you can feel that rage and come back.”

“Maybe. But, Will...I can’t ever be like a human woman. I’m not a part of your world. I tried to be, but...”

He gripped her shoulders. “I don’t want a human woman. I want you. That’s what I’ve been telling you all along.”

His arms enfolded her, pulling her close. The smell of cinnamon and wood-smoke wrapped around her, and she held him tight, pressing her face to his chest. He tilted her chin upward and kissed her, his mouth warm and firm, and for a moment, she forgot everything else. There was just the gentle pressure of his lips against hers, the scratch of his stubble, the clean taste of his mouth.

Her fingers slid into his hair, and she relished the soft, shaggy texture. Everything about him smelled and felt and tasted so damn good. So right.

When they finally broke the kiss, Ashley panted for breath and struggled to focus her mind. “Will, just because Victor’s gone doesn’t mean we’re safe. Other vampires will try to claim me, now that he’s dead. I’ll probably have to kill a few of them before they leave me alone. I don’t want to, but the threat of death is the only thing that can deter a vampire.”

“We’ll face them together.” He smiled. “We can do it. I know we can.”

“I want to believe that. But there’ll probably be other dangers to deal with, too. Danger follows me around.” A part of her wondered if she was crazy. This was more than she’d ever dared to hope for: someone who understood her and wanted her just as she was, yet who wouldn’t try to control her, as Victor had. Will was offering her that dream on a silver platter, and she was pushing him away.

She’d been alone for most of her life; she hadn’t known how to exist any other way. Now that she’d tasted the sweetness of love and friendship, returning to that emptiness would be ten times worse.

But if Will got hurt because of her...

“I need you to really think about this.” She gripped his arm. “Don’t just tell me it’ll all work out somehow. Think about what it will mean for you. You’ll never be able to have a normal life with me. I’m a hunter. I couldn’t give that up even if I wanted to; it’s too much a part of me. If you’re looking for the whole house in the suburbs, white picket fence thing, that’s not going to happen.”

He cradled her cheek with one hand. “I don’t need a picket fence.”

Her gaze focused on his mouth. She closed her eyes and drew in a shaky breath. *Focus.* “You’ll be in danger all the time. You...”

His lips grazed her ear, and her breath caught in her throat. “I’ve thought this through,” he whispered. “I know what I’m committing to. I know it won’t be easy. But nothing worth having ever is. I can do it. I can face all the monsters, anything the world can throw at me, if it’s for you.” He smoothed her hair back. “I’ll do whatever it takes to make this work.”

Her heartbeat quickened. Holding her breath, she opened her eyes and looked up at his smile—so warm, so tender. A part of her mind still insisted that this couldn’t be real, that after what he’d seen, he couldn’t possibly look at her with such love. She touched his cheek, and stubble prickled under her fingertips. No dream had ever felt this real. His features blurred as tears welled in her eyes. “Will...”

A warm, rough palm cupped her chin, and his thumb brushed her lower lip. “You don’t have to fight your demons alone. Not anymore.”

She smiled through her tears. “Same goes for you.”

“Then it’s agreed.” He kissed a tear from her cheek. “Live with me, Ashley.”

“I smoke.”

He smiled, and it was a wonderfully young, carefree smile. It lit up his tired, stubble-shadowed face like the sun shining through clouds.

“I can handle it.” He stood, wrapped her up in his arms, lifted her off her feet and kissed her until she was dizzy. She tangled her fingers in his thick hair and clung to him, drunk on his warmth, his taste. His heart pounded against his chest; pressed up against him, she could feel it, and her own heartbeat quickened to match its rhythm. “I love you,”

he whispered against her lips.

A tremor of joy ran through her. "I love you too."

He carried her into the bedroom, lowered her to the bed and kissed her again. Stubble tickled her chin as his lips moved against hers. He sucked her lower lip, then traced her mouth with the tip of his tongue, sending sweet shivers down her spine and making her toes curl. A little sigh rose from her throat as she slipped her arms around his neck and parted her lips. Muffled moans escaped her with each breath as the hot honey of his tongue filled her mouth and rubbed against hers. When they finally broke the kiss, Ashley was panting for breath, her lips tingling. "Will," she breathed. "Please..."

His gaze pinned hers, and the intensity in those eyes sent a rush of heat to her sex. With the tips of his fingers, he stroked her cheek, then her throat, lingering over her pulse. "What do you need?" His voice was a husky whisper.

"Your hands on me. Your mouth on my skin. Your body in mine. Everything."

Desire blazed in his storm-blue eyes. Still holding her gaze, he slid his hands beneath her shirt, over her breasts. His palms grazed her nipples, and they hardened to stiff points. He gently tugged her shirt off and lowered his head. His tongue traced a circle around one nipple. As his saliva cooled on her skin, it puckered and tightened.

"More," she whispered.

A hot, wet mouth engulfed the taut nub and sucked, and her fists clenched tight on the bed-sheets. His thumb slowly rubbed in circles around the other nipple. Her breasts ached with a sweet, heavy sense of fullness, and her nipples became almost unbearably tender under his touch.

She reached out, fingers trembling with anticipation as she unbuttoned his jeans and tugged them down.

He smiled. "You're eager."

"I need this."

"Just relax." Gently, slowly, he undid the buttons of her jeans. Those dark blue eyes remained on hers, holding her, as he removed her jeans, then his shirt. He trailed kisses down her throat, over her breasts. When he kissed her stomach, the muscles tightened, and a fluttering gasp escaped her.

She watched as he trailed more kisses down her thigh and along one leg, lingering over the sensitive spot just under her knee. Warm fingers encircled her ankle as he kissed his way back up her leg to the juncture between her thighs.

One finger traced the crease of her sex through her panties, giving her a thrilling jolt. Wetness seeped through the thin cotton. He slid one finger beneath the waistband and tugged them off, exposing her. Then he leaned down, and his lips brushed her sex. The tip of his tongue touched the moist slit between her labia, traced it from bottom to top, and slid into her folds. She pushed against his mouth, making small, hungry sounds deep in her throat.

With small, sure strokes, his tongue coaxed her clit out from under its hood. At the slight scrape of his teeth over that sensitive nub, she gasped. The pressure of those teeth was dangerous—thrilling—and she wondered if he felt the same way when her fangs grazed his neck.

His tongue plunged into her, and his lips rubbed against her folds as he licked and sucked. Panting, she pulled off his boxers, sat up and rolled atop him.

She kissed her way down his body until her mouth closed around the head of his

cock. She felt him tense and carefully retracted her fangs as she engulfed another inch of him, then another, her lips stretching around his shaft. He pulsed within her mouth as she sucked him, sliding her lips up and down his length, tasting bursts of salty heat on her tongue.

“Are you ready?” he whispered breathlessly.

She raised her head and licked her lips. “Yes.”

He retrieved a condom from the pocket of his jeans. She took it from him, unwrapped it and slipped it over his cock. Placing her hands on his chest, she lowered her hips to his, impaling herself on him. The walls of her body stretched open, and her breath hissed between her teeth. He groaned softly as he slid fully into her. His hands rested on the gentle inward curve of her waist, thumbs rubbing back and forth across her smooth skin.

Ashley rode him, grinding her clit against his stomach as she gazed down at him. The angle was different with her atop him, but it felt good. Pleasure spread through her middle, a warm, drugged glow, as his hips moved beneath her, pushing himself deeper into her body.

When he changed his angle slightly, his shaft struck a sensitive spot inside her, and her breath hitched in her throat. She needed more, and she knew that no matter how many times they did this, how often their bodies joined, she would never have enough of his scent, the heat of his hands on her, the delicious slide of skin against skin. Her hips rolled and rocked against him, and sweat trickled down her sides as the pleasure swelled inside her, and each thrust of his cock brought her closer to the edge.

They reached their climax at almost the same moment, her body clenching tight around him as he erupted into her. Ashley went limp atop his chest, panting, and his fingertips traced gentle patterns on her back. He remained buried inside her, his spent cock within her sweetly aching core.

His lips grazed her ear. “I won’t ever leave you,” he whispered. “I need you, Ashley.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she smiled. “I need you too, Will.”

Deep down, she’d still been bracing herself against the inevitable moment when all this became too much for him, when he would reject her, as Brian had. Now, for the first time, she allowed herself to believe that maybe he would stay, after all—that he could accept her completely, both her vampire and human aspects, her light and dark.

In the center of her chest, an ache eased, as if an old, deep wound had begun to heal.

The End

About the Author:

Amanda Steiger has lived in the Midwest her whole life, though she enjoys regular visits to other galaxies and dimensions in her mind. She enjoys cold weather, daydreaming, supernatural romance, and anime. She lives with her family and one very spoiled little dog. You can contact her at sekuiro@gmail.com

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