



**Soul Reaper Series Book III:  
Angelic Cravings  
Crymsyn Hart**

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**Part One:**  
**Nothing**

## Chapter One

*My name is Brenna.*

The aroma of clove and vanilla incense mingled with the scent from the lavender candles as people relaxed and chatted in the homey atmosphere. A man snoozed in the back hall while his cigarette burned down to its filter. Multicolored walls and a rainbow-painted male torso, a throwback to the old owner, greeted customers. Pictures of the employees lined the wall above my table, but my own portrait was conspicuously absent. Wooden-backed chairs with cow-patterned seats surrounded the thirteen or so tables, and like much in this place, they had been here for generations. They were part of the Boston Tearoom's long-standing decor, but I ignored them. Instead, I studied the hematite stones on the table. On each was carved a rune. I knew the generic meanings of the five, the book meanings, but their intuitive ones were beyond me.

My fist slammed into the table, causing everything on it to jump. Customers glanced over, wondering why I'd triggered such a ruckus, but I owned the place, so I could do whatever the fuck I wanted.

My dark hair fell into my face. When I moved it aside, I squeezed my eyes shut against a throbbing migraine. For the past few days, I'd been trying to reopen my chakras, the energy points on my body that allowed me to connect to the universe, but they were not responding. A blank, shiny rune reflected what awaited me.

*Nothing.*

*"Raven."*

*"What?" I growled.*

Peter hesitated. I immediately regretted snapping at him. He was the one person who had put up with me over the past year as I dealt with my grief. It was pure in its intensity, and Veronica's face

was stained behind my eyes. She lurked there every time I closed them, and I was reminded of holding her dying form in my arms.

A stray tear escaped, but I wiped it away, used to their presence now. I sighed and forced a smile while Peter held the phone. Underneath my molded exterior, I wanted to rip someone's throat out. The thought of warm, sticky blood on my face would be a change to playing human. A little random violence never hurt anyone. Well, maybe it did to the meat, but deep down I was truly being wicked.

"What's up?"

"Someone is requesting you for a party. It sounds like the same woman that's been asking for you. What would you like me to tell her?" A bit of Peter's German accent slipped in, and I knew he had been drinking.

My blood really boiled when I thought of the bitch on the other end. She had called eight times in the past two weeks wanting me to do readings at a party for her. She didn't take no for a fucking answer. I had stopped doing readings a year ago after I shut myself off from my guides. I wanted nothing to do with the public and everyone knew it. I had passed off all my clients to others, told some to get lost, but a few wouldn't take the hint.

"Give it here. Boston Tearoom, this is Raven, how can I help you, ma'am?"

Fredrick stifled a laugh at my plastic voice while I sliced my finger across my throat. At least Fredrick still had a sense of humor. If Xavier were here, he wouldn't have let me have the phone, knowing I would make some snide remark. Besides the fact he thought he ran the business. True, I didn't go to the Tearoom as often as I should, but I had a lot on my mind.

"Hello, Raven. Wow, I can't believe it's you. I've been trying to get you for weeks. They keep telling me you don't do parties anymore. But I'm sure you would for me." The woman sounded way too chipper for my taste. The image of a mound of lollipops—or an empty helium tank—came to mind.

"Ma'am—"

“Please, call me Bridgette.”

“Bridgette, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I don’t do readings anymore. I’m sure that everyone you’ve spoken to has told you that. Everyone on staff here is equally good. Lady Mae’s been reading for over thirty years. Peter has been doing it for fifteen. Fredryck—”

“No, no, no. I’m sorry, you misunderstood me. I’m not having a party.”

“Then what do you want me for?” I asked, hearing the elevator thump to a stop. Glancing up from the schedule, I saw Xavier walk in, unzipping his coat. The smell of fall clung to him; the weather was beginning to change. He glared at me, and I knew he wondered why I was on the phone. He had given strict instructions to the staff: I was not allowed to speak to the customers. Why would my psychics deny the owner when I signed their paychecks?

When I started coming back to the Tearoom after my lover’s demise, I had screamed at several of the patrons and nearly bit their heads off; all I saw was the rich crimson liquid coursing through their veins. But I’d gotten more control now, just a smidge. The urge to kill was always near the surface, but at least now I could fool humanity. My nature did not need me to kill those I fed off of. Lately though, I was realizing I was more akin to my kind than I cared to admit. I hadn’t taken a life yet, but the thought of it got me going.

Xavier was waiting for me to attack one of the customers. He avoided me at all costs, even at the house we shared. In the beginning, he accommodated me, thinking I was only acting out because of my grief. After several months, I wanted nothing to do with him or Miranda, our half-vampire housemate. I hardly ventured home because the house had belonged to Veronica.

Most of my time was spent with Zhen, an ancient undead who’d befriended me. She had helped me out with Miranda when she had been kidnapped. Of course, I never thought that I would call a vampire a friend, but who knew?

Zhen loved the idea of me giving in to my vampiric urges. I had denied the fact I was one of the undead before, but since my lover's death, I thrived on it. My nature might not demand that I kill my food, but the instinct was ingrained into my system. And I was learning that playing with meat was so much fun. Blood and death; nothing of the angelic was part of me anymore. I'd given up my ability to take souls, and by turning my back on that gift, I had also shut the door on Azrael, Death himself.

"Brenna."

My name brought me back to myself. My appetite was growing, a sure sign of needing to hit the buffet to quench my thirst after my shift.

"Yes." I paused. How did she know my name? No one here would have the gall to tell her. "What did you say?"

There was a giggle and muffled voices in the background. I was about ready to hang up on the bitch.

"Raven, that's your name right?"

I shook my head. I must be losing my mind if I was hearing things now. It was bad enough that I had trouble controlling my hunger. Yes, madness seemed to be my destiny.

"Yes. Now what was it you wanted?"

"Dear, dear sister. Grieving over our lost Master when you killed her. Wait until I get my hands on you, you fucking cunt."

*Sister?*

"Hey! Wait a minute!" But she hung up, leaving me open-mouthed and staring at the phone, wondering.

"What was that all about?" Xavier asked.

He had become the manager after Zach, who had been killed the year before. Xavier was a centuries-old werewolf who had been taken prisoner by his old Master, Julien, whom I had killed.

Julien had assumed that Miranda was his because his seed created the demon in her soul. It was a long, complicated story, but the gist was, Xavier had been in love with Miranda's great-great-whatever-grandmother and had interrupted Marie's transformation, but not before the vampire seed was born. Marie's

child possessed the undead blood that gave rise to Miranda. Of course, Julien had truly been searching for me and, by a wonderful coincidence, happened on Miranda. He wanted me because I was different from other vampires.

When one killed a couple of ancient undeads the way I had, news trickled through the vampire community. They really were more organized than I assumed. Zhen was teaching me the ins and outs of our society. They had more than just the urge to fuck and kill.

But, in order for Julien to get my power, he had to suck out my soul, and he almost had. Through my emerging abilities, I lashed out and took his soul instead, giving it to Azrael. Xavier helped save my life by going against his Master, whom he hated anyway. The werewolf wanted to prevent Julien from ever finding his progeny. It had almost worked.

Now, Xavier and Miranda lived with me. Both had been wonderful after Veronica died, but I didn't care about anything anymore except wanting to be with my lover. Even death had been denied me because Azrael wouldn't collect my soul. I had tried when Veronica first died and then, when Julien held my soul, the angel still wouldn't release me. I'd begged and pleaded, but nothing. He remained impassive as the grave until I'd given up. He didn't deliver cryptic messages anymore, rather, he tried to say kind words to soothe me. But how could I take comfort from the one who had taken her when all I wanted to do was rip him to shreds? Even thinking about it made my skin crawl. And to think, I'd thought I had feelings for the angel. How could I have emotions for the being that had stolen the one thing that mattered in my life?

"Raven, are you daft? Is there even anyone in there anymore?"

"Xavier, I heard you. Now what do you want?" I forced myself to put the phone in the cradle gently instead of hurling it across the room. This was our sixth new phone in the past year.

"I asked what the phone call was about. Does it take a firing squad to get an answer out of you, or are you just going feral? Has hanging out with that bitch vampire gone to your head? How

many times did you say that you weren't one of them? That you cared for those around you? If you cared so much, then you'd be home helping me with Miranda."

My fingers hardened into talons, and I pressed my nails into my palms so no one would see. It wasn't time for me to take my mask off and reveal my true self to the humans in the Tearoom. I figured that would come when I wanted to bury my face in their chests, gorging on their juicy hearts. The skin was beginning to dance on my back. My wings threatened to emerge. My teeth pressed against the tip of my tongue. Xavier saw this transformation and smirked.

I stormed past him to the metal balcony that overlooked the brick wall of a neighboring church. My salvation wasn't within the hallowed walls. The cold air calmed my nerves somewhat. My back stopped itching, and my fingers returned to normal. My teeth remained sharpened. None of the psychics could see me this way. I could wipe their memories if I chose, but where would the fun be in that? It was amusing to be the creature of their nightmares. None knew what I truly was, save Peter; he'd seen me at my worst when I almost killed him, but he held no ill will and kept my secret.

A hollow ache formed in the pit of my stomach and my big toe started going numb, signaling my rising hunger. I swallowed, thinking about the fresh taste of warm human blood sliding down my throat, tasting like new pennies and thick chocolate syrup. My body didn't require it, but the blood was exquisite, and it took my mind off of Veronica.

Zhen loved that I was glorifying in my vampiric side. She hated that I never considered myself one of her kind. I always thought I was different from the undead because I didn't have their bestial personality. My body didn't need me to kill my meals. But these past few months, I was beginning to reevaluate my situation. I had urges like the undead, and playing with humans was fun. Their minds were easy to break, and when their blood was laced with fear, it reminded me of cotton candy.



I had despised Devon and Julien for treating humans like meat, but I was beginning to see the appeal. I hadn't mentioned my thoughts yet to Zhen, but I had a feeling she'd approve. She hated that I associated with angels. Death and I were through. My only goal now was to contact Veronica on the other side.

She would never agree with how I was acting. She had hated Devon for what he did to her, forcing her to live a damned lifestyle when all she had wanted to do was treat mortals fairly. But the more I drank lately, the more I yearned to ravage and torture. Maybe Xavier was right and I was going feral. Maybe I was losing my mind. I'd probably already lost it. I'd abandoned all those I cared about and wanted nothing to do with the home or the business I owned. All I craved was blood, and nothing else was more important than satiating my rumbling belly.

## Chapter Two

*My name is Bridgette.*

I should have known my sister would know nothing about me. It would have been typical of our Master not to inform her of my existence. Veronica and I weren't on good terms to begin with. I had always assumed I would have time to reconcile with my Mistress. Then, I'd felt her die.

It was in Veronica's last moments that the bonds between us had been reopened. In the middle of feeding, I had been hit with a wrenching pain around my throat. I spit out blood, spraying it all over my victim and ruining my clothes. That was the biggest bitch of all because I had bought new Gucci shoes and they were destroyed. My prey had financed them, but what did I care? He was meat.

That had been one of my Mistress' complaints. She wanted me to be all lovey-dovey toward mortals. It was against our nature to care about the meat—we were supposed to rip them apart. I had no problems with what my Mistress did when she fed. We were two different monsters. She was my Mistress, so I would never go against her.

Of course, I never approved of my grandsire, Master Devon. He treated her like shit. I didn't agree with how he played with his food. Torture wasn't my style. I fucked and fed and that made me happy. I wasn't sadistic the way many of my kind were. Many thought that I was a meat-lover, but that was far from the truth.

I pitied my Mistress for not being in tune with her darker side. The conflict between the two was horrible. That was one reason I'd left. That and the fact she wouldn't come with me to escape Devon. I had wanted to kill him many times, but Mistress forbade it because her other half loved its Master.

Mistress was never harsh with me, even when I wanted to feed differently than her. She had hoped I'd be just like her, but even though we were formed from the same blood, we were different.

I loved my Mistress dearly, and even though we parted on bad terms, I was always connected to her on an unconscious level, no matter how much the ties between us were severed. It wasn't until later that I discovered Veronica had left Devon and met up with the slut who was my blood-sister.

There were a few times I thought I felt her near, and even though part of me wanted to seek her out, I was stubborn and refused. My other half grumbled about it, but she was my reflection. It was only when something really irritated her that we split into two separate personalities. Many others had names for their other halves, but mine never told me hers, and I never asked. We both knew where our loyalty lay, and since our Mistress had deserted us, the only code we followed was our own.

Many of the older vamps thought they could possess me, but I was too good for the likes of them. I wasn't going to be part of anyone's harem. Besides, I had my own to take care of. I might not have been ancient or think I was all high and mighty, but I had a brood of my own. And I'd teach them what it meant to kill one's Master.

## Chapter Three

*My name is Brenna.*

“Feeling sorry for yourself again, are we?”

I glanced up and saw the Angel of Death perched on the railing of the fire escape. He rocked back and forth, keeping perfect balance. Perhaps his wings held him in place, or maybe there was something on his feet that made him stick to the thin iron. I used to be able to see his wings, blacker than the night even in the dark, but now I couldn't even see their outline. His beauty used to captivate me. Easter lily pale skin and black eyes that held the universe. My heart used to stop at the sight of him, and he would be the only thing in my world. I should have been flattered to have a celestial being giving me personal attention, but none of that mattered anymore. It was just him looking down on me.

“Now what do you want?”

I felt a slight chill on my shoulder from the pressure of his touch running along the nape of my neck. His fingers twirled a strand of my hair for an instant, stroking my pulse point before I squirmed out of his reach. There was a time I'd thought I cared for the angel, but how I talked myself into that was beyond me.

My fingers changed to talons and I turned to face him, but he wasn't there.

*Do not think you can be rid of me so easily, Brenna. How many times have we danced this same dance? Deep down you do not wish to harm me. It is only grief that motivates you now. Stop your mourning and let your friends back into your life. That is all I wish to be to you. I am not your enemy. I was only doing my duty when I took Veronica. You know this.*

His presence was close, and even though I couldn't see him, his voice echoed in my mind. This was how it had been when I first met him. He would only speak to my thoughts and never with his voice. I used to love hearing his whispers, like wind moving through a belfry, caressing my heart.

"You took the only thing I loved. My only reason for living. And when I begged you to take me, you wouldn't release me from this hell. Why do I give a shit about you or the others? They don't care. All that matters is her. With or without your help, at least I'll be able to talk to her."

I felt a long pause in my mind. It seemed the angel was sighing.

*Brenna, you censure me when it is yourself who truly is to blame. Those you condemn have all wished to assist you, but you push them away. They can only take so much. If you do not let others around your wall of grief, then you will have nothing and be nothing. I am not here to hinder you. Only to help. I have tried to coax you through the pain. From my understanding, that is how mortals support one another when dealing with anguish. They see one another through hard times. I am only trying to do this with you. Why do you push me away when — ?*

I stared at the angel, who had reappeared sitting on the small stoop. For a moment, my heart heard him. "When what?" I whispered, grasping for some unnamable feeling that caught my breath.

The angel looked at me with dark, normal eyes. Usually they were filled with stars and planets. His power reached into my soul the longer he stared. I sensed the spark I'd felt when I thought he could tell me what I was, but then I saw his true self—not a beautiful angel, but a skeleton, and I knew that he was Death. My rage returned, and nothing mattered anymore except trying to contact Veronica.

The angel stood up. "Nothing," he muttered. His gaze was filled with sorrow, but before he could speak, Xavier stepped onto the balcony, passing through the angel who dissolved in a wisp of smoke.

The werewolf glared at me. His wolf lurked under the surface, yearning to come out and play, probably wanting to use me for a chew toy because it had once before. Xavier had the animal under control, which I had to give him credit for; he was merely a mongrel, after all. I understood why vampires kept them for pets

and why they were a sought after commodity in the undead community. Werewolves really were good watchdogs.

"What do you want now?" I said, staring past him and watching Mae walk off the elevator. She had been reading for years and had a huge following, so her appointments were always booked. She was also a witch who worshipped nature and took the concept of God as having both male and female counterparts. This was something passed down from her mother and so forth.

I believed there was something up there. It didn't matter to me what it was. Hell, if there were angels, then there had to be something called God, but what kind of a god would not let me be reunited with the one I loved? Was my punishment for being damned living an eternity in this hellhole? No, wait a minute, that wasn't God's punishment, but Azrael's.

I was amazed at how dedicated Mae was to the Tearoom. When I had been human, she'd been a guiding light in the sense that she had helped me deal with my unfolding psychic abilities. Now, whenever she saw me, she sneered. She didn't handle weakness well. She assumed my grief had shut down my ability to do readings, and she didn't feel sorry for me. I would open myself to the universe again soon, and Veronica would be there waiting.

I planned on taking several days off, taking my first official vacation in almost two years. There were days I spent my time with Zhen hunting and playing. Her staff at the Black Rose thought I was her lover. They knew I had an all-access pass to come and go as I pleased. This never went over well when the customers saw me waltz in, but who cared? They were only human.

"Brenna, do you even care about the Tearoom anymore? Do you know that we've lost almost a third of our clientele since you locked yourself away?"

"Xavier, it's not that I don't care. But there's nothing I can do. The universe and I aren't getting along these days. Besides, you seem to be doing a good job of running the place. So why don't you be a good dog and run along? Maybe there's a hydrant that needs to be pissed on somewhere."

"Damn it, Brenna. I'm not some fucking animal. Has it occurred to you that you're acting like the rest of them? You swore you'd never stoop to their level. Doesn't that matter to you after everything you went through with Miranda and Devon?"

"What do you know of it, wolfy? You weren't there when I killed Devon or when I lost Veronica. You're nothing more to me than a pet. If you're good, I might even throw you a bone."

"You fucking heartless, undead bitch. Does Miranda matter to you anymore? You can be shitty to me all you want, but at least have some compassion for her. Living with that thing inside of her is hard. I've been there for her when it rises and wants to slice and dice humans for dinner. I stayed with her all last night pinning her down so she wouldn't hurt herself. Merde, I thought you were different. But you're just another one of them. You think mortals are meat, and I'm nothing more than an overgrown puppy. Well, let me tell you something; I'll stay here at the Tearoom because I care about the people. I'll even stay at the house for now. After that, we'll see."

"Woof, woof. Whatever." I pushed past him and back into the Tearoom.

"Hey, Raven, how's the readin' comin'?" Mae asked. The sneer in her voice was evident even though it wasn't on her face. She was in her mid-fifties and had long, manicured nails. A golden pentacle dangled around her neck along with her numerous rings. One was an Egyptian scarab, another ring with the three faces of the Goddess, and a couple of diamonds she never left the house without. Her hair was gray and frosted blonde, and her glasses were from another decade, but she always had a regal air about her that was really starting to piss me off. Who cared if generations of witches lived in her bloodline? She was another mortal I could play with.

I glared at her and lashed out with my power, snaking into her mind and administering a little mental slap. Her eyes widened when she felt it and that was the point.

"So, Mae, has the witch hunter found you yet or are ya hiding behind your cauldron?" Her face dropped at the mention of the witch hunter. It was a sore subject. Six bodies had been found, all in some perverse position, within the past month. All the witches in Salem were cringing behind their pentacles and it was all hush-hush. No one wanted to be next. The police were keeping it silent, but Mae knew a couple of the victims.

"You shouldn't joke about it," she said, collapsing on the couch.

"Why not? It's fun." I giggled. The look of anguish and anger in her eyes gave me a spring in my step and a good feeling for the rest of my day. I sat down at my table and passed my hand over the runes. There was a tingling sensation in my palm. I smiled. My intuition was coming back.

*Damn everyone else. They're wrong. I'm going to talk to Veronica and they can all go to hell.*



## Chapter Four

*My name is Azrael.*

“Brother, why do you let this beast treat you with such disrespect? You have the power to move worlds, to set life in motion. Like the rest of your brethren, you are an archangel, the highest of angels.”

I glanced up at the stars that, once upon a time, had captivated humans when they were primitive and knew nothing about science. They blanketed the sky, filling the eternal universe that I knew every secret of. It stretched for thousands of eons and, even though much of me was on the beach staring at the black ocean, some of my form gathered souls across time and space. It was part of my essence, but there was much more to me than collecting souls.

Waves crashed on the beach, entrancing me. They hit the sand, leaving foam and seaweed designs behind. The power of the sea meeting the land used to hold my attention for hours before I knew my destiny.

I turned toward my brother and met his gaze. His eyes were embers in a fire, radiant crimson and orange. Steam rose where the water caressed my brother’s bare feet. He was dressed in a lava red suit and trench coat. His wings blazed against the white fall moon that hung in the horizon, making it appear on fire. Earth had only one, but there were other planets in other galaxies that had hundreds.

“Michael, it is not that simple. She grieves for one who was taken from her. She feels that it was done unjustly. She is not like the others. She is no demon. Brenna stirs—”

“She stirs what in you, brother?”

I stared out over the sea, wondering how the world would be if vampires had not been created. I was sure that other perverse creatures would have taken their place. Our First Fallen brother

would have used his ingenious imagination to create other atrocities to call his subjects.

“You feel for her. Human emotions are something forbidden us. We may sympathize with those we watch over, but we do not interfere. We do the tasks we are assigned and nothing more. You know this, Azrael. I can appreciate if you wish to observe her and try to comprehend how she feels, but this has been going on for far too long.”

I hung my head. My brother was right. We were not to intrude, but to do our assignments. Of all the angels, I felt for more of the mortals because I held their souls in my hands.

Michael touched my shoulder, his heat interacting with my cold, warming me slightly.

“Brother, she is only a beast. You know how we deal with them. Besides, your involvement with her is taking you away from your duties. She is nothing compared to you, a miniscule molecule that will fade away in the blink of time. Remember what she is—a being created from the spawn of the First Fallen. Whatever it is you think you might feel, you do not. She does not rule you. There is only one choice—cut your ties with her. Go back to your duty; heed the calling of the universe. Do something before another intercedes and makes the decision for you.”

The pleas of souls needing to be harvested wailed in my ears. My brother was right. Brenna was not my main concern—gathering the dead was. She had shut me out, spurned my heart when it had started to beat again, allowing me to remember what it was to feel. It had been so long, but I could easily forget again. I was an archangel and nothing else mattered except my vocation, a being to do its duty with the greatest love being that of my Creator.

## Chapter Five

*My name is Brenna.*

I pulled the cloak closer to my face as I walked quickly to the Black Rose. The sun had set and the moon was rising large and full, but I still felt the irritation of the sun on my flesh. I desperately wanted to run my nails over my skin and tear it off until the sensation went away, but that would only happen when the sun burned out. My tolerance was almost nil now, and I could barely spend an hour in it before I started to burn. Before Veronica's death, I had basked in its rays. It was one of the special talents I had abandoned. Everything I had given up didn't matter because tomorrow night I would talk to her once more. Tonight was the night she had died and tomorrow would be the year and a day it took her spirit to cross the void.

I walked to the back of the club where the door was kept unlocked. I opened it and walked in. The bouncer, who was a human vampire junkie, looked up and nodded when I passed. I didn't bother to acknowledge him. His name was Kyle. He had short, curly, red hair and paraded off his scars. The idea made me cringe. I enjoyed playing with my food, but his kind never whetted my appetite. Junkies had a tin flavor in their blood that left it watery to my palette. He was Zhen's property. Her brood was big enough to fill a small town.

I walked past the coat check and through a wall at the end of the hall. It was an illusion, but not one that just anyone could move through. Zhen was one of the only vampires who could do such a thing.

I had killed Malachi. At least, I was given the credit for the kill when it was really his werewolf who had slain him. After I had defeated him, I had control of his brood. I had wanted nothing to do with the lot, and when they found out, they turned on one another. His illusions had been perfect; he had created a whole

mansion, but Zhen only did it for comfort. Zhen allowed a select few through, and I happened to have exclusive access. I'd been invited last year. It was a safe haven I had spent many a day in.

As I reached the inner sanctum, I plunked down on one of the overstuffed chairs. Three of the walls were painted black and twinkled with distant stars. A golden dragon undulated along them; his scales and wings sparkled against the makeshift night. In the corner was a small fridge filled with bottles of clear liquid that resembled water, but it was distilled blood that someone made into a purer form. It was kept cold, but was still warm when it went down and had all the nutrients of mortal blood. It wasn't supposed to be the main meal; it was more to stave off hunger for a while.

By this time tomorrow night, I would talk to my lost love. It would be wonderful.

The fourth wall was blood red, and it, too, was an illusion. On the other side was a torture chamber. She had an iron maiden, whips, chains, a makeshift rack, and a wardrobe where she kept extra clothes that I borrowed. I had some fun with Zhen in that chamber with my own meals while she watched.

Zhen had showed me some interesting techniques the past few months that were wonderful to help prolong their pleasure and raise the taste of the fear in their blood. It was not something I did often. I was still getting comfortable with the idea of tormenting the food, but it made them taste so good. For now, I grabbed a bottle and sipped, thinking about the first time I'd met Veronica.

I had been living in New Orleans for several years doing psychic work. I had a good business; hotels and certain shops recommended me, and in my spare time, I lived the life I had always wanted. I was a vampire stalking the night, living the high life of a Goth, but I was only human, falling under the spell of my own fantasy. One night, I was hunting and the vampire literally ran into me. I was so pissed that I went after her. Using my psychic abilities, I had discovered that she was running away from someone and my heart cried out. I was hooked.

Veronica and I were infatuated with one another. We each wanted to be what the other was—her, human and me, a vampire. We were perfect together. Then I found out she was real. My fantasy shattered in that one moment. My thoughts of ghosts being the only supernatural life form in the universe flew away, and I became entangled in her world, becoming everything I had dreamed about.

Veronica had to be convinced by Edmund, the ghost of my dead boss, before she turned me. I owed her my life, and she had given hers to save me. All I wanted was to communicate with her spirit. I was tired of seeing her ash frozen form locked behind my eyes. I yearned to see her flesh, to feel her light touch, even if she was a ghost. It would mean she wasn't completely gone from my life.

I swallowed another sip of blood, feeling the moon rising higher. The night was growing fuller, and the club above was coming to life. Haunting melodies filtered down, enticing humans to dance. In another room, the DJ spun industrial sounds from his play list. Even the noise of the bartenders restocking alcohol came to me. I smiled. This was going to be a busy night.

It was one of the Friday nights that the club was open to the public and vampire kind. Tonight was considered Hell Night. A feast of fruit and bread was laid out in the receiving room where vendors from all across the BDSM and Goth world sold clothes, pictures, whips, lotions, anything they could. A show was even put on toward the middle of the night to entertain the guests. On these nights, the place was packed with all kinds of freaks from human and non-human society. Most of Zhen's brood showed up. But the major law was that no killing or harming humans happened when the club was open to both species. It was either play by the rules or suffer the wrath of the owner.

Most scoffed at the thought when they saw her, and some of the older vampires laughed until she showed her true power, which was something I had felt firsthand.

Zhen was over five thousand years old and one of the most ancient vampires still existing, but to look at her, one would never know. She was from the northern part of Asia, about five feet tall with dark eyes, a three-inch blue mohawk, and always dressed in some type of leather and spiked heels. She wasn't intimidating until she set her mind on you and then peeled you like an orange and left nothing unless she wanted to. She was one of the few vampires that could get into my mind, and my mental shields were strong. Unless I was having my soul sucked out of me, but that was a different story.

Nowadays, we were friends, so I didn't bother keeping anything from her because she would read it anyway. She didn't say anything until I mentioned it first unless she was in a bad mood or she forgot, which happened a lot.

"Brooding again, are we?"

I finished the last of my blood and threw the empty bottle into an almost invisible basket that was black against the paint. I hated that she could startle me, but I figured when I got that old, I could do whatever the fuck I wanted, too. Tonight, she wore a blue, two-piece rubber suit. Both pieces were skintight, and six-inch lace up ankle boots adorned her feet. I was always lucky if I could get by on the three-inch kind. A hint of blue eye shadow accentuated her eyes.

"No, I'm not brooding. I was thinking. Good things are happening."

Zhen crossed her arms over her chest and eyed me. She had heard all of my bitching over the past year and was a little skeptical about me having good news. "So?"

"Well, I started to read my runes, and then Azrael showed up and went on with his same spiel. Then Xavier went off on me and Mae started too—"

"And this is all good?"

"No, silly. After all this, I went back to reading runes, and I felt something. It's coming back to me. I know it. I'll be able to talk to

Veronica again. I'll be able to see her. It will be wonderful. I'll have a life again."

Zhen looked at me and smiled. "Hon, if you think that, then wonderful. Just keep in mind it could have been your imagination. Don't humans have sensations if they lose their limbs or something? The brain can trick you into thinking that it's itching. Maybe that's what is happening with your intuition."

"No, I'm sure it's coming back. Now hush and don't spoil my good mood. Besides, it has to turn back on. It has to. I didn't lose my powers because I haven't used them in a year."

"I'm not the one who said it."

"Will you shut up?"

"Hey, I'm trying to be the voice of reason. That's all. Your news is wonderful. I'm happy for you, if it's true. I just want you to be open to all possibilities."

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all before. So, how was your day?"

"Not much better than yours, I would say."

"What happened?"

Zhen shook her head and looked down at her chest and, when she looked up, I noticed a tear running down her cheek, staining it red. She wiped it away with ease, and for the first time, I heard her draw in a breath. When her lungs inflated, they sounded like crackling leaves. I went over and gave her a hug, but she was like cold marble and wouldn't budge.

"One of my friends was killed today. It's funny to say that. I mean, I've watched people die for so long, but he and I were close. Probably because I've known him since he was a little boy."

"Who was he?"

"I killed his mother and didn't realize she had an infant until I heard it crying. Something in my heart felt for the child, so I took him and gave him to a couple I knew. They were donors and I told them that, if they raised him, I would one day reward their service with eternal life. So, they did and I turned them both. He knew about his parents and me, but we were always close. I spoiled him

rotten whenever I saw him. I always thought he would come to me to ask me to turn him. I guess that will never happen now."

"How did he die? Did one of us—"

"No, if they did, I would already have their head on a platter. It was that witch killer the police are looking for. Apparently, he got tired of Salem and decided to try his hand in the big city. Humans are so fucking stupid."

"Are you trying to find the killer?"

She growled, and I saw her beast underneath snarling at me. Her power over shape-shifting was amazing. She had control over her body at the cellular level, so for a split second, her face folded away.

It was fascinating to watch. Her skin liquefied, showing muscle, tissue, and bone. It shifted to her demonic face and then back to humanity again. It was also a little scary to think she could do it so fast. Being vampires, we had our beast side, a hellhound form, and also, we could change our appearance. Devon once morphed into a beef cake—blond with green eyes to make me fall in love with him, when he was actually slightly built, average height with dark hair. There was nothing spectacular about him in his normal guise. Besides, Devon treated Veronica like shit and me like I was his property. Well, he'd learned quickly and I was free of him for good. Now, his head was fish food. Maybe some sea monsters were playing underwater soccer with it. Who knew?

"Zhen, I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I have my brood looking for him. I wouldn't dream of asking you anyway because you're so wrapped up in your own problems."

I was a little taken aback by what she said, but I brushed it off. She was grieving. I understood how she felt. This entire year, a shroud had hung over me. The death of her friend had me a little worried. It was hard on her, and I had never seen the ancient vampire cry. "You know, if there is anything I can do..."

She waved me off, wiped the tears away, and smiled. The music thumped upstairs, shaking the ceiling, and I heard the voices



of those already lining up to check their coats. I sensed the arrival of the other vampires starting to fill the club. We had a particular scent that was a mixture of old garbage and shit; one got used to it after a while, and it seemed we were the only ones who smelled it.

"So, are you going to come upstairs with me and dance? It'll help take your mind off Veronica and you can keep me company."

I glanced down at my jeans and tank top. I hadn't showered in a day or so and my hair was a mess. "Wearing this? I wasn't planning on it. Besides, I don't think you need a date. All your children will be salivating just to hang off your arm."

"Oh, come on, you can borrow my things. You know where the closet is, and if you're beside me, it'll keep off the humans and my children. I really don't want to be bothered tonight. Do you know how tired I get of hearing 'Yes, Mistress' all the time? I want to socialize. Come on, for me? We can say you're my girlfriend. Shit, half of the staff and my brood think you are already."

Her hand slid over my tits and, before I realized it, her nails had cut the straps to my tank top. The exposed air turned my nipples into pebbles against her palms. She turned them quick enough to get me to moan from the exquisite pain. Her fingers slid over my stomach. She tore off the rest of my shirt and I felt her undoing my jeans. Her eyes never left mine.

I stared at her, letting her know that I was not going to flinch or let her have total control over me; most vampires looked down from their elders because it was protocol. Only those who were either too cocky or felt they were equals locked gazes with older and more powerful vampires. I was a little of both.

My pants dropped and her hands wrapped around my face and brought my lips to hers. Her tongue parted them and brushed over my fangs. I let her explore, keeping my eyes open. One hand found my clit and began manipulating it while her fingers pushed into my pussy.

I grabbed the back of her head and pushed her into me, feeling the rubber against my bare skin. She was bringing me to orgasm, and I let everything I was feeling overwhelm me and take over. My

fingers turned to talons and caressed the side of her face. My yearning for her rose up, my desire to be fucked. With her, I could give in.

I clamped down on her tongue and dug under her outfit to get at her small breasts. They were enough for a handful but nothing else. I mashed into them and, without thinking, let go of her face and pushed her neck to the side. Her hands had grown into bone hard talons that she shoved deep inside me. It felt good as blood seeped from the cuts between my legs. Once she wounded me, I was already healing.

My lips found her throat, and I tore into it while I bucked against her. She rode the wave with me, her mind wrapped around mine while she brought me to height after height. Pain mixed with pleasure, and I drank in her ancient blood.

It was bubbling hot, tasting of cinnamon and spice with a hint of something colder and earthy underneath it all. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that tang. I had tasted it before and it wasn't from her. It was from someone else. So cold that it almost burned, but I couldn't place it. Her mind took over my brain and my body, fucking me while she let me drink. We went on this way forever it seemed, an endless time, before she pulled her mind away and took her hands out of me.

My eyes were closed against all the sensations wracking my body. I wanted more and didn't know if I would ever be sated. I finally came down from the high, feeling quenched from her blood and the sex. She was smiling. I knew I was flushed and panting.

She licked her fingers clean of my juices and blood. This was the first time I had ever let her fuck me, and I wanted more of it. I realized I needed it. We were friends and nothing else would come of it, but God, she was good.

"Change your mind?"

I smiled, knowing she had done that to influence me, but hell, she could manipulate me anytime she wanted. I glanced down at my clothes and shook my head. There was no way I could go upstairs naked.

"You're such a bitch."

"I know."

I shook my head, walked through the illusionary wall and went to the clothes cabinet. I began rifling through it. Zhen came through holding a red velvet dress over one arm and a black satin corset in the other.

"How about these?"

I took the clothes she held out and knew that there was no way she had them in the other room, especially in my size. "Where did you get those? Wait, I don't want to know."

I put the clothes on, wondering where she'd gotten the garments unless she had conjured them out of thin air and, knowing her, I wouldn't put it past her. At least they fit. The corset was a size smaller than what I was used to, but I didn't need to breathe. "Any shoes?"

Zhen pulled out a pair of knee-high Doc Martens from the wardrobe. They had been there since I had left them here over a month ago.

"Come on."

My skin was pale enough for mortals to think I had makeup on. I left my fangs out and my eyes had silver flecks in them, so it appeared I had contacts in. To any untrained eye, I was playing vampire like I had years earlier.

We ventured upstairs. A long line was already forming down the stairs. A few regulars chatted amongst themselves or remained stoic because they thought themselves better than anyone else. The vampires were easy to pick out. They were almost too perfect in their body movements, their breathing too calculated because they tried to pass for mortal. They all looked at me as I walked by holding Zhen's hand. The envy coming off of them made me giddy. I drank it all in. They all wanted to be on the arm of the Mistress. Aside from those I looked at, they all took one glance and then cast their eyes down. Power was fun.

During the night, I stayed mostly silent and laughed at the appropriate times. I played the part of the excellent girlfriend—

dancing, groping, kissing, and I had a blast. All my drinks were on the house and Zhen fed me grapes and strawberries. The vendors at the Rose were selling chain mail and jewelry. Zhen told me to pick out anything I wanted. She tried to spoil me, but she was caught up in the act too, trying to forget about her friend.

About a half an hour before the club closed, I snuck away and grabbed my cloak from downstairs. The coat check eyed me with envy. I winked and blew kisses at him and ran into a Goth chick with red hair and purple eyes. She spun around and growled. I realized she was a vampire; I hadn't been paying attention before. I mumbled my apologies and sought Zhen upstairs.

There, I begged my leave and told her I would be back in a few days. She wished me luck with Veronica, and I just smiled. I didn't need luck. Everything was going to go my way. The night engulfed me. I felt my intuition growing, my connection with the universe was returning, and by this time tomorrow, all would be right in the world.

## Chapter Six

*My name is Michael.*

I observed her in the mirror of space as she indulged in her demonic lusts. I tried to understand why my brother was infatuated with the beast. She was nothing more than a bitch in heat and, like the others of her kind, she should be put down. My cleansing fire could burn the infection from her soul and return her to the wonderful grace of the Creator.

He was the one who breathed life into the universe and gave us all existence. We were His first children, the archangels, destined to do His will and watch over the worlds. We were exalted before the demons rose and mixed their blood with the souls of humans, creating the things that now roamed space. But that was the cause of our First Fallen, of Maestema, Lucifer to the mortals. In spirit, he was our brother still, but no longer held the grace of being favored, choosing to go against the duties assigned to him. Proclaiming himself ruler over the universe, he created children to suit his whims.

Now, the beasts were infiltrating our hearts, causing us to Fall. We were made to love only one Being, and Azrael was torn. This could not be. He had been raised above his kind to join our brethren. He had been given form to bring souls back to Him. Now he was threatened from the inferior world he loved more than he loved us.

Watching Azrael's infatuation, I knew if he did not cut her off, then she would be the first to feel my fiery touch. If it were my will, all those tainted would be obliterated. But my decision was not law and I only followed His creed. Maybe—

## Chapter Seven

*My name is Bridgette.*

It was pitiful watching my bitch of a sister hanging on the arm of the Ancient One. If she knew how pathetic she looked, she would have died, but then again, I wanted her to die. But now was not the time. For now, I watched.

How could my Mistress even think of creating her, nothing more than a partially insane vampire? Even I detected the stench seeping from her pores. If she only knew what the society would do to her if the Ancient didn't protect her. They would tear her limb from limb. My kind couldn't tolerate such freaks. They wouldn't be privileged to dine on her blood. Its impurities would taint those who did. It put a bad taste in my mouth.

She was wretched and would soon understand the wrath of those that were her kin.

If only my Mistress could see where her adored child had fallen, but no, our mother was dead. All because of my sister. The thought of her made me want to tear her eyes out, yank her wings off, and leave her lying about like a helpless fly. I flexed my fingers into tightened talons. Here was not the place to show my anger. The Ancient would bid me to leave and never return if I endangered any humans in her club. I had to keep the façade for my children's sakes and my own. They were the ones who depended on me now.

I swallowed my rage and thought of my bloodline. Devon might have been an asshole, but his sire had been well respected. There were many who knew Malachi's name and revered his line. The bitch had slain him, or took the credit for it. I'd felt it when the ancient died. When one so old was extinguished, it was a great loss to us. To think that my sister had done it, knowing nothing about her heritage, taking no pride in it, ignited my hatred. Thoughts of her begging at my feet while I plucked her eyes out and ripped her

tongue out while she begged me to stop got me going. Her blood on my talons would make me happy.

I shook my head. This was not the time or the place.

"Mistress."

I glanced up into the deep blue eyes of one of my children, Shantrell. She was only a few months old and was still adjusting to her new life among the undead, but she loved it, relishing in what her body could do. She was the fourth addition to my growing brood. My eldest was fifty years old, came to be with the family for months on end and then would leave. I would not hold him back. I'd turned him on a whim of loneliness. He filled many of my nights and made me forget about my beloved Veronica.

Shantrell had been dying of AIDS. She'd only had months to live. Waif thin, her hair had been mostly gone, and liver spots covered her body. I offered her eternal life and restored her to her former model-like beauty. She was forever grateful and had a soft heart, but not soft enough to love the humans she fed off of. I was thankful she was not a meat-lover.

"Are you all right? The others are worried," she whispered, keeping her eyes cast on the ash-covered floor.

I glanced back at the couch where the rest of my children watched the activity of the club. Mostly they were in awe of the place. I had never taken them to a vampire/human bar. They had never seen so many others undeads in one place, let alone the Ancient One. I smiled. There was much for them to learn, but I was putting them in jeopardy by staying. They would be disappointed to leave, but if I lost my temper, I could end up dead.

"No, seeing the one who killed your grandsire has reminded me of why I'm here. It's not for me to take my revenge on her without having the Ancient One pass judgment on her first, as it is our law."

"But they are lovers, Mistress?"

I gazed at Brenna and the Elder dancing together, their hands locked around one another, their tongues probing in a kiss. It brought back images of my Mistress and me. "Yes, child. That will

be a problem. But the Ancient will hear me. Now is not the time to bring my case before her. Get the others. I'll get my coat."

Shantrell met my eyes once, nodded, and headed toward her brother and sisters. From her demeanor, I knew she would be with me for years beyond, which she didn't need to be. She was going to be loyal until the end, a good, faithful child. I smiled at the thought and slipped downstairs. While I waited in line, my hunger crept into my veins, burning its way along my limbs. It was a welcome thing, fueling my rage. There were so many scrumptious morsels I could sink my teeth into. The coat check boy looked tasty, but from here, I sensed he was property of another, probably the Elder. Her scent hung about him.

*Damn, I bet he'd be good. Oh well, there are plenty of other humans in Cambridge. The city is just coming alive.*

I got my coat. My children waited patiently outside. Their minds gently touched mine to discover where I was and say they were waiting. None of them dared enter my thoughts, not without my permission. The thought of my children made me happy, and I was halfway up the stairs when I realized my bitch sister had run into me and didn't even know who I was.

Typical. Fucking typical.



**Part Two:**  
**Salvation Lost**

## Chapter Eight

*My name is Brenna.*

With the stars twinkling and the river running next to me, I stared out into the night. This was a place I had discovered when I had been a teenager. It was peaceful away from the city, letting me focus on one thing. Veronica.

My tryst with Zhen last night had been just that. There was nothing between us except an attraction. She had wanted me from the first time she saw me, when she thought I was a lost lamb, the night I'd gone to her club looking for information. She was my friend and nothing more.

I laughed when I thought about her. I had needed the release more than I thought, but that was only physical. My arms ached for my true love. My heart whispered to her even though she was in a different realm. Now that a year had passed, I hoped my powers would pierce the abyss so I could feel her presence once again.

I closed my eyes. The crickets chirped and the toads sang along in the twilight. Passing cars on the nearby bridge added to the cacophony of sounds. I wanted to shut all of them out and listen for Veronica, but it seemed that even the beaver a half-mile up river decided to start chewing on some wood to refurbish its home.

I sighed. I could never block out all the noise of the evening even if I wanted to. They were part of the night, and the darkness' caress was what I lived for now that she was gone.

I drew in a breath and unlocked the doors I had bolted for the past year and hoped what I had felt in my hands had been true. I flung open all the doors to my chakras, the energy points on my body. My aura expanded, and the intersections of dimensions pressed down around me. Closing my eyes, I saw a black background in front of me. The power of the shadows played over me while my chakras drew in energy from the environment. I realized what I'd been missing by keeping them closed. I had

longed for the excitement of worlds closing in on me, as if I were walking in a light mist, getting ready to cross through a spider web veil into another realm.

Gathering my energy, I pulled it up from my toes and carried it through the conduit along my spinal cord so it hit all of my points. When it reached my head, I let it go in one long call, hoping it would penetrate the dimensions of heaven and the astral plane to reach my lover. Patiently I waited, listening with every fiber of my being, but absence was all I felt. There was nothing except a cold void. I took another breath and shook it off.

My intuition was still with me. My abilities sputtered and died since I hadn't used them in so long. It would be okay. I reached out again, but this time, I was not looking to reach Veronica, but my guides, the beings who gave me hints on what would happen, whether it was pictures in my mind, feelings, or the ever-annoying itching on the back of my brain. Searching the black expanse, it was devoid of life, even on the higher levels of the astral plane.

*You should be there. You're always there. Why aren't you there?*

I put everything I was into listening, blocking out the natural sounds, listening for the unnatural. Collecting my energy, I let it out, and all I did was hit my head on the ceiling.

I got the hint. I slumped down on the concrete with my legs dangling over the side. The water rippled and rolled over the manmade dam. A basketball was caught in the current, spinning in white foam where the two different waters came together. It was ridiculous, but I identified with the ball. That was me—trapped, not knowing how to get out of the grave I had managed to dig.

Sorrow overwhelmed me. I should have been able to speak with Veronica. My powers hadn't left me when I became undead. Why had they deserted me now? It was because of my strange abilities and by coincidence that I kept them. It was what made the other undeads come after me. I was unique among my kind. Now all of it was gone. I had assumed I could reopen the door to my dormant psychic abilities and make some kind of contact with the other realm and know she was all right.

Tears blurred with the spray falling on my cheeks. Everything I ever was had been lost. I thought about the past year, about how I had given into everything I hated about vampires. Grief overwhelmed me, and I saw my lover's face melting into ash once again. I used to tell Veronica that I was nothing like her. We used to fight about it because I hated thinking I was undead. Her beast didn't understand why I loathed those who tortured humans. I thought it was demeaning. Now I had become everything I despised. I guess insanity had truly gotten to me.

I had expected so much. I'd thought I was better than everyone else. I assumed I could close the world off and still have it at my fingertips, but I had done something worse. Something I didn't think I could forgive myself for. All those who I had loved, I had pushed away, even Veronica. In my own selfishness, I had turned into everything I reviled.

"What did you expect?" a voice said next to me.

I didn't bother to look over. It was Azrael. I tried ignoring his cold presence, although the weight of it pressed down on me. What could I say to him? There was nothing to say. He was still who he was, and I was fucked by my own ignorance.

Silence stood between us for a long time. We both gazed into the river. His aura was too much. He was the cause of this. He tried to put his arm around my shoulders, but once I felt his aura charge against mine, I shrugged him off and sprang out of the way. I had to get away. Why wouldn't he leave me alone?

I walked down the path, marveling at the manmade canal that still stood beside the river. Fish flipped to the surface to eat the bugs that settled on the still water. I stared at the murky depths, waiting for Azrael to leave the way he normally did after he realized that I didn't want to speak with him. It was bad enough I'd hit rock bottom. I didn't need him to remind me that he had taken Veronica from me. The only thing I wanted was peace, but I couldn't have it since Azrael doomed me to walk the earth forever. Tonight, I wanted to be left alone so I could try and put the shambles of my life back together. I should have listened to

Edmund. When I floated in the astral space after getting my soul sucked out, his spirit had warned me not to put up walls, but I didn't listen to his mysterious messages. It dawned on me now what he meant.

The atmosphere condensed around me, signaling the angel's departure. The water went still, frozen in a perpetual moment in time. I waited until the air thinned and the water moved again, then looked back to where he stood and found him still there. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his black trench coat hid a black suit. Midnight hair hung down around his shoulders, unfettered, enhancing his pale skin, which was whiter and more transparent than mine. His eyes glistened in anger with stars going supernova and planets colliding against one another. His nails were points against his leather trench coat, and his mouth was set in a grim line. I stared at him, realizing that I hadn't taken in how beautiful he truly was. How else could you describe an angel? Humanity's words never did him any justice. He was holy, like churches, cemeteries, or ancient shrines. Everything about him demanded respect, but to me, he was just a being that had caused me mind-numbing pain.

Staring at him, I remembered how I'd thought I had feelings for him. Everything was so confusing, and he had been there for me almost every day, even if it was for only a few moments. This celestial creature had taken time away from his duties to make time for me. He had cared, something I thought an angel couldn't do.

*God, what have I done?*

"I am tired of being ignored, Brenna. If you do not wish my company, then bid me leave. Do not let your sorrow keep dictating your actions. You cannot blame me for taking Veronica when it was my duty. I have put up with your tantrums, hoping you would come to your senses. And, like everyone else, I have grown tired. Veronica is dead, and there are other things to live for. What of Miranda? She struggles with her beast and you do nothing. You are not the only one who lost someone you loved. She lost her companion, Gina. Now you think after a year of disregarding what

you are, after shutting off everything, you can switch it on again and everything will be repaired. You have become what you abhorred. I have tried to be your friend. I am exhausted. You push me to limits I have not stepped upon in millennia. I tried to make you understand that I was your ally."

I stepped forward, not sure of what to say. Everything he said was true. I'd told clients to accept death and not dwell on it, not to lock out friends and loved ones who tried to ease their pain. That was what I'd done. It was different when it happened to you, and I couldn't get past it. I had hoped that tonight when I made contact, I could reclaim my life. Just to know that Veronica was there, to have her presence in my reach, would have helped. That hadn't happened, and now I didn't know what to do, where to start to put my life back together. If only I could turn back the clock and give myself a kick in the ass. That would jar my reality.

I looked at Azrael, frozen in my own feelings, drowning in everything I'd done and become. I was desperate. He was the only being who could carry a message across the River Styx and let Veronica know how much I missed her.

"Help me, Azrael."

He stared at me, his power boring into my mind. The weight of his gaze overwhelmed me, and I was on my knees before him. I couldn't even look up because of the power he had over me. This was it. In that instant, his feelings consumed me, and I understood how I'd hurt him and the others I cared about.

"Brenna, I cannot help you. Maybe before your heart became so twisted from your sorrow. Before it drove you insane. But now, you are nothing to me. Eternity can be a cold place when there is no one to lend a warm fire when it is needed. Remember how many times you turned me away and live with that forever."

With that, the weight on my mind dissolved, and the atmosphere returned to normal. I collapsed on the ground, crying. The pain of Veronica's death swallowed me whole, and for a moment, I held her dying form in my arms again, watching the life leave her eyes and feeling her soul glide through my mind. As she

slipped away, so did all my hopes of ever being able to reclaim what I had lost.

I felt the loneliness of my situation. I got up and wiped the tears from my cheeks, noticing they were red like Zhen's had been. Mine had always been clear. I dried my eyes. I knew the Angel of Death would never again darken my doorstep, and with that knowledge, something died in me that I didn't realize was still there.

\* \* \* \*

The elevator thumped twice, coming to a stop. It'd been almost two weeks since I had stepped foot in the Tearoom, but I doubted anything had changed here. Xavier took good care of the place. But so much had changed for me.

I'd spent my vacation wandering around, barely sleeping, not that I needed much sleep. Other times I ventured up the river to see where it would lead me, and when my skin started to burn, I'd hide under bridges or in ditches. I thought a lot about how I had seriously fucked up my existence. How can I get them to trust me again, especially Azrael? I hadn't realized how much I missed him until he stopped coming. His presence had been familiar and calming. And now, when I needed him, I couldn't tell him "thank you" for all the times he had been there for me. Now I never would be able to. I felt empty because of what I felt for him, for losing Veronica, and for my humanity, which had slipped away from me without me realizing.

There was Xavier and Miranda to think of. I had to make amends. That would be hard. I had written Miranda off too. I promised her that I would help her deal with her vampiric half. It shared her body, fully awakened after Julien had given her some of his blood. I was thankful that he hadn't completely turned her. Still, having the other personality vying for dominance was something she was having a hard time fighting, especially when the blood-hunger rose. Even though the vampire was not fully matured in

her, her thirst still raged, and it was then that her other came to the surface and tried to take control, pushing Miranda back.

After I was back on my feet from having my soul sucked out, I'd stopped helping Miranda and left it to Xavier. It was then that my world started crumbling, when I realized Veronica wasn't coming back. My grief sank in and hit my core, and nothing was there to help me see past that. All I truly wanted was to curl up and die. That was when I'd started begging Azrael for the release I thought he could provide. He wouldn't, saying I was destined for greater things.

While I was away, something had dawned on me: Azrael had once told me that Veronica had gotten his attention in New Orleans, and she had traded her life for mine. Knowing she surrendered everything for me was even worse, and guilt ate me alive. I guess that was one of the reasons I was having a hard time dealing with her death, because I had been the one slotted to die.

That was over with now and who knew if Azrael would take my soul even if I thought it was my time. By now I figured he wouldn't, and if I did see him again, it would be because my soul was on the way to hell, and he would be laughing as I fell. My mind drifted back to Miranda and Xavier.

Both shared my house on Beacon Street, which originally had been Veronica's. My lover wanted to redo all of the wood floors in the plan of restoring the house, but I stopped the work shortly after her death. Now, I spent as little time there as possible. It reminded me of the short-lived nights we'd had together. Miranda and Xavier decorated it the way they wanted. When I showed up out of the blue, both seemed to be getting on fine, considering a year ago Miranda had found out Xavier was her great-great-whatever-grandfather and a werewolf. Her beast hated him and treated him like the bastard he was.

*No, Xavier's not an overgrown puppy. He's a man, and I need to remember that he isn't a pet for me to order around.*

I sighed. The vampire side urged me to make him beg at my feet, maybe sit up on his hind legs and dance around like a circus



animal. I never claimed my demonic heritage, but it seemed of late, that was exactly what I was.

I walked into the Tearoom and tried not to think about all of the familiar faces. All of them were the same. They were human with pulsating hearts sending warm blood through their veins. It had been two weeks since I'd fed. I didn't need the blood, but I'd gotten used to satiating my desires. I closed my ears against the sounds. Once, I swore I'd never kill for amusement, but there was fun and pleasure in torture. It made the blood sweeter, adding spice. I never thought playing with one's food could be so satisfying. Veronica would've looked down on me for my senseless behavior. She always hunted hospitals, bringing mercy to those who needed it. Zhen loved the fact that I committed random acts of violence, but she also told me to be careful.

I glanced up at the main ceiling of the Tearoom, which had a large mural of Saturn, the guardian planet of the place, with drainpipe covers that had been turned into planets and asteroids. Comets raced across the sky and faded into the ceiling that had been painted to look like it had fallen away. Edmund had always wanted to put more than he could into the place. That was why he owed back rent and had many creditors. When I took over, hardly anyone wanted to do business with me in the New Age world. They thought I was going to be like him, but finally, they trusted me.

The landlord had been a different story. He had wanted the back rent up front. Veronica had given me all of it and then some, so the lease was paid through the end of next year, which was great because business had been slow.

I smiled, thinking about the first time I'd walked in. I was fresh out of high school and didn't know a thing about what I was doing until Edmund and Peter had helped me hone my abilities. The atmosphere was different, heavier. I'd always felt that before, but since shutting down, the place felt normal.

I sighed. I guess I had to get used to the idea of never being able to hear ghosts whispering or my guides tweaking the back of

my brain when I had a premonition come on, or the fact I would never talk to Veronica again. Tears threatened, but I held them back, knowing I had to deal with the loss. If I didn't, I was going to end up in some dark abyss that used to be my sanity.

My eyes grazed the wooden shelves and cabinets. Crystals, incense, tarot decks, candles, books, everything a patron would spend their money on thinking they could read the future, take a curse off themselves, or better yet, learn how to become a witch. That was a growing attraction at the Tearoom. It had always been a part of it, considering many of the psychics were either Pagan or Wiccan, believing in a divinity that was masculine and feminine. There was even a mural of a Goddess in the Fire Room surrounded by pillars. When I had been human, there were times I swore I saw her move, but now I dismissed those movements for shadows playing off the wall or the glare of a candle's flame on the white paint in her robes.

Even though it was fashionable to believe in the pagan religion, with a killer on the loose, it was something that was not selling. It reminded me of Zhen and the friend she'd lost. I had been so out of touch for the past couple of weeks; I wondered if anything else had happened.

Mae's table had been in front of the Goddess mural since she had worked there. She wasn't here, which I was grateful for. I didn't feel like talking to her and, even if I did, I wouldn't know what to say. Studying the Goddess, I saw a painted flat surface like the golden dragon on the left wall and the dueling Pegasus and gryphon opposite it. They were just decorations that had been commissioned by the deceased owner.

When it came to the Goddess, I used to believe in something dictating the movements of things on earth and in different realms, but now I wasn't so sure. What type of god or being would take away everything I loved and leave me stranded in an existence where there was no feasible way out?

"Raven, you're back," Mae said.

*Fuck. Is today Friday? Am I getting so lost in my own head I don't even know what day it is now?*

I smiled at her weakly, seeing the age in her face. More wrinkles had appeared on her skin, etched from time and the stress of dealing with a degenerative bone injury in her back. Her lower vertebrae were fusing together, so it made it increasingly hard for her to walk. I was surprised that she still kept coming in.

"Raven, are you all right?"

I felt a hand on my shoulder and had to catch myself from growling when I realized Mae was in front of me. I cringed at the contact I wasn't ready for. Pulling oneself away from the world and then reemerging into society was not the best of things.

When I had been human, I had been afraid of her, but now she was nothing more than a piece of meat to rip apart. She could satiate my hunger, and then I wouldn't have to deal with the thought of it rising. I shook my head. *No, I wasn't going to kill Mae or any of the other psychics.*

Veronica had told Peter so I could have someone to confide in. I had told him some things about my existence, but over the past year, I'd shied away. At first, it had been because I was guilty and then it was because I saw him as food. Which was bad. Now I had to find a way to dig myself out of the vampiric mindset that was slowly driving me batty. That would take work. I hoped I could do it before the lunacy fully developed and others of my kind sought to kill me, because an insane undead was the worst kind. It was the lowest thing on the food chain and vampires were a dominant society, so if you didn't fit the bill, you were hunted down. Still, if they were so gracious to perform such a duty, my soul would be shunned from Hell, and I would be doomed to walk the earth as one of the ghosts I used to talk to.

"I'm fine," I forced myself to say. "How are things with you and Rochelle?" Rochelle was Mae's lover.

"Good," she said. Her accent was slightly shrill with a Long Island inflection and a hint of Texas twang.

I was glad I'd never spent that long in Revere to pick up the accent while I roomed for a year with Edmund when I was in college. How I missed those days. Life had been simpler then. I didn't know anything of what true vampires were. I thought I was one, going to the local Goth club in Cambridge and having a good time. It wasn't until I was turned that I found out the Black Rose was neutral ground when open to the public. While mortal, I'd frequented the club, mixing with vampires and humans alike. I used to be able to radiate an undead aura. It must have worked because, as a human, I was never attacked.

Once I got on the street, any vampire could have picked me up for their nightly snack, but I was lucky. It wasn't until later with Veronica that I'd decked Devon hard enough that he bled. At the time, I'd had no idea about Zhen, and we got away scot-free until Devon caught up with us, and well...here I was.

"Hey, Brenna, I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow, or maybe never. That seems to be your way nowadays." Xavier strolled behind the counter to get some change for a client.

I smiled, holding back the impulse to put him in his place. *No, he was not my pet.* I swallowed my vampiric side and studied him through human eyes. For a werewolf, he wasn't half bad-looking. A quiet calmness demanded attention so no matter who complained about their readings, he always soothed their ills. His brown hair was littered with grey at his temples. He was muscular with beefy hands. Underneath his clothes, his body was riddled with scars he had gotten over the years. I knew this because, the first time I'd met him, he had been naked. He had killed me by taking a chunk out of my neck, severing my spinal cord, but by the miracles of Death, I'd been brought back to life.

I don't think I ever thanked the angel for that and now I would never have the chance again to make atonement for all I had done, for all I had hurt, especially him. Even now, my heart ached for the dark angel. But I had exiled myself from those around me, and I had to make it right, so I would start with the werewolf who lived with me.

I didn't know exactly how old Xavier was, but I assumed he was pretty old for his kind. Then again, I knew very little about werewolves except that they were stronger than vampires. Their blood was thicker, syrupy. Under their shape-shifting ability, I imagined there was rage from the demon that inhabited them. I had seen Xavier's a few times since and most of it had been because of me.

Now his temper was prevalent, or mainly, his wolf was close because of my appearance. His eyes were forest green, which was one clue the wolf was near, but his scent was also muskier. His skin rippled, waiting for the wolf to appear and tear me apart. I understood how it felt, wanting retribution. Of course, I had to appeal to Xavier's rational side before the wolf would even consider forgiving me, but getting Xavier would be hard. He was stubborn, but there was also the way Julien had treated him. Needless to say, I had handled him the same way, proving to him I had become everything he hated about vampires.

"Yeah, well, you know me. This place pulls me back. You'd think I was connected to it or something. How's business?" I scanned the appointment book, disappointed to see there were only two appointments for Saturday. In the past, we'd been booked; business was getting slower than I liked. Granted, I had enough money to pay the psychics, but they got paid based on how many readings they got, plus tips. Money wasn't an issue. Veronica had left it all to me. Before she died, she signed over the house and all of her possessions.

"Business is slow, but I'm sure you've noticed. Now, why don't you be a good bloodsucker and let the nice werewolf run the business before you fuck that up too?"

A wave of anger rolled through me, but I caught it. *Motherfucker, how dare he speak to me that way! I'm his Ma—I'm his boss.* I swallowed my rage. Xavier saw the thought play across my face. I looked down at the schedule and tried to appear impassive. The pressure mounted between us. The more I slipped into the vampire mentality, the more the tension escalated. In some strange

way, it was very sexual, almost as if the wolf had something for me. Not that sex wouldn't have been fun. I had never fucked a werewolf. Still, I was having enough trouble handling myself now, and I didn't need anything else on my plate.

"How's Miranda been these past couple of weeks?" I asked, changing the subject. I was truly concerned. I had to get back on track, and I had sworn to help her, even though that had fallen to the wayside.

A look of concern crossed his face at the mention of her name. His muscles relaxed. Miranda was his main worry. He stared at me, his eyes getting watery when he thought about his relation. "Not that you care. Mira was out for almost two days and is getting stronger. I had to tie her down. She's getting hungry, and her appetite isn't for my blood anymore. Mira's demanding a human sacrifice. Miranda can't handle that. She's still too human, herself. Talk to her before she goes berserk. Do you think you can handle that? Or are you even beyond helping us mere servants now?"

The elevator opened and people poured into the Tearoom before I could respond, so I let him wait on them. If her beast caused the blood-hunger to rise, then she was closer to turning than I'd originally thought. I hoped she'd let me in again. Miranda mostly had Mira under lock and key, but when her other fought for control of the body, it thought it was the dominant force in the flesh.

When I felt Mira, she always retreated out of fear. The demon was still pissed that I had destroyed its Master. Mira would love to see me dead, but that wasn't happening any time soon. I doubted she'd be happy to see me. When I'd left, we hadn't been speaking for months. She'd tried to draw me out of my shell, but my mind had taken me on another path. She was too much of a reminder of the past. I could already hear the tongue-lashing I was in for.

I walked back to the smoking area, where most of the psychics gathered. The air was thick with incense and smoke, but I inhaled it anyway, marveling in the human gesture I used to take for granted. Of late, I'd noticed I had to force myself to breathe more often. My

body was forgetting it was an automatic response because I was dead, or undead.

Rounding the corner, I felt another tap on the shoulder. I jumped, not liking the fact that everyone seemed to be sneaking up on me lately. I wondered why I hadn't felt Fredryck approaching. Maybe it was some kind of spell the Angel of Death had put on me, but it was more likely another sign that I truly was going insane.

## Chapter Nine

*My name is Brenna.*

The stench of old dried blood lingered in the air. Faint drumming kept time with my heart. I had been in this place before. It was dark. I didn't know how I knew that, but something inside me had called me to it. Fear raced into my heart, echoing in my brain. Panic from the dark ran rampant through me. There was something else, an excitement about this bleak place. The hollowness of it tried to drive me mad. My heart sped up with the pounding. Underneath it there was chanting...

I awoke drenched in sweat from the nightmare that had delved into my daytime sleep, wrapping itself around my brain until I became part of it. I shook, actually scared of what I'd gone through. A lousy dream, but for a creature who rarely dreamed, this was most disturbing. I'd had a few dreams over the past year and all of them were of dark places where there was drumming and blood, but this was the most intense of all. It was undeniably a sign that something was seriously wrong with me.

Slowly, I rose from my bed, longing for Veronica. Death had turned me away, and all my psychic abilities and odd powers of incineration and soul snatching were also gone. All that remained were my vampiric talents, but the only ones I used these days were the ability to fly and alter my shape somewhat. In the back of my mind, I thought of wonderful ways to torment the meat, but I had to remind myself that was not me anymore. I had to get back on the path I had been on before Veronica had died, remembering I was not a true undead since I didn't possess their other half, the demonic force that Miranda and the other vampires had to deal with. I was the only presence inside my mind, driven by my own thoughts and not the demon that sprang from the ingestion of vampire blood.



I shivered when I thought about having to deal with a dual personality the way Veronica had. What Miranda was doing now. The thought of her made my head hurt, but she was what I had to tackle tonight.

I got up and stretched. My bones cracked from their long sleep. Hope had lit my way in the fog-filled nights all year as I'd waited for Veronica to cross over. None knew the complete loss I suffered, except Death. The one time I asked him for help, he'd passed me over. To think I had once held the notion I was cut from the same star as him.

After he'd left me to my own wiles, I knew eternity was going to be barren. I was coming to terms with that. A quiet lull settled over my brain. I had been trying to be nice to Xavier and everyone over the past week. I'd avoided Zhen, but I would end up back at the Black Rose soon. She was the only friend I had left who truly understood me.

Dressed, I headed toward Crimson Liquids. The television switched on downstairs, and I heard Xavier in the kitchen. When I slipped out the door, I heard that another body had been found. I shivered at the thought. Zhen had her vampires looking for the serial killer. Mae still mourned for her lost students and, oddly enough, it didn't faze me. I was apathetic to the whole situation, where normally I would have been up in arms that someone had killed innocents. Everyone else's plight was nothing to me now. I had to get my own shit together first.

Outside, the chill in the air made me cling to my cloak. Snow would soon be making an appearance, transforming the city into a nightmare of brown slush and icy sidewalks. My mind drifted and, before long, I found myself in front of Crimson Liquids.

The coffee shop was Miranda's link to humanity. With the sale of her parents' house, the shop had been completely renovated. During it all, Miranda dealt with the turmoil of losing her best friend, Gina, and having her birthright come full circle with the emergence of her vampiric half.

I had started to help her gain control and push the beast into the confines of her mind, but Mira surfaced under stress. Staring in the window, invisible to all, I watched Miranda sitting at her table looking out into Boston Common. Part of me didn't care if I helped her or not. Miranda wasn't my child, and I had no notions of making her into one. It would be a fruitless venture since she wouldn't replace Veronica and my blood would clash with the beast.

This was the side that had ruled my thoughts for a year, but I had to right the wrong I had done. She was paler than she should have been—her body was feeding on itself. Xavier's blood should have sated Mira, but it seemed the thing inside of her desired human blood. I couldn't put it off any longer. My hand grabbed the knob, and I became visible. I walked in and bumped into a red-haired chick blocking the entryway.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you," I apologized. I tried to make my way over to Miranda in the corner.

The redhead turned around and smiled. "Well, well, isn't this a surprise."

I focused on her and realized she was a vampire. I just hadn't been paying attention earlier, but that's what I got for letting my mind wander. Something was familiar about her, but I couldn't put my finger on what.

"Children," she called. Her brood turned from the counter and gazed over at me. Their minds settled on mine trying to split me in half, but even under the weight of their combined stares, none were getting into my thoughts. Besides, they were all too young to try and hack into my brain.

"Look," I sighed. "I don't want any trouble."

Her hand fastened on my shoulder. She showed me a hint of fang. "You should've thought of that before you killed our Master, bitch. Remember her face, children. One day we'll have vengeance for the death of your grandsire."

Okay, she was starting to get on my last nerve. The only vampires I'd killed had been Julien and Devon. I didn't think Aria

had any offspring since she'd been completely devoted to Devon. He had been so focused on Veronica that I doubted he had any more children floating around. Besides, this annoying fuck was too independent for Devon; he'd wanted complete and utter subjugation. That left Julien, but he'd devoured the souls of his children, leaving mindless husks no better than zombies. So whoever this bitch thought I had killed, she was wrong.

I suppressed a snarl and the urge to swat at her. It wouldn't do any good to show signs of force in a crowded area filled with unaware humans. Besides, Miranda was wondering what the hell was going on. I looked at her and swore I saw Mira looking out with interest to see what her peers were going to do to me, wishing they would take me down and kill me, no doubt. This was why I hated vampires.

"Look, I don't know you or who your Master was. If he's dead, then I'm sure I killed him for a damn good reason, and he's probably rotting in hell where he belongs. So, if you'll excuse me. Whatever fantasy you have in that fucked up head of yours is over."

Pushing past her, her little clan stopped me. A black vampire growled at me, his forked tongue flicking between his fangs. A lithe beauty tried to stare me down, but underneath her demeanor, she was asking to be fucked and dominated. Her being cried out to me, but she would never be called away from her Mistress. Part of me wanted to posses her, but that part of me bit the bullet and I swallowed the vampire in me and tried to go past them.

"We're not done," the bitch roared. "You think you're all high and mighty because you pretend to be human. Because our Mistress chose you didn't give you the right to kill her. But you know nothing. My Mistress would want revenge. You were nothing, a mere distraction, and you will be punished for her death."

Her eyes grew black, reflecting the beast in her nature. The others of her brood circled, waiting for a signal from their den mother, but I had no clash with them or with the bitch in front of

me. She just had to get that through her thick skull. I wasn't in the mood to fight. I just wanted to talk to Miranda.

"As I said, I don't know who your maker is, so unless you want to join her, get out of my fucking way," I sneered. My fingers automatically hardened to talons. I itched to slice them through this cunt's head.

"Even now, you deny your role in her death. You act just like...like a human. Whatever Mistress saw in you was only a momentary sign of weakness."

"Break it up," Miranda snapped.

Mira was in her voice, the undertone gravelly from her vocal chords shifting. The redhead looked from her to me and then laughed, tossing her hair over one shoulder. "It seems the child rules its Master. Come, children, we'll save this for another time."

Her group filed out of the store. The redhead's power whipped into my mind, breaking the mental shields I had against the others of her group.

In that split second, I got a glimpse of a woman with blood on her mouth, smiling down at the redhead. The woman had dark hair and purple eyes. I swallowed the lump in my throat and caught myself on the corner of the bar. It couldn't be—it just couldn't be. It was impossible. I realized then I'd just met the mysterious voice on the phone that had called me sister.

*But how? When did you have the time, or the defiance to go against Devon? Why didn't you tell me?*

"You all right?" Miranda asked.

I shook my head, not knowing what to think. Miranda led me over to a side table reserved for staff and sat me down. The vision had to be wrong. Veronica never had any other children besides me. She hated the vampire lifestyle too much. Besides that, Devon had kept her under lock and key until she'd escaped. Even after she had escaped, she'd been on the run for a decade and the redhead was more than a decade old. She was at least half a century. The bitch was lying. She had to be.

Miranda brought me a cup of tea, and I drank it without thinking about how hot it was. It scalded my throat. Then I felt her hands on mine, bringing me out of my stupor.

"Who was that bitch? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"She thinks I killed her maker, but that's impossible. I'm just tired, haven't been sleeping well lately, been having daymares." I smiled and looked into her eyes, but was met with mock concern. She cared more about her shop and what her customers had seen, hoping no one had been spooked by the incident, than she did about what happened to me. I doubt it would have mattered if the little group had disemboweled me on the spot so long as it didn't push any of the clientele away.

"Miranda, do you have a minute?"

"Yeah, sure. But hold on a sec—" She glanced over at the counter where one of her staff floundered with a customer's order and was blanching at the line that had formed.

"Sure," I muttered. Sipping my tea, I tried to get the image of what the red-haired vampire had shown me out of my mind. It had to be a lie, but there was no one I could ask or compare stories with. Devon and Aria were dead, and Veronica was beyond my reach. The only other entity that could answer my question was Death, and he had ostracized me. I couldn't open a gateway to his dimension. Overall, I was fucked.

I glanced at Miranda, knowing she really didn't want me here. Oh, well. Sometimes, we all had to do things we hated. I waited while she dealt with the patrons and got through the queue winding around the bar and bumping into me. All a while, I hoped she would listen to me. I didn't expect her forgiveness right away. Hell, I would settle for her talking to me with none of this fake bullshit. I just wanted her to understand.

"What is it you wanted to impart on me, oh great and wondrous one?" The sarcasm all but dripped into my tea.

"Miranda, look, I don't expect you to even want to talk to me, but just listen. I've been a bitch lately, worse than that, even. I haven't been there for you. I should've helped you when Mira

poked her horns out. I see how I've been, and I want to make it up to you. I'd love to start over, but I know it's impossible. I was hoping we could go from here and maybe you could trust me again like you did after Julien attacked you last year."

The silence between us lengthened while the minutes ticked by. The bell above the door kept ringing, and people filed in and out. Thoughts passed by her eyes. Her facial expressions changed. I already knew the answer in my heart, but I had to be sure. Miranda began laughing, relishing the look on my face.

"You're kidding, right? What, suddenly queen bitch has decided to interact with her subjects? Look, Brenna, whoever you drank, I want some. Man, do I want some."

"Miranda, I'm serious."

Her smile was devilish. "I know. That's what makes it so much more fun."

Her voice was barely graveled, but I heard it where no other human could. "Mira?"

She giggled and winked. "I'm not just one or the other anymore. We're learning to co-exist. Or didn't great-granddaddy tell you? He's such a worrywart. Besides, he's just a pet to be fucked with anyway. I'd love to see him on a leash. I wonder what he'd do if I came down with a collar and a whip. Hmm—that could be fun. You know, it's fucked up to even think that I've got dog blood running through me. Makes me shiver just thinking about it. But man, I bet he's a good fuck, being hung the way he is and all."

Without thinking, I grabbed her chin and squeezed. Bones creaked and gave way under the pressure of my grip, distorting her face slightly. "You listen to me. Just because I've been out of the picture doesn't mean you can run rampant with Miranda's life. You're nothing more than a relic spawned ages ago. Now get back into your cage. Remember who killed your Master."

The color drained from her face, and her eyes changed pigment a couple of times until Miranda blinked and she was back. As she changed back, the alignment of her face healed.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she asked in hushed tones, not trying to draw attention with customers sat only feet away. "Did you think maybe I was happy? We're getting along. What gives you the right to push Mira out? You're such a controlling bitch. Where do you get off trying to butt back into my life after I've tried to keep her back? Do you know how strong she is? How much the hunger eats at me, taking a little piece of my humanity with it? You deserted me after you said you'd help."

Tears tinged red slid down her cheeks. She had trusted me to protect her from Julien, and then I'd had to protect her from herself and I couldn't do that. My heart broke to see how much I'd hurt her. I'd broken every promise. I'd let everyone down. How could I go back?

"I'm sorry. You have no idea how sorry. I'd turn back the clock if I could on so many things. But it doesn't work that way. I know I don't deserve it, but I was hoping you would forgive me."

Miranda sniveled and her features hardened. "I understand how you felt when Veronica died. Your heart shriveled and died that day. I saw it in your eyes and heard it when you cried out for Death to take you. I was there, if you don't remember. I grieved for Gina and Veronica and got on with my life. Everyone dies. It's life. I'm sure we can be civil while we look for another place."

*They were moving?* I'd be all alone. I'd truly go mad if I was left alone in the house. I'd be eaten alive by the ghosts of the past, by the voices that lingered in the walls and behind every crack in the large house.

"When are you leaving?"

"I thought Xavier told you. I mean, you haven't been around, so we figured we'd find another place. The house is great, don't get me wrong, but it carries so much weight and it gets so cold there. But you wouldn't know that, would you?"

"No, I haven't been around. The house used to be so full of life, long ago when things...well, I hope that you and Xavier can find a place that is suitable. I'll see you around, then. You know if you do ever want to talk or whatever, I'll be around." I got up, not sure of

where I was going or what I was going to do. Sunrise was in a few hours. Maybe if I kept on walking, my body would turn to ash and Azrael would be forced to take my soul, but that was only a false hope. Committing suicide was not going to help me any. It just meant lifetimes of bad karma and I was already dealing with that. Gotta love the weavings of Fate and all the bullshit.

“Yeah, whatever,” Miranda muttered.

I stepped into the human filled world, marveling that the city was still busy even at such a late hour. I had slept long into the night, trying to juggle a schedule that should have been human when my body wanted me to sleep through the day, but I was forcing myself to be unnatural and live by both night and day. My body was a vampire, and as I set out on the cold pavement, I realized my mind was figuring that out also. I was dead inside and out, and there was no redemption for me. Miranda was right. My heart had died the same night Veronica had. It was then I truly realized I was dead and nothing could change that.



## Chapter Ten

*My name is Bridgette.*

Once again, I almost had her in my grasp, but it was not the time for me to take my vengeance on my ill-begotten sister. My blood boiled in the chilled night air at the thought of her and how my Mistress had chosen her over me. It didn't help that my brood was on edge. The undertone to some of their unease was hunger, but my eldest's mind—Shawn—was closed to me, where it never had been before. He was quiet and more subdued than I knew him to be. Normally, he interacted with me and aimed to please. He wasn't being disobedient, but something about him was more independent than I was used to. It made me wonder what had happened in his years being away.

It had been seven years since our last reunion, and nothing had changed about him save the hardness he sported. His eyes were still the same storm gray, and his hair still windblown and brown. I wondered if I had given him his freedom too early. The world was dangerous if he was not ready, and other vampires would try to possess him if he wasn't strong enough. But if he had any battle scars, he hadn't told me about them.

"Mistress, why are you so worried about me?" Shawn put his hand on my shoulder and kissed the side of my cheek.

I smiled and calmed a bit by his presence. "I'm just thinking. My sister has no idea what she's in for, and I ache to bring justice for your grandsire. It's long overdue. My Mistress would've wanted it that way. She wouldn't have wished to die so young. She may have been a meat-lover, but I loved her as you love me."

"For your sake, I wish I could've met her. Our grandsire would be proud of what you have accomplished. You will have your vengeance, I promise. The Ancient One cannot deny your claim for blood."

The hardness in Shawn's voice made me wonder. "You're not planning anything against Brenna, are you? You know what it means to disobey me." I grabbed his throat, my fingers forming talons, cutting thin ribbons of blood from his flesh. He stared into my eyes too long for my liking, but once I squeezed his neck, his gaze lowered. And I forgave him for his insolence. He had been on his own for a long time, but he had to remember who had made him.

"Answer me. Have you planned anything?"

"No...no, Mistress. You haven't willed it. She must be judged by the Ancient One. It is our custom to bring justice before the Eldest in where we dwell."

"Good boy," I purred, releasing my hold. I sliced my talon across the tender flesh of my inner wrist and held it to him. He hesitated, wondering if he earned the right, and then took it in his mouth, drawing on the lifeblood pumping in my veins. My other children hissed, wondering why their brother deserved such an honor. Shawn was my favorite. I hated to admit it, but he was the one who had saved me from myself after I had left Veronica.

I'd seen him in a club back in the fifties as I was slowly descending into madness. I had no guidance and I was too young to be out on my own, and it was beginning to show. Others of my kind began fighting me for no reason. Insanity has a certain aroma. That was what Brenna had, the distinct smell of craziness. Soon, her mind would be gone and there would only be the hunger, eating away at her until others of our kind noticed the stench. I just had to approach the Elder when my sister wasn't around. That would be hard, because the Old One favored Brenna. *There will be time. I am sure of that.*

Of course, I could always use my sister's child to get to her. Shaking my head, I dismissed the thought. The fledgling had nothing to do with Veronica. There was something distinctly different about the newborn, something I couldn't put my talon on. It would be best to leave her alone. It had been sweet to overhear my beloved sister begging forgiveness from her offspring, though.

It would almost be a shame to see Brenna brought to justice. It was amusing watching her suffer her delusions.

Shawn rejoined his brethren. At least he seemed happy with them. That was a plus. When we had first been together, he insisted on me starting a brood so we wouldn't be lonely. But I hadn't been ready for a large family and didn't turn another for ages. Tonight, we would feast together and welcome him home for good. I smiled inwardly at the thought. My baby would be with me for good now, and I wouldn't have to worry.

My stomach turned over and made a low rumble. My fangs lengthened without a thought, and my tongue caressed their length. Food sounded good, and Chinese seemed to be on the menu.

## Chapter Eleven

*My name is Brenna.*

My feet carried me back to the Black Rose in Cambridge. I arrived with the line zigzagging around the corner, ending in the semi-residential part of Central Square. I pushed through to the front of the line, not caring about the mortals who were anxiously waiting for the privilege to enter.

"Hey bitch, watch where ya fuckin' goin'." One of the club goers snarled when I cut in front of him.

I turned and growled, letting him see my fangs and my eyes glinting silver under the Christmas lights that hung above the door. My mind pressed against his, and I felt the heat of his breath. I snagged his thoughts instantly, and made him my slave.

He was in my arms, running his hands over my tits. My fingers slid down beneath the waistband of his leather pants and touched the top of his hot, hard dick. My cold hands unzipped him. He took my nipple into his mouth and teased it. My mouth enclosed the head of his phallus. I let my fangs caress the smooth skin. He was moaning in the cold night air. His cock was ready to burst. Phantom hands and lips worked him into a frenzy.

I was close enough that his aftershave stung my nose. My stomach lurched forward at the thought of warm blood. One taste wouldn't hurt. A tiny sip. My hand wrapped around his neck, being tickled by the stubble. The world fell away. It was just him and I. The music of the club was drowned out by the base of his pulse. Teeth separated his flesh, and I was rewarded with a molten mouthful, reminding me of biting into a chocolate covered cherry. The burst of flavor and reward, except without the chocolate.

My mouth fastened to my new acquisition, and I pulled on the warmth until it filled my belly. The ecstasy of it overflowed my brain until something tugged on my arm, trying to pull me away from my new slave. When the first rush of cold air hit me, I realized

where I was and what I was doing. I swallowed my last bit of blood and came back to reality.

“Hey, slut, get off my boyfriend.” His Goth-wanna-be girlfriend had noticed what was wrong with him.

I looked at his girlfriend and smirked. I was his one and only now. I smiled smugly and frenched him with my eyes locked on her. Catcalls erupted from the line. He clung to me. Sated, I pulled away and pushed him off into her waiting arms, making my way to the door. My mind was off Miranda, and I was at peace, for now.

The bouncers nodded. They held the door for me, and I didn’t get anymore flack from the line. All accepted my new toy. It was Friday night, and the place was packed with humans dressed in all kinds of Goth and fetish attire. Mortal women wore corsets to accentuate their tits. Many of the men were dressed in black velvet coats, capes, leather boots, and chain mail.

The viewing room had a pool table nestled in the back corner covered in a Bacchanalian feast of grapes, fruit, and bread. Televisions suspended from the ceilings showed snippets of porn movies, anime, and foreign music videos. Local art adorned the wood-paneled walls. Couches and red velvet chairs were littered across the room. A few dark booths were set up on one side. One sold jewelry and fetish wear, another offered erotic getaways. I always wondered where Zhen found these companies. Knowing my luck, they probably sprung up like newly planted corpses.

Scanning the crowd, I noticed a cluster of vamps on a rounded settee. They sensed my presence and looked up in unison. I nodded over to them, not recognizing them for Zhen’s brood.

I winked at a bouncer and snuck into a small entryway. It led into the main bar and dance area. The bartender nodded when I walked by. Normally, her fear of me was genuine, but tonight, something was odd about her. I caught my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Yup, still looked the same.

I moved downstairs and headed straight for Zhen’s lair. There, I rummaged in her wardrobe and found a black, slinky vinyl ball gown with an open back and huge slits up the sides; it clasped

around my neck and left my shoulders bare. I pulled my hair into a bun, grew my fangs and nails, and let my eyes shine silver. I wondered if my slave would seek me out. His blood ran warm in my cold body and made my hunger flare.

It was wrong of me to have a junkie. I hated all vampires who had followers. I wasn't one of them. I had to remember that.

I sighed and tried to rein in my hunger, but the call of blood was high. It was the only thing in the night that welcomed me. I couldn't take anyone in the club, but later, when everyone had left, there were always fun torture devices in the other half of Zhen's room. Maybe I could pull my slave down here? Zhen would want to be there while I played, and we could get naked and she could fuck me again. *No, there would be no torture.* I liked the idea, though.

I ran my hands over the vinyl, thinking of what she'd done to me the other night. I could go for another round, but even that was something I would not let myself indulge in.

I shook my head. *No, no torture.* I didn't need to do that. I did not need to kill. I had to remember what I was. Music from above drew me to the packed dance floor and several more people tried to fit onto the small stage. Couples were even on the blocks, hanging off the chain spider-web Zhen had constructed. Some were jumping up, trying to get the helium inflated condoms floating along the ceiling. I ignored them and let the rhythm of the dark beat control me.

My mind drifted out upon the mob and I connected with my slave. His thoughts moved through me. He was already empty without me. He would do anything to please me.

My mind wrapped around his. Nothing could separate us. The rhythm of his heart drove my feet. My hands caressed his body, running over the flesh of his bare chest, feeling the hardness of his pecs. The one he came with was forgotten. He followed my mental leash, and his hands were touching my ass. The vinyl of my dress rubbed against the leather of his pants, and it was hard for him to grab what he wanted. I didn't need to open my eyes to look at him. I saw myself through his.

I was beautiful, powerful, something he would worship until the sun exploded. His lips met mine and our tongues joined in a sloppy kiss. I moaned internally while his thoughts raced in my head. He was hard. He wanted to fuck me on the dance floor with everyone watching. He wanted to prove to me that he could be the best I ever had. He would take lashings or beatings, anything if it pleased me. I liked his style. I felt his hands unbuttoning the clasp on my dress. But I wasn't going to let him get his way, even if it was just to please me.

My power enclosed us and, suddenly, we were hidden from all except other undeads, and I didn't care if they saw me. We all knew what went on behind prying eyes. Just as long as the meat wasn't privy to the show. I yanked my slave into a darkened corner and pushed him down. His eyes met mine and I smiled. He didn't have to ask me what I wanted. He settled under my ball gown and his head nestled at my waiting pussy. I was already hot and wet with the anticipation along with his sexual desires filling me. When his tongue touched my clit, I was close to coming.

The wetness made me jump. He settled into a rhythm. My head fell back against the wall. Sensation after sensation rocked my brain. My slave was getting off knowing he was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing. I also realized then that, since we were so connected, he was getting the sexual high from me too. I would have to learn how to cut him off later, but there was plenty of time for that. Right now, his tongue was working double time. My fingers changed to talons. I held him in place while the other set raked the wall trying to keep myself steady. With him engaged, my mind was free to wander along to the rest of the crowd.

Some of their happiness filled the void left in my soul, trying to quicken my dead heart. I only tapped their surface thoughts. To go any deeper would have meant violating neutral ground, and I didn't want Zhen's wrath on me. I didn't think she would mind my little distraction.

The music slid through me, allowing me to waft away on its waves while my little human used his teeth and tongue to make me

come. His hands gripped my ass harder each time my hips pushed against him. Thoughts of humans pressed against me. Their heartbeats spiced my hunger and drove my desire. My claws sliced through my dress and into the skull of my new pet. I drew blood, but he didn't stop. Moaning, my mind opened up and I knew I could have all of them if I wanted. The meat could be mine with a simple command.

The music grew darker, frenzied. My pet knew what he was doing. I culled his mind and realized that he was a prostitute on the side, and his girlfriend never suspected. He'd pleased women for years, earning hundreds of dollars an hour, doing whatever they wanted.

*Oh, yes. You are mine, little one. And, like you, the meat will come to my waiting jaws.* My mind smiled. My head hit the wall hard when he brought me over the edge and I allowed him to stop. My tendrils that brushed the humans became choke chains, and I was the Master. Fears and nightmares pounded my brain from all sides, and the smell of blood was in the air. My fangs tingled and lengthened. My new pet slid to my side, unconsciously getting out of the fray. I licked my lips and opened my eyes. Once the music stopped, there would be a blood bath. There—

*There will be a what?* Zhen's voice was a mental slap across the face.

I froze. The mental clamp on the meat, and my junkie was broken. I scanned the club, but didn't see her or her aura anywhere. That didn't surprise me since she could shield herself from the strongest vampire or angel.

*Up here, silly,* she laughed, but I felt the harshness in her voice. I glanced up into the DJ booth and saw her waving down at me.

*Nice show. I would have joined in, but I assumed it was a one woman thing. I thought you weren't into junkies. Something you want to tell me? What the hell were you doing? Trying to make this into a slaughterhouse? Be thankful all the undead are mostly my brood and youngsters I can control or you'd be dinner.*



I noticed the mortals close to me were blinking, coming out of a daze. My slave was wondering what had happened. Silently, I sent him back to his girlfriend. Music went into another beat, and they began to dance, not knowing what had happened. The undeads on the sidelines were salivating, ready to jump into the fray.

I glanced up at Zhen again. Her power moved over the club, keeping an eye on all. I didn't need another warning to know I was in deep shit. I gulped and pushed my way to the bar and waved for the bartender to bring me something. I didn't care what. I took what she gave me, feeling the smoothness of alcohol roll down my throat. God, I was losing my mind.

I had a junkie. He had fucked me on the dance floor. In front of other vampires. *Fuck! I am screwed.* I'd almost broken the one rule no vampire was supposed to. Don't break neutral ground or suffer the penalty of death.

The bartender grabbed my glass and held my gaze, something she had never done before. A twisted smile painted her features, and that meant something bad was going to happen to me.

Zhen's power eased. I broke the glare, wondering when the vampire had found herself to be my equal. Most undeads looked down, sensing I was above them. I even stared down Zhen, but I'd always been cocky and never listened, which had gotten me into trouble in the past.

*We need to talk,* I messaged up to my friend.

*Wow, she telegraphed back. Finally, after a year of being all queen-bitch, you decide we have to talk. What side of the coffin did you wake up on?*

I sighed. *I'm serious.*

*Yes, I realize that. That was quite a stunt. Go downstairs. Help yourself to what's in the fridge. I suggest you have a couple bottles of blood to calm yourself, and you might want to change.*

*Thanks.* I glanced down and realized my talons had done quite a number on the front of my dress.

She turned her mental back on me, and I began drifting downstairs where I'd be safe from the mortals above, but not from

my own desires. As I headed past the coat check, someone grabbed me and pushed me back against the wall and began kissing me, running hands over the tight vinyl, trying to get to the flesh underneath.

I snarled and pushed the human off, not wanting the contact, feeling disgusted at what I had just done. It was my new acquisition. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I stared at my slave. Dirty thoughts ran across my mind again about a repeat performance or maybe a little more, but I ignored them.

“What do you want now?” I whispered.

The look in his eyes was pathetic, lost. He would let me do anything to him.

“I just want to make you happy. To please you, to fuck you, to feed you. I’ll do anything. I delighted you a few moments ago. I can still taste you on my tongue. Let me pleasure you again.” He moved in close, but I kept him away.

I wondered how I could fall this low. Insanity was truly catching up with me. I pushed my way into his mind again and saw the damage I had caused. He was useless except to want me. I tried to reprogram him, but I didn’t know how. So I planted the suggestion for him to go and be loyal to his girlfriend, to forget about me and think I was some slut. I tried to rebuild the walls of a normal life, fucking other women on the side so he could have a house instead of just a roof and open walls.

When I withdrew, he blinked, turned, and said nothing, heading back to his girlfriend upstairs. I hoped my mental bandage would heal what I had inflicted. But I hated to admit it was a high knowing I could so easily control mortal minds. I’d never used my power in that manner before, just influence at best, but never handled a complete wipe. I knew why vampires loved it and thought of humans as meat. They were walking cheeseburgers that could fuck and play before they squirted ketchup all over you.

I shook my head, realizing how far I had fallen. Pushing through the wall into Zhen’s lair, I grabbed a bottle of distilled blood and downed it without thinking. My hunger was a beast, the

only thing that pulled me apart, and I'd let it drive me mad for a year. I'd lost my senses—that much was evident by tonight's episode. Now, I'd lost everything I was, and my mind was slipping away.

I grabbed another bottle and guzzled it too. I'd tricked myself into thinking I'd see Veronica again when I knew I never would. I sank to the floor and felt the emptiness in my soul. Death had been my friend, and I'd turned him away.

*God, what have I done?* No one wanted me in their lives, including Azrael, and his loss hurt almost worse than Veronica's.

"Yes, what have you done? You never struck me as the voyeuristic type. That little stunt upstairs gives me cause to throw you to the wolves. I hope you have a good explanation. So, what did you want to talk about?" Zhen sipped on some kind of vodka concoction.

I'd almost broken the sacred rule, but I didn't think she was serious about giving me to her brood. Tears slid down my cheeks, and I noticed they were tinged red. Horror washed over me. Zhen saw them and took me in her arms, not caring at the moment that I was on her hit list. I cried, and still the pain was not eased, and the tinge of copper was on the back of my tongue.

"Brenna, what's happening to you? You've never acted this way before. It's more than not being able to contact Veronica. There's something serious going on inside your head, and if you don't figure it out soon, then even I won't be able to stop you."

"Zhen." I sniffled. "I don't know. I'm scared. I thought I could just turn my abilities all back on and Veronica would be there, that my connection to the universe would magically return. You were right. Azrael was right. I've been such a shit to everyone and I just want to make it right. I think I'm going crazy. I really do. I mean, tonight, outside, I scrambled this guy's brain and then, well, you saw. God, it made me feel great having that much power over the meat, mortals, but I saw myself fucking him in ways that made me sick, but part of me wants that. He'll do anything for me; he's a junkie now. I hated vampires for using humans, and here I am

doing the same damn thing. I'm not like them. I don't have a beast. God, what would Veronica think? She'd hate me; Xavier would laugh. Azrael...God, Azrael. Well, I don't want to think what he would do. You're the only friend I have left. You've been so good to me, and I repay you by breaking your rules. My desires have fueled me to act without a conscious thought. I've become everything I hated. Veronica would have the right to kill me. I'm a beast."

I bowed my head and angled my neck so Zhen would have a clean shot. According to vampire tradition, my life was hers. It was getting obvious I was insane. If I were in my right mind, the bartender would not have kept my gaze. Any crazed vampire was to be destroyed, and I wanted my friend to do it. I could deal with the thought of a walking death being a phantom and never seeing Veronica again. Azrael wouldn't claim my soul. His punishment for my rejection would be for me to roam the earth until the sun burned out, paying for my sins, and at this point, I agreed with him.

"Brenna," Zhen whispered. Her hand was on my shoulder. "Get up. I don't need to kill you."

Shaking, I couldn't move. My victims' faces haunted me, and I wondered if I was ever going to be forgiven for all the pain and torment. "My life is yours, Ancient One. I am not worthy to live. End my agony before my mind falls into hell."

She sighed and lifted me up, her hands underneath my arms, but I couldn't meet her gaze. I was nothing more than shit. The equality I once assumed I had to her was gone.

"Brenna, you will look at me." Her mind stunned mine, taking control of my body. Her words were in my brain and my ears. She made me stand on my own two feet with her mind manipulating me.

"You're not insane. Not completely, anyway. If you can admit that you're losing your mind, then there's a chance we can save you. It's noticeable, yes; you're beginning to stink, but I can help you. This past year, you've fallen from your high horse and

realized you have the same desires all vampires do. You do not possess a demonic half, which I think is part of your problem. If you did, then the guilt over your actions wouldn't be so bad; it would blend with your desires. Your remorse and your heartache have poisoned you. Hell, I can't say I didn't like the way that you were, but I knew something was wrong. I should've done something about it earlier. I thought you'd get over it. It wasn't your fault or Azrael's. Even though I can't stand High Beings, him in particular, he was doing his job. He had to take her. It's what he was made for. You told me what he said, that Veronica switched places in the tapestry of the universe to die in your stead. That was her choice. Not yours. It wasn't your fault that she died. She made the decision. Shutting yourself off from everyone and everything you've ever known was not the best thing. You need the contact you have to the other side. It's part of you, and I think it used to be a release, and without it, everything's clouded your mind. The human upstairs...well, shit happens. We all make mistakes. But it will be okay. Damn Azrael for getting involved. Every time he does, he just fucks things up."

Zhen detested angels; she had mentioned that before, but I never knew it was Azrael in specific. "What happened between you and him? You've never told me the gritty details."

"Nothing, just a few altercations. That's all. But this isn't about him. The most important thing for you to do now is not worry about angels, but to work on forgiving yourself. From there, you can work on everything else. Do you think you can do that?"

I realized then that I was standing of my own free will. I wiped the last of my tears away and wondered if my fractured mind would heal, or if it would remain tinged with blood, making me remember my shame for the rest of my existence. Everything she said was serious. And I was scared, terrified I would lose my mind completely and there would be nothing left, horrified that I could so easily slip into the persona of the vampire and love every fucking minute of it. It was imperative that I went back to normal, forgot the vampire bullshit, and tried to regain my lost life. If I

didn't have something to hold onto, then I would fall completely on my face, and my mind would be gone.

Zhen was right. I truly was a vampire, and that meant there was no turning back the clock and reclaiming my lost humanity. I couldn't take on the Angel of Death and make him return Veronica, and my dark desires were part of the demonic blood that forged me. I'd never dealt with the fact that I was truly deceased. I'd lay dying with Devon's fangs thrust in my throat and the sting of his blood lining my lips to keep me alive just long enough for Veronica to save my soul. I was human no longer. I was a different monster. I could survive for thousands of years if I thought I had the stamina for eternity.

Everything she said clicked. I accepted the fact that I was never going to change, and a small fragment of my sanity returned—not a huge chunk, but enough to stay my desires to ravage and torture prey. Veronica would have hated me for what I had done; I just hoped wherever she was, she could forgive me.

"I'll never change. I realize that now. I'm dead. I can't change my nature. I am what I am."

Zhen smiled. "It's a start and that's good. For now, stay here. Tomorrow we can talk about what happened when you went away. I'm curious to hear what Azrael said."

I just nodded, wondering how she knew about the Angel of Death appearing to me when I hadn't told her. Then again, she could read my mind. I sank into one of her chairs. She produced a blanket for me to curl up in. Wrapping it around me, the thin material tried to warm my cold flesh. My skin would always be frigid; my body would never take in air unless I willed it to. I would never age, watching my friends die. I would be alone until the end of time.

**Part Three:**  
**Ashes to Ashes**

## Chapter Twelve

*My name is Brenna.*

“What do you mean, you can’t find him? He’s a stinking human. He’s meat. You’re my best hunters. It’s not that hard when we know he’s going after mortal witches.”

Zhen’s rage burned my mind into wakefulness. She fumed at her offspring about not finding the killer. The longer he was out there, the angrier she got, which was not a good thing. Her children’s fear was ripe in the room, and it flared my hunger and desire to feed, but I quelled the urge and remembered the vow I had made. I was going to get better. I was not going to be driven insane by my nature.

“All of you, out of my sight.”

Her children skulked away. I watched Zhen slam her fist into the wall and the golden dragon rippled, the illusion disrupted over the concrete where she left a huge dent.

“Having a good night?”

She remembered I was in the room. Her hair hung straight to her waist, not in its usual blue mohawk. I wondered if it had been that long when she was turned. Her knuckles were bloody from their impact with the concrete. Absently, she licked the blood away and flexed and cracked them. The bones healed instantly. Her eyes were closed while she savored the taste and reined in her anger. Her cheekbones poked out like reverse horns. They moved when she opened her eyes, which burned red for a split second, and a black tongue licked the remaining blood from her lips when she looked at me.

“Brenna, now is not the moment for me to be dealing with your shit. I have a killer on the loose slaughtering my children, my loved ones. My best hunters can’t even catch the bastard.” She growled, and I heard the other in her voice.



“Zhen.” I put my hand on her shoulder and met her eyes. The vampire in me wanted to look down and back away, but the dregs of my humanity knew better. I pulled her into my embrace and remembered when I used to do this for others. “Hon, I didn’t realize there was another killing. Who was it?”

“No one you knew. I’m sorry I snapped, but just to think that a meat-puppet-hunter would kill one of my babies.”

“Not for nothing, but maybe it’s not a human that’s killing the local pagans. Maybe he’s a little off kilter, like me.”

I had her attention. “Maybe. I doubt he’s like you. You’re a unique bitch.”

“Thanks, love. The killer might want to see blood spattered around. I want to dip my fingers in it and finger paint my whole fucking house. But I won’t. What if this one can’t stop his desires? Maybe he’s targeting pagans because he has something with them. They fucked with him or something, who knows? Was your child a witch?”

Zhen nodded.

“Find out if there’re connections between pagans and vampires, if that’s possible. I bet you’ll find your answer. Maybe there’s some secret society of vampires lurking around?”

Zhen shrugged and thought about the suggestion. “So tell me, what happened when you tried to hook up with Veronica?”

I smiled sadly and drew in a ragged breath. “When I reached out, there was nothing. Not even my guides greeted me. My powers are gone. I’m beginning to deal with that. I’m accepting the idea of Veronica never being there again. Even Azrael won’t have me. There was something there between us, I thought, but who knows.”

Her face hardened at the mention of Death. “When it comes to Azrael, I know he’s been trying to comfort you, trying to act human, but you don’t want to piss him off.”

“Too late,” I muttered. “Zhen, when I was human, I’d go months without acknowledging my guides, but—”

"But you're not human. It doesn't work that way with us. When you were mortal, you heard the cry of spirits and got premonitions, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"As a human you were still connected to the cosmos; all humans are, but when you turn something on or off or make a decision as a vampire, especially something so ingrained in your soul, you disconnect completely. When you took in that first drop of blood, you were instantly removed from the world you knew, and the rules changed. When you turn your back on something so powerful, don't expect it to be there. Brenna, we know you're going crazy. Most vampires kill others at the first sign of insanity. That's the way our kind operates—survival of the fittest, but I haven't thrown you to the proverbial wolves because I've been there. My spiral lasted two centuries, and I had no one to help pull me from the wreckage.

"I was lucky I wasn't killed. I was on the verge. Hanging on by a thread because I lost my maker. I reveled in what I wanted: fucking, feeding, torturing, and playing 'vampire games,' as you love to call it. Everything you've thought of, I've done and ten times worse. My other loved it, but I hadn't dealt with the loss of my humanity or the loss of the one who sired me. When I woke from my blight, I started from scratch, built my powers all over again, and then my other half and I came to an understanding. The signs were obvious with you, but madness starts small, a splinter from reality. I know it's strange, but after the first fracture, it just gets easier to ride the wave."

A look appeared in her eyes while she recalled her past. Even now, the loss of her Master was evident after five thousand years. She still loved the one who made her. "How did he die?"

Her smile faded and her face elongated, giving her a pointed chin. "He didn't die. He turned his back on me. When I needed him the most, he severed the bond of Master and child and left me to fend for myself. So believe me, I understand your loss. At least you

know Veronica watches out for you in death, but mine, well, who knows?"

The sorrow in her voice echoed in my heart. I'd never known this about my friend. She'd suffered through time when I'd only gone on alone for a year. Her loneliness had spanned an eternity, and I didn't even know a fraction of that. I needed a way to redeem myself, but there was one thing that bothered me.

"What about Azrael?"

"Fuck him. You don't need him anymore. You said yourself that all he does is impart cryptic messages that never really help. Besides, all the angels are trouble."

I was not going to change her mind; besides, it sounded like she had something against Azrael, and this was not the best time for me to go poking for details. She would tell me if she wanted. I figured I'd work out the details of how to apologize to the celestial being a little later on. For now, my friend needed me more.

"Good." She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, but then her eyes darkened. "Brenna, I need to ask you for a favor."

"Fine," I muttered. For a moment, I thought I felt faint itching on the back of my neck, like I'd used to when my guides were trying to tell me something. But it was gone before I could recognize it. "You know I'd do anything for you. You've helped me this long. I owe you."

"I want you to find the asshole that's killing my children, be he human or undead. Since it's your idea, I think it'd be good if you take over the hunt. I'll even lend you a few of my hunters. It's always good to have more than one nose on the trail. I don't know how they'll take to you, but they'll deal with it. They might detect the insanity in you, but they wouldn't dare double-cross me. Besides, getting back into the game will give you something else to care about. Remember how you were when you wanted to beat the hell out of Julien because he killed Zach and had his claws in Miranda? You came to me and never thought we could be friends, but here we are now."

“Zhen, I don’t know. I mean, I’m not in the best shape. I can’t even go out in the sun without burning. My resistance is not the same.”

“You were just thinking that you wanted redemption. Well, here it is. Yes or no?”

She read my mind so easily and I hated her for that. But it was true. I had just thought that. I wanted a way to regain my sanity, and I was always at my best if I had something to focus on. It would help to get my mind off Veronica and Azrael, which was another reason she suggested it. Of course, she knew I couldn’t say no because I owed her a lot, so this really wasn’t a favor. It was payback.

“How can I say no to you?”

She smiled half-heartedly and touched my cheek. I swallowed, wondering what the hell I had gotten myself into.

## Chapter Thirteen

*My name is Azrael.*

Death was my domain. It had been for longer than I could remember. My past was no more than a piece of dust in my mind. Out of all the planets, none held my attention more than Earth. It was tiny compared to many of the planets in the vast galaxies I oversaw. The inhabitants were uncivilized and brutish. However, it was there I kept my view, watching the goings on and the souls of others, especially one soul in particular. It was there that a long forgotten part of me craved to walk along the shores and remember a life I hardly knew.

I gathered souls, carrying them across time and space to Her, the Creator of all things. She was my mother, my lover, my everything. My heart was always for Her. My undying love, for She had given me life. Now, my being was torn. Emotions long buried were rising like the tides. We weren't permitted them. But on rare occasions over eons, we developed the inklings of feelings.

Angels did what they were told. We were designed for specific tasks. I was a tumult trying to contain my feelings. Stars burned out; some fueled thriving planets while others became hurling meteors. The revolution of a planet even rotated backward when I tried containment, but nothing worked, not even the distractions of my brethren who tried to soothe me with their otherworldly chorus.

Michael's advice to sever my relationship with Brenna echoed in my ears. It would be best if I did, but something bound me to her. An otherworldly union that had been forged the first occasion I had spied her when she hung in between life and death. Her soul petitioned me for release. All do when it is their time, but by the instant I arrived, a single drop of demonic blood had sealed her fate. I had stayed in that brief instant, touching her essence, feeling the spark of life that was her settling back into her body, and

although the demon seed took root in her soul, something about her was special. I sensed it even then.

Souls had slipped through my grasp before, and it had not fazed me. They were erased from the Tapestry of Fate and their existences extended. But with her, my destiny had been altered. My heart became locked. Everything I had done, she had thrown back in my face, and that stirred my heart, making it boil. She knew nothing of what she had achieved. Everything she wanted was for herself.

Michael was right. The only way to liberate myself of these unwanted emotions was to sever my connection with her. My existence would be peaceful once again, and I could collect souls while listening to my brothers' celestial melodies.

## Chapter Fourteen

*My name is Brenna.*

The numbers on the clock clicked closer to twelve, and I had yet to stop staring at it. I was supposed to be at the Tearoom an hour ago. No one would want me there, save Peter. Lately, he seemed to be the only one who cared. Today was one of his days off, but I wished he would be in.

The sun was high. Xavier had left the house two hours earlier to open the place. I hadn't slept since accepting Zhen's offer. It resounded in my brain and triggered old feelings and memories from when I had a purpose. Zhen was right—I used to be motivated when I wanted to rescue everyone from all the badness in the world. Veronica had saved me from myself, and I had pulled her from an eternity of hating what she was. Azrael had said that in the few months that I'd known Veronica, I had given her more than she had ever known.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I smiled. Nothing had changed in a year, except on the inside. What Zhen had said made me realize that this was something I had to do. No one I knew had been directly affected by the killer. Both Mae and Zhen had lost friends. Most of the folks at the Tearoom were pagan and so was Peter. That in itself should've given me incentive to want to go find the asshole.

After watching the clock click to half past twelve, a feeling that I was needed overwhelmed me, although it might have been that Xavier was wondering when I would drag my carcass into the business. Oddly enough, the sensation felt like my psychic abilities reawakening, but when I concentrated, there was still an empty hole. The werewolf had no qualms about taking over the Tearoom. But if I was going to reclaim my life, I had to get back to the way I had once been, even if no one trusted me again or I never regained my psychic powers. I still had a life, a business to run, a killer to

find, a pissed off vampire who claimed to be my sister, and an angel whose heart I'd broken.

I sighed. I bit the bullet, carefully covered my face with my cloak, and left for the Tearoom.

I rode up on the elevator and walked in. Everyone was assembled around the couch in the center of the room and all looked over at me. I hung my cloak up. Xavier's arm was around Mae. Peter was on the other side, comforting her. The other psychics were gathered around, all with tears in their eyes.

"So, who died?"

Xavier motioned me into the Fire Room.

"Where the hell have you been?" he whispered, forcing his voice to be calm and quiet. "You were supposed to be here an hour and a half ago. The phone was ringing off the hook with the police on the other end when I walked in. You know what they told me? They found Lennox's body in the Common. There was very little blood. What'd you have, a late night snack? Did you have fun killing one of your own?"

I chuckled at the shock of him thinking I'd killed Lennox. I hadn't stooped that low, to kill my employees. For all I knew, he'd killed Len. He had been the one who killed Zach, but that was ancient history, and he had been following Julien's order at the time. My gut told me that it was the animal I was about to look for.

"Xavier, I didn't kill Len. I'm sorry I'm late, but at least I'm here. Trust me, what happened to Lennox won't go without punishment."

Xavier stared at me. "Did you get some sense beaten into you?"

"You have no idea," I muttered. "Look, close the Tearoom until further notice. Don't worry about payroll. Contact Len's family and see what we can do. Offer to pay for the funeral or something. Don't worry about the one who killed him."

Xavier eyed me. "What do you know?"

I pushed past him into the main room. He didn't need to know what I had signed up for. The wolf wouldn't approve. I was sure if I told him about the posse, he would frown on it, too.



"Everyone, the Tearoom's closed due to the unfortunate circumstances. Xavier's going to call Lennox's family. It is a grievous time. Be careful." I hugged everyone, including Peter, whose eyes softened some. Mae just ignored the look.

"Since when did ya start carin'? I'm surprised ya remembered your way in here. Yar cards sit'n boxes, and we've lost business because all ya do is whine. Newsflash, we're all hurtin' here," Mae steamed.

At that moment, I wanted to kick Mae's ass, but she was right in everything she said. I stared at the mural of Saturn and swore that the rings rotated, but I blinked and they were back to normal. All the psychics gazed at me, waiting to hear my answer and wishing they had the balls to stand up to me. Tears came to my eyes when I thought about what she'd said. In that instance, I felt like Edmund when he would go on a tirade. But I would never be him. Besides, he was dead, and in the end, he had been redeemed for being an ass.

"Yeah, you're right. All of you want to say it, but you haven't had the balls. Thinking I would explode or fire you on the spot. I don't blame you. Look, I know I broke down when Veronica died, and I haven't been here when I should have. It's true. But I'm here now, and I'm trying to fix things, whether you believe it or not. I never expected Lennox or anyone on the staff to get caught up with that bastard who's been hunting in Salem. I thought the Tearoom was done with its days of seeing violence, especially after Zach died. I haven't stopped caring. I just lost my way a little. I'm trying. Bear with me. This place is my home and you are my family.

"Mae, Peter, Fredryck, Sophie, you've all known me since I wasn't more than just a little country girl. Mae, you were the one who interviewed me and convinced Edmund to hire me. You were the one who gave me advice on my first reading. Peter has always been my friend, and Fredryck, well, secretive as he is, has always made me laugh. And Xavier, I hurt you the most. Miranda too. I want to make it up to everyone. I might have fallen off the wall, but I'm not completely broken. I'll get back up and get it right. Len was

my friend too, and I swear that his killer will be found. No one I protect is slaughtered without a fight.”

The Tearoom went silent. Even the candle flames stood still. No one said anything but just looked on me dumbfounded, wondering how I was going to accomplish everything.

After a moment, everyone started moving again. They gathered their coats and all headed out the door, leaving Xavier and me behind. I ignored him and focused on the task at hand. There was cleaning to do. I had to get back into the swing of things, answer the phone, and call all of our appointments to reschedule. That wouldn't help business any, but at least I wasn't canceling for any reason the way Edmund used to.

At the thought of him, my eyes sought his picture on the wall above my table along with all the pictures of the psychics who worked here. Mae was on the beach, her arms outspread to meet the breeze. She gloried in the power of the sea. Fredryck's was in shadow, and he held a candle that resembled a baton. Len stared out, stoically holding his staff, in his robes, trying to be one with nature. I smiled at the photo. He'd had plans to get them redone in all his witchy glory. Now that would never happen. Sorrow from everything threatened to overtake me, but I swallowed it and let it turn to rage.

Peter's image looked like an ex-hippie holding a tarot card with the sun glinting off of it. Then there was Edmund, staring out through a crystal ball so his reflection was superimposed. Mine was not up there because I kept it in my flat in New Orleans. Besides, I wasn't doing readings anymore, so there was no need for it. Xavier refused to have his picture taken, but at a few of the events, we had gotten him unaware. There was a picture collage in the back that now threatened to cover the entire wall. It was great that this place had seen and would go on seeing so many years. So many memories. Sometimes I wondered if the Tearoom was alive or had a consciousness of its own. Sometimes I compared it to a vampire feeding off the energy of the psychics.

I picked up some trash bags when I heard clapping behind me.

"Bravo. That was quite a performance. For a second, I almost believed it. So, how many did you have to kill to be on such a high?"

I put the trash bags down on the counter and sighed, resisting the urge to hurl them across the space and watch all the carefully placed candles come crashing down. Xavier reclined on the couch. The wolf was nowhere near his nature. It was just him. "I wasn't faking it. Look, I meant what I said, just like I meant what I said to Miranda the other day. I want to fix everything, okay?"

"Yeah, Miranda told me about the display in the café. Bravo. What're you going to do next, kill in front of everyone? Or, I know, change into a hellhound, but that would blow your cover."

My fingers hardened into talons, and they were wrapped around his neck before I could even think about what I was going to do. "Look, you filthy beast, I meant every word of it. You're good for nothing except maybe a good fuck anyway."

His cold eyes met mine, and he didn't even flinch. He could throw me off of him; he was far stronger than me. "I thought maybe you had changed, but you've just proven to me you're more like them than ever. It makes my decision final. Miranda and I are leaving by the end of the month, so you have exactly that to figure out what the fuck you're going to do. Stay out of my way until then."

His hand wrapped around mine and, in doing so, his grip crunched the bones in my wrist and broke them. A small sound escaped my lips. He smiled, pleased to see that he could still inflict pain.

"You may stink like one of them, but in the end, you'll never truly be one of them. Have a nice eternity, Brenna."

He threw me back on the couch, and I cradled my wrist as my body started to heal it. Xavier grabbed his jacket and slammed the door shut behind him. I hung my head. I had been tested, and I had failed. Now there was no way he was ever going to trust me again. I could see him and Miranda leaving in a month's time and then where would I be? The house would be empty, and there would be

no one to keep me company. Insanity would surely engulf me then. What would it matter if there was no one around to let me know I was alive? The ghosts in the house and in my own mind would drive me crazy.

“...never alone...always here...” a whisper sounded in the back of my mind. A moment of hope made me want to believe it was my guides, but that was impossible. I was just going mad, and the insanity seemed to have progressed farther than I thought.

I got up, the pain in my wrist not so mind-numbing. I glanced at my table. It was mostly barren except for papers I had to go through, time sheets and such, along with the runes I had been reading when I'd thought I was going to speak with Veronica again.

Out of the five stones spread, the second one caught my attention. It was in the shape of a B and it meant rebirth. I laughed. Maybe I was entering that phase of my life. Fate was ironic. I wasn't sure if the universe was condemning me, or maybe there was hope in it for all of us. Gazing around, I realized the owner of a psychic salon couldn't have a barren table. What would that convey? If I never got my powers back, at least I could look the part.

I went into the back room and dug through the boxes of stuff and found mine. I set several quartz crystals on the table. Next I brought out a few bags of tarot cards that I couldn't make myself open. Not yet. I wasn't ready for painted faces staring at me or a skeletal grin to warn me of death itself. I'd already seen that too many times in person. Once you met the real thing, no drawn icon lived up to it. No one knew the beauty behind the skull. I doubt few ever got to see his true face, and now I never would again.

After I was satisfied with the display, I gazed around the establishment. With pushed up sleeves, I got at it.

After dusting, mopping, taking out the trash, cleaning every imaginable surface, going through the store, rearranging the merchandise, and even straightening all the pictures until I was satisfied, three hours had gone by. For the first time in a long time,

I felt good about something. Knocks had come and gone on the door, but I ignored them.

I walked into the Fire Room and looked at the painting of the Goddess. She was the one the pagans worshiped, the one they were being killed over, her and their beliefs. She used to captivate me, standing between the stones. Now something about the mural came alive. I thought I saw her breathing. I went to touch her when the hair stood up on the back of my neck and a slight chill passed through me, but the Tearoom was drafty even with the heat on.

I shivered and ran my hands over the wall. Cool to the touch and bubbly from dust. But there was no other life, just a painted surface. With my nose to the wall, I swore that I saw her chest move. I went to touch it again when a sudden crash jarred my attention back to the main room.

Edmund's picture had fallen from the wall, landing face down on my table, hardly disturbing anything. "Are you up there watching me, or have I pissed you off enough that you don't want anything to do with me either?" I didn't expect an answer, and I didn't get one. I stared down at the glass and picked it up. Somehow, the framed glass wasn't broken. "Man, I wish you were here. I could use your help."

After a minute of thinking there would be some kind of response, I shook my head and hung the picture back up on the nail. I was glad I hadn't been in the chair, or it would have been my head.

I giggled, hearing knocking again on the door. Opening it, I found a brown-haired boy around twenty staring at me. He was dressed in an oversized leather jacket and blue jeans, a typical college guy who couldn't afford new clothes.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I was wondering if you were open. I wanted a reading with Lennox. He told me to ask for him next time I was in town."

Shock settled in. I ran a hand through my hair, aware that my wrist still didn't feel right. "I'm sorry. We're closed due to a death on staff. Len won't be reading here anymore. I'm sorry."

“Man—geez—I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I mean—”

“It’s all right. Thank you. Look, we’ll be closed for a while, but here’s my card. Come back in a couple of weeks or so and I’m sure we can hook you up with a reader. Now just isn’t the best time.”

“Great, thanks. I appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

He turned and pushed the elevator button. I closed the door and slid onto the couch. This was the most I had been up for a whole day, and I was drained. Sunset was a few hours away, and I was going to make good use of them. With my mind, I locked the door before drifting off into sleep.

\* \* \* \*

I found myself on Revere Beach listening to the crashing waves and rolling surf. The stars were shining through the haze. The horizon was empty, even with the silence. I had been drawn here for some unknown reason. Something in the waves and the sheer power of it captivated me. Or maybe it was the dream I had.

Blackness around me again, locked in a place where drumming filled my soul. There was intense anger and a sense of loss. I had been sucked into some kind of black hole. In this dream, I heard chanting. Then there were screams and an overwhelming sense of completion and power. My hunger surfaced and I wanted to wreak havoc, to visit my nightmares in the flesh, but I was flung back into the void where nothing else existed.

Just thinking about it made me shiver in my cold flesh, and I wanted to be warm—not filled with the warmth of life, but with another being near me so I wouldn’t be alone in the vastness of eternity. It wasn’t Veronica my mind settled on. It was Azrael. My thoughts drifted back to the first time he had held me close. The feel of his wings wrapped around me, keeping me safe. He had smelled like churches and funerals, of lavender, jasmine, and lilies, of places holy. My hand had settled on his cool chest, and for a moment, I’d seen into his soul, if an angel had one. That moment stayed with me, and the ghost of his presence surrounded me and

tore at the shroud of my heart. At that moment, I'd wanted so much more to blossom between us. Now, that would never happen.

Zhen told me to write him off, but I couldn't. It'd been a week, and I was pretty sure he was still pissed, but I had to try. Part of me was vacant without him. The lights were on, but I knew no one was home. I'd never thought that I'd miss the mysterious messages he gave me or even his annoying presence. I'd blamed him for taking my lover. It was all I'd thought about last year when he'd come around. But he was doing his job. Using his precious time to come and check on me, moving away from his duties to check on a demon. Now, I felt despair for turning him away.

"Azrael," I whispered to the empty night. "You were right to do what you did. Nothing like a good wake up to eternity alone to make one realize how much of a shit I've been."

"What do you know of right and wrong?" His voice was crisper than the wind coming off the sea.

I turned behind me and saw him there, a virtual silhouette in the night, blending with the shadows, an inkblot in the darkness. My heart stood still and I swallowed air. Maybe the rune had been right. Maybe I was making a rebirth. Maybe...no, there were no maybes with him. He was part of the darkness, so not even his majestic wings were revealed to me.

Slowly, I walked to him, hearing the sand crunching under my feet. It was a lonely sound, one I used to never enjoy when I was human, and now I realized I had taken it for granted. How could I look at him after what I had done? I had taken much for granted.

"Can you forgive me?"

Azrael laughed. The sound pierced my heart. "What do you know of forgiveness, little vampire? Just like all of your species, you only consider yourself and use others to get your whims. I witnessed your little prank with the human. Most impressive for one who considers herself nothing a part the species she was bred from."

I met his gaze, wondering how he knew that, and wished I hadn't because there was nothing of the compassion I had once seen. "I'm sorry you saw that. I got caught up in the moment and wasn't thinking clearly. I regret what I did. I know I hurt you by pushing you away when you were being my friend. Things got out of hand. I realize that now. If I could take it all back, I would. You don't know how much it would mean to me if you could forgive me. I'm so sorry. I never meant it. If you know what I did to the boy, then you know I am truly trying to make it right. I never meant to hurt you or the human. But you—"

His eyes lightened. Hope blossomed in my heart. For a split second, I saw my reflection in his eyes instead of the never-ending blackness of skull-sockets. I wanted to reach out and touch him, for him to take me in his arms and hold me, but my delusion turned to gut-wrenching pain. His eyes held me paralyzed. His true feelings emerged. Raw emotion, emptiness, rage, and despair flowed into my mind. The coldness of the grave penetrated my very being. He had done this to me once before to get my attention, but this was more than I had bargained for. He turned his full power on me and I was on my knees, not able to look away, screaming inside.

"Never assume anything. Never dare contact me or even think of me. You are nothing, just a different branch of the demonic race that begot your kind. My brethren or I will pass judgment if you seek me out again, and you shall wish you were never created. Now go crawl back to the hell you were spawned in."

Tears ran down my cheeks with each stab of his disgust and hurt that poured into me, swallowing my soul, trying to consume my already fractured mind. "Azrael, please. I'm so sorry. Please—" A sharp pain sliced across my cheek and I landed hard on the sand, my hair caught with seaweed.

"I am Death, vampire. My power extends to the outer dimensions of time. Feel my wrath and see me for what I truly am."

His angelic exterior evaporated. A long, black tattered robe replaced his suit. The breeze from the sea caught the frays, and I saw the beach through the gaping holes. Skeletal fingers clutched a



scythe that could easily take my head. His beautiful face was masked with a graying skull with sockets that went on for an eternity of blackness. His grin was fierce, and the hood hid most of his face. This was Death. This was what so many had written about, the mythical being that most saw when it was their time to die. Hardly any saw the face behind the fleshless exterior. It was a privilege to behold. My heart stood still under his power as my blood literally froze.

Tears stopped on my cheeks and became icicles. His power was too much, and it overwhelmed me. The torture of his rage and raw emotion went on and on. Galaxies died in my thoughts. His mind dumped pain and anguish into my soul. I thought I knew loss and pain from losing Veronica, but that was nothing compared to all the suffering that went with his office, that he had seen, created.

I couldn't cry anymore, and his power was absolute. I didn't know how long I was under his thrall except to say that I wished I was dead and before long, I thought I was.

\* \* \* \*

There was nothing for hours. Pain and cold torment engulfed me. The icy hand of Death had touched my soul. I didn't know if he had left or if he watched me suffer.

I was aware of the passage of time, but I could do nothing about it. I was frozen in the sand. When the sun rose, I felt it on my face, moving higher in the sky, growing brighter until my cloak did nothing to stop its intense rays from reaching my skin. As it rose, some of its warmth melted the ice, relinquishing the torment of the angel, but it wasn't fast enough. The higher it climbed the more aware I became, but was still unable to control my limbs. When my senses started returning, I noticed the smell of burning meat. But I still couldn't move or even feel the pain of the sun as it ate away my skin. It was acid moving through the layers of clothes and skin, peeling away the flesh all over my body. And after being out in the direct light for over two hours, I was roasting.

I opened my eyes a little. Feeling came back, but I had to close them again. I remembered when Veronica had saved me from Devon. She had flown from New Orleans to Boston, and when I woke up, her skin had been black and peeling off as new skin formed underneath it. It had taken hours of her sleeping before she was completely healed because the sun had eaten her down to her bones. If she had stayed in the light any longer, she would have died.

Now, with the sun beating on me the way it was, Azrael was going to have to take my soul. My cloak had long ago gone up in flames. My vision was blurry, and even with the cold of Azrael's power, the gaping hole he left in my heart would never leave me. My body was light and seared with pain. This was it. I surrendered to the torture.

It was a strange sensation because, even though I sensed there was barely any flesh left on my body and it was only minutes before the sun would do me in, I was clinging to my life. I guess this was how an earthbound spirit felt, trapped forever in a plane of existence, doomed to wander until no one remembered them. This was Azrael's punishment, keeping me locked to the remnants of my body so I would understand that the sins I had done had to be paid for in blood.

My heart died, my blood leaked from every orifice until it boiled away. My eyes melted, and the fire from the sun charred my bones, leaving hardly anything except a few pieces of broiled cloth. Then, the fire left me, and I had a sense of coolness. Strong hands closed around me. There was something hovering on the edge of my consciousness, but I couldn't make contact with it. It was like Azrael but different, more grounded and yet...but no, I was just dreaming, and finally, oblivion took me.

\* \* \* \*

*Hey, you're awake. Zhen's voice was clear in my mind, but when I tried to speak, my world was nothing but suffering. Don't talk. Just think. You're barely alive. God, Brenna, what fucking happened? I find*

*you in my lair with one of my children freaking out because of how you look. How did you end up this way?*

Consciousness hurt and all I wanted was sleep. My distress was beyond even that of my hunger, but blood would rejuvenate me. Still, I was glad to be in the hands of my friend. I chuckled inwardly, knowing I should have listened to Zhen.

*Azrael.*

*Oh, Brenna, didn't I tell you to leave him alone? Well, I won't tell you I told you so. You look like you've been charbroiled. You must have pissed him off. Tell me about it when you're well. Drink and sleep. You can go after the killer later.*

*You remembered?*

*Of course. I wouldn't forget something so important. Sleep now. Her power pushed me to unconsciousness.*

*Tell Xavier. He'll be wondering where I am. Tell—*

*Hush, child. It shall be done.*

\* \* \* \*

I awoke in great pain, but pain meant I was healing. Blood bloomed in my nose as it went down my throat. It wasn't just Zhen feeding me, but others of her kin. I tasted her spice in their life-giving liquid. While I slept, someone watched over me, the same presence that had saved me. I tried to make contact, but it was beyond me.

I was grateful to all while I mended, but it was taking so long. I felt time passing. I had already been here a week and a half, and I could barely sit up. Zhen kept me company. Nathan stayed by my side in case I needed anything. He was a great nursemaid but kept on me all the time, saying he was glad to wait on his Mistress' friend. Mistress wouldn't share her blood with just anyone. I smiled, nodded, and allowed sleep to carry away the pain. I avoided looking at my blackened skin, which reminded me of an over-grilled hotdog.

More days went by. I healed faster, and the blood of my caregiver began to be replaced by human blood. My dead skin

flaked off, revealing baby pink flesh. Pain still influenced me, but I was mobile even though I couldn't stand bright light.

From what Zhen had told me, there was barely anything left of my body save bones with some charred flesh clinging to it. My head was mostly intact minus ears, eyes, nose, lips, and flesh. They had all burned away. But my heart was still whole, albeit a little overdone. I should have died, but no, it was because of Azrael's torment that I remained locked in a burnt husk.

Strangely enough, as I wandered the tunnels of Zhen's lair, I wasn't mad at him. I understood his anger. I had allowed him to feel something an angel was never supposed to. He had looked out for me, and I had spurned him. He had shown me the horrors of the world, and they were burned within my mind forever. That and his power had frozen me to the beach. It was I who had wronged him, and I would never be able to say I was sorry or I would face punishment again at his hand. I doubted there would be another saving grace.

Without Zhen's ancient blood, I would've never healed as fast as I had. If I'd sipped straight human blood, it would have taken decades. I was grateful to her for that. Soon, the pain became a faint memory. While I recuperated, I thought on Zhen, Mae, Lennox, everyone who had been affected by the killer. I owed it to them all to find the one who had murdered the witches. Zhen had told me that three other bodies had been discovered and the city was virtually in a panic. Salem had become a ghost town. All the new age shops were closing early and canceling events. She'd kept her word and had someone tell Xavier what happened, but I had no word on anything after that.

Almost recovered, I was itching to go on the hunt, and I felt something like my old self. My grief had lessened, and acceptance that I no longer had my psychic abilities had set in. Even my desires were gone. I was parched all the time, but the thought of torturing humans evaporated. I'd been reborn. Of course, Zhen would say my insanity was gone because I'd accepted all the horrendous things I'd done and my subconscious was no longer

eating away at me. Maybe she was right. Or maybe it had been cured because of what Azrael had shown me.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're better. Still a little rough around the edges, I think." Zhen handed me a bottle of distilled blood.

A total of three weeks had passed. It was time for me to get back to my life. Nathan had been sad to see me leave and had even asked his Mistress' permission to visit me. Zhen found this hilarious and told him it was up to me. I just shivered at the thought. He reminded me way too much of Renfield from Dracula.

Now I was in her room under the Black Rose, listening to the music above. It was good to be back in the normal world again, even though any source of bright light was blinding, so she gave me a pair of sunglasses. My tolerance to the sun was almost nil, an hour at best, and my favorite cloak had been ruined. That sucked because I had it made for me during my first year at the Tearoom. *Oh, well. Shit happens.*

I sat listening to the music, amazed at how everything looked after my brush with death. Zhen had illusionary dim candles on the walls. My eyes picked up every little detail in the room. Colors seemed brighter, sounds were louder, and even the feeling of dust settling on my skin was more alive than anything. I was experiencing the world for the first time. I loved life and wanted to keep on living it, and to get the asshole who had slain one of mine.

"So, you ready to meet your posse?"

"Sure, we have to get this over with sometime. I just hope they don't mind taking orders from an insane vampire."

Zhen smiled, showing me her lengthening fangs. "If you haven't noticed, honey, you ain't insane anymore. Whatever you did while you were asleep was the best thing you could have ever done. The stench of insanity no longer perfumes you. Seriously, you're all better. I guess burning away your blood helped to put things right back in your head. Or maybe that was just divine intervention."

I chuckled. "Yeah, we know where divine intervention got me. Whatever it was, I'm glad I don't smell."

“Mistress, forgive the intrusion, but you summoned us.”

I glanced over and noticed three vampires all standing in the doorway. They had all been so silent that I hadn’t felt them enter. I realized these were the hunters I was going to be leading. They kept their eyes dutifully cast down on their Mistress, but their leader stared at me. It made me uncomfortable. He thought he was my equal, and the hackles rose on my back. He gave me a silent challenge.

This was one of Zhen’s eldest children. This vampire had seen several thousands of years while the others had only been around for several hundred. It was the vibe I got off of them in terms of their power. I understood why the older one would think he was above me. He thought his Mistress was belittling him by putting someone so young in charge.

“Drago, it’s good to see you again.” Zhen gave her child a hug, which was returned stiffly. It was obvious she still cared for her offspring. After she released him, he stepped aside, and she looked at the other two behind him. “Who are these beauties you’ve been hiding from me?”

Both of the children stepped forward and didn’t even look up. One was a black, lithe, exquisite specimen. Her skin was dark with a slight sheen—this one was from Africa. I wondered if she had been a slave or caught in the trade ages ago. Her hair was done in small braids that hung down her back. The other was the complete opposite of Zhen, a hulking, towering man who screamed Viking even though he was wearing leather pants, had lip piercings, nipple rings, and a spike protruding from his nose. He was bald with a long scar running down his neck to the center of his chest. His eyes were so light blue that I wondered if he was blind, but as my mind moved over him, his eyes darted toward me.

“Drago, they are wonderful. I see why you’ve kept them from me, but I forgive you. Is the rest of your brood like them?”

“No, Mistress, these are my only children. They have served me well. Sherna was a Zulu warrior and Viktor, a Norse swordsman. Will you accept them?”

I watched the exchange with mild humor. Some of the vampiric code was just bullshit. It took me biting my lip to keep from laughing. Drago gave me a dirty look when the two knelt before Zhen and kissed the inside of her wrists.

"Children, you are welcome here. Come and go as you please, but it shall not be me who leads you on the hunt. Brenna will be leading you. She, too, has lost one of her own."

I got up. The others came over to me. They glanced at me once and then cast their eyes down like good little undeadlings. "It's nice to meet you both. I'm sure you'll live up to the standards to which your Master holds you."

Both of them muttered something. Zhen handed them each bottles of distilled blood. She offered me one, but my body craved fresh human blood. I wanted to cull the sweetness of the pain, to know I would satiate my hunger on my own now. I was completely healed, save the emptiness where Azrael had left his sorrow behind.

"Drago, is it?" I asked. He half bowed while never taking his eyes from mine.

"Yes. And you are my Mistress' lover, I take it, or she would not have given you such a high responsibility. We are to be your bodyguards, I understand."

I stared at Zhen, but she shrugged her shoulders, not responsible for what her child thought. "Um, I think you misunderstood my position, and no offense, but I'm leading the group. I can handle myself. Trust me; I've been in worse situations than hunting the dregs of our kind. I'm no novice."

"Forgive me, but you are so young and Mistress cares for you. I assume she doesn't want you hurt. But we have had experience tracking the insane among our kind."

I glanced at Zhen. "Drago is an Enforcer. Many fear him. But there is no need for you to, considering what you've been through and your experience with Death."

Now it was Drago's turn to stare, wondering what his Mistress was talking about. He gawked at her, and there was a moment of

silence. They were discussing something. Then, he looked at me. "You've spoken with Lord Death?"

I laughed. "I've done more than that. He won't let me die, it seems. First, he saved my life and then he left me for a crispy critter, so even when I should be dead, I don't die."

"That could prove quite convenient, but how is it you've come to be so involved with the High Being? If I may ask. You see, I've only known one other to be so intimate with an angel."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. I wondered what exactly it was that Drago had to tell me about Azrael. I was curious to learn all I could about the angel since he was always so secretive. Maybe Zhen's child knew something that would help me contact Azrael or get back in his good graces.

"Shouldn't we be talking about finding the one who killed your brothers and sisters?" Zhen chimed in.

I nodded, forgetting about Azrael. He was always going to be there, and so was I. The others stood and we began to talk about the killings. All the victims were pagans. Most were humans, but a few had been undead. Zhen had her minions look into it and found there were killings across the country, but there was nothing unusual. The city was abuzz with it, especially since there had been more slayings in the past three weeks while I had been out of commission.

Each pagan had been tortured with some kind of medieval device used during the Inquisition. Several bodies had been found with their thumbs and toenails ripped out, others had their limbs stretched on the rack, and some had their tongues cut out while they had been bled. The atrocities went on. Others appeared to have been stuck inside an iron maiden, but the cops were keeping it tight-lipped. Zhen had her children everywhere and, of course, she was so good at reading minds.

We talked about plans until near dawn hours, enough so my skin began to itch when the sun hovered on the horizon, waiting for the Earth to turn so it could spread its warmth on the land. Drago wanted to keep planning, but the trail was dead until



another body showed up. Zhen's minions had already proven that. They were coming up with nothing. So I got up and the younger ones rose, too, but I motioned them down.

*You sure you're okay to go home? Your body sustained a lot of damage. You might not be completely healed. You know, I've never seen one of us sustain so much injury and still be alive.*

*I'll manage. Besides, I have others to think about besides myself. Yeah, well, enter in the punishment of the angels.*

*It's good to hear that you aren't thinking about yourself. But do me a favor. Don't go looking for Azrael. I think he made his point.*

I paused and met her gaze. Azrael was a touchy subject. It was my fault and I had to set things right, if not for my sake, at least for his. *I'll leave Azrael out of the mix for now, but you know how I feel, Zhen. One day, I'll have to face him. But it won't be soon. I promise.*

Zhen only grunted. Drago eyed me. I felt his stare trying to penetrate my thoughts, but he couldn't. I only caught enough of his to know he thought I was a liability. I didn't care what he thought. This was a favor to Zhen because she'd saved my life.

Above ground, the pre-dawn purple mixed with the haze of the already awakening city. Trash collectors moved their trucks along the narrow streets, cars cranked to life. The pressure of the light pressed on me while I walked along Commonwealth Avenue toward home. It was an hour hike, but I had the time. Besides, I needed the fresh air to clear my head and try to sort some of the shit out in there.

A lot of it had to do with Azrael. Though he had done damage to my body, paralyzing me to be burnt to a crisp even, there was still a lingering cold hollowness around my heart where Azrael had left a touch of his power. Veronica was beyond me, and I had to accept that. Now I had to focus on the ones who were still alive and within my reach including Xavier, Miranda, and the Tearoom crowd.

I climbed the stairs to the brownstone, marveling at how quiet everything was. Last night had been a full moon, and Xavier was off wherever he went, but his scent and Miranda's were strong, the

aroma of cinnamon. I swallowed and held back tears, thinking of Veronica. She'd always smelled like the spice.

I was okay. I moved into the kitchen and decided on eating some solid food. I opened the fridge and found an apple and some cheese. The back door opened, slamming into the wood. I looked up, letting the refrigerator shut on its own momentum. I froze when I saw her.

Miranda was naked with bits of flesh torn and bitten out. Claw marks raked over her upper thigh, slicing it to pink shreds that were almost healed and four small punctures that seeped right above her heart, wounds caused only by talons that had caressed her heart, ones that would leave her with scars for the rest of her life. The other wounds would heal. She'd acquired some of the unique physiological abilities to reshape herself. In the end, she might live longer than a normal human, but she would die.

"What the hell happened?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. I'm surprised you'd show your face after abandoning us."

"What the fuck are you talking about? I've been recovering for the past three weeks. Didn't Xavier tell you I was caught in the sun and had a run in with Azrael?"

"Yeah, I think he mentioned it. But you're immune to the sun, so find another excuse." She tried to push past me, but I grabbed her upper arm.

"Look, it doesn't matter where I've been or if you believe me or not. What matters is what happened to you. Now I'm not going to ask again." I motioned for her to sit. The sight and scent of her blood made my stomach growl, and I no longer wanted the apple and cheese.

"It's a long story."

"I have until the sun burns out." I got up, grabbed a cloth, and started dabbing her wounds. She hissed when I touched the gashes around her heart.

Miranda sighed and knew I wasn't going to let her get away so easily. She paused, and I sensed Mira near the surface. For a

moment, I caught the whiff of garbage and shit that our kind smelled of, but underneath it was a faint hint of decay. The scent faded; Miranda was back, but the aroma troubled me.

"I needed to clear my head after I shut down the cafe. It was a rough shift and Claire called in sick. Once outside, I lost myself in the sights and sounds of the night. You know how intoxicating it can be to hear a pigeon cooing or a couple fucking on the third floor of their house. I lost my hold and Mira stirred. She wanted to feed. Xavier's blood isn't cutting it anymore. I, we, want to feel our hands buried in flesh, covered in blood, drunk on fear."

Miranda's eyes dilated and a black forked tongue licked her lips. I touched one of her open wounds. She jumped and her tongue shifted to normal.

"Sorry. Anyway, she was more cunning than before."

"You didn't let her out, did you?" I snapped.

Miranda growled. "Do you want to hear this or not?" She shoved me backward. I was surprised by her growing strength, and that worried me.

"I'm sorry. I'm just concerned. I know I haven't been here when you needed me. I was hoping I could make it up to you. Please continue."

I threw the cloth in the garbage. She bit into the apple, tearing out a large chunk. As she chewed, she stared at her hands, which I noticed had become a little longer. "She was so sincere, just asked for a little blood and promised she would go back. I wasn't thinking, and it gets so hard. I don't know how others do it. I let Mira out, we—or she—got into a fight, but I don't know with whom. I know I didn't let her kill the other vampire. She wanted its blood, she wanted to be complete, but I stopped her. God, I remember what it was like, and I still want it. It would solve so much. The power that went with it. The feeling of life."

Miranda began shaking. Mira wanted back in. Her eyes turned black and her whole body contorted.

"So you think you can control us, bitch? You think you have us all to yourself and convinced the human she can fight me off? Well,

you know nothing. She didn't stop me. Its blood was insufficient to complete my change. The blood eats away at the human in me, and the more I take, the better."

"If you finish your transformation, what then? Will you cage Miranda? Will you make her suffer an eternity locked away in the dark?"

"She would do the same to me."

"Only because you've never given her any reason to want to let you out. Have you tried to be civil?"

Mira thought about it and shrugged her shoulders. "And what if she doesn't listen? The fighting between us will never stop, and it must. We must become whole. We were not made to live as halflings. No, I'll kill until I am complete, and my other will not have the body."

I grabbed Mira's chin, forcing her to look at me. "What if you didn't have to kill to be whole? What if you were offered the blood?"

Her eyes grew gray because Miranda came into the mix. "Are you offering?"

I swallowed. It was the last thing I wanted, but it might be the only course of action without having to lose Miranda. "Maybe, but you both would have to wait a while until matters settle down. If you can do that, then yes."

"It had better not be too long." Mira pushed past me, and I wondered if I had condemned them both.

## Chapter Fifteen

*My name is Azrael.*

The stars drifted and burned out from the center of the universe where they glided further from the void. I gazed upon these wonders silently. Thousands of dead souls cried out to be released from their fleshy torment. I disregarded them and let the lesser angels gather those who didn't need my assistance.

For eons, the movements of galaxies and dimensions had kept me occupied and sated, but for the first time, I was restless. Meteors streaked across the heavens. Their fiery tails no longer brought me joy or peace of mind. Something gnawed in the back of my thoughts, a hunger I had denied for centuries.

The cries of the dying burned my ears, calling out for peace from the torment of their existence. It had been my position to return them to the Source, the One who bestowed me with life, exalted me above other creatures. The bliss of being with my brothers and sisters, hearing their voices in the chorus of life was magnificent, but now I tuned them out, even those of the dead I was supposed to bring back to Her arms.

When I reunited a soul with Her, I had always felt elation. Now, with the lesser angels delivering souls, I found no rapture in the simple duty. The universe was strewn with newborn stars and celestial matters that the human race had no name for and might never see. It was unlike me to wish a break from the monotony of my years, but as I watched the souls being held by my Mistress, for the first time, I was weary. The calls of awaiting phantasms culled nothing in my heart. But the denied hunger did—a hunger for warmth and power and for some unnamable force that would drive away my despair and return me to peace.

## Chapter Sixteen

*My name is Brenna.*

Encompassing darkness with only pinpoints of light. There was no air, and all I felt was a gnawing hunger. Echoing, tormenting screams of agony filled my head, worse than any ghosts I heard begging for attention. The sound penetrated into the deepest recesses of my mind. More screams and then blurred images. The scent of blood filled my thoughts. The once dulled voices were becoming clearer, but I still couldn't understand the chanting. It was one word repeated over and over again. Through it all, there was still darkness, but below it was a thud, loud enough that my eyes snapped open.

I bolted out of bed with my heart thumping against my chest, racing with fear from my dream. I swallowed and was amazed that I was sweating and shaking.

"Brenna, are you awake? Are you even in there?" Xavier grumbled.

I took a deep breath and tried to get over my nightmare. This one was worse than before, and I wondered what they meant. Vampires rarely dreamed, and I'd had more dreams in the past few months than I had had in the past three years.

Maybe Zhen was wrong, and I was still slightly insane. Maybe it was just another throwback to Azrael's torment.

Thinking about it, my mind told me everything was working fine and I felt good. Slightly tired, but my body was still repairing the damage from being charbroiled. I had to feed on human blood sooner or later. All the vampire blood I had ingested would begin to eat away at me. Tonight would be a good night to do that.

"Brenna, I can smell you; now answer the damn door."

"What do you want, Xavier? I'm up." I opened the door when I heard the low growl in the back of his throat.

His eyes passed over me. I realized my robe was partially open, exposing my tit. His nostrils flared and his eyes grew green, but when he realized I noticed, he looked away. "There are some creatures here for you. I suggest you get dressed and come down before Miranda gets back."

He left. I pulled on a black T-shirt and jeans and focused my senses. I heard three slow heartbeats, Drago and his crew. Just what I needed.

Downstairs, Drago sat on the couch while his other minions were looking out the window watching the traffic. All of them were on edge. The tension in the air was thick enough to bite.

"What do you want, Drago?"

"Have you forgotten our mission so conveniently? Another body has been found. Again, it is one of our Mistress' children. We all mourn the loss felt by our most revered Mother." Drago bowed his head while the others followed suit. I didn't know what to do, but I didn't have to worry. Xavier came waltzing in.

"Brenna, what the hell are they still doing here?"

Before I knew it, Sherna had her hand wrapped around the werewolf's throat. Her fingers had formed into talons, ready to strike, with her mouth a maw of sharp teeth. Xavier had gone half furry and half man. His claws raked across Sherna's chest, spraying blood all over the floor. Viktor, on a delayed reaction, wrapped his arms around Xavier's throat and tried to pull him off of his blood-sister.

I sat back and watched the scene, finding it interesting the two vampires would go after Xavier for breaking up their moment of silence. Then again, from what I knew of vampire etiquette, he might have committed a grievous sin. My knowledge of the vampire world had grown over the past year while hanging out with Zhen, but I was never brought up in the society.

"Are you going to get your dog off of my children or do I have to do it myself?" Drago asked.

"He's not mine to command. You want to call him off, then call off your minions. Xavier's an equal here."

“How can you deem that whelp your equal? All wolves are lackeys. Insane vampires have more purpose than they do.”

“If you think that, then why are werewolves considered such a high commodity among your kind? You might consider them lower than dirt, but those who possess them are always higher than those who don’t. The society has to make up its mind about their kind.”

“So, you let the dog rule your den. An interesting fact, and why do you think yourself above us? We are all descended from the same blood. Our Mistress would drive her talons through your heart if she heard what you said. If she didn’t hold you in such high esteem, I would do the deed myself. I don’t see what she saw in you to grace you with this life.”

This had me shocked. I’d assumed Drago knew that I was a breed apart. I had no idea where he got the idea I was descended from Zhen’s bloodline, not that I wouldn’t have been honored, but that was interesting. I’d assumed Zhen had filled him in on my background. I guess she hadn’t, and it made me wonder all the more about him.

“Look, Drago, your Mistress didn’t turn me. Up until a year ago, I wanted to kill her because I thought she was the one who ordered my maker dead. It’s only been since then we’ve become friends. We aren’t lovers. But that isn’t the point. I don’t care what you think about me. We have to work together, so get your children off the werewolf, or I’ll wrap my talons around your heart. Is that clear?”

Drago smiled at that comment and, instantly, his children were by his side, panting and healing from their wounds while Xavier transformed back into human form. The elder vampire grumbled something. Xavier stared at me. I sighed and grabbed the werewolf by the arm and dragged him into the kitchen, knowing full well that the others would be able to hear me anyway, but at least I had some semblance of privacy.

“What the hell were you doing back there? You didn’t have to attack them.”



Xavier wrenched out of my grip and sent me back a couple of steps. Werewolves were revered for their physical strength and could out bench most undeads. If he wanted, he could have sent me through the wall.

"I do what I need to protect myself. Now what the fuck are they doing here? I'm not your minion. I'll not be ordered around again. Damn you." His fist hit the table and it cracked in two, leaving the wooden antique nothing more than firewood.

I put my hands up. "I know you're not my servant. Over the past year, the vampire in me was getting the best of me. That isn't an excuse because I don't have their beast, but I'm better now. I'm trying to do the right thing, and if you believe it or not, they're here to help. I meant what I said about you not being my servant. I want to set things right with everyone, and this is a start. I know Zhen told you I was caught in the sun and you didn't tell anyone. Not even Miranda. You're an asshole for that. She came in last night cut to shreds."

"You think I really believe your sob story about the sun? Of course I didn't tell Miranda because you gave up your rights to her a long time ago. You're going insane. I can smell it and so can the others in the other room. I don't give a damn what you think. I hope they rip you to pieces and we won't have to deal with you anymore. Brenna, I thought you were different from the others. I only wished that I could have saved Miranda before that thing in her evolved. It's driving her crazy. If you cared for her, you'd try to help. But no, you get caught up in the fucking bullshit games they play."

"Xavier, I came home last night and Miranda walked in naked with four puncture wounds around her heart. Mira is wreaking havoc. She was almost killed. Mira will keep getting out and killing other vampires until she's completely turned, and then she'll lock Miranda away. Miranda countered that she wanted to be whole. She's tired of fighting her other half. If she continues on the path she is now, then she'll be just like Julien and you'll lose her, too."

"And I bet you offered to turn her, oh exalted one."

"As a matter of fact, I did." I turned and rejoined the others in the living room, letting my hunger creep over me. I welcomed the thought of hunting. The rising silver moon began the night song that only the dark creatures heard. Underneath it were the vibrations of life that pressed down around me. The others were getting restless, and Drago was going to leave without me. He was tiring of my ignorance in dealing with the werewolf, as he put it.

"Ready to go?" I asked.

"And you know where the other body was found, do you?" Drago responded.

"Lead the way, Drago. I'm in no mood for games. I'm hungry. Take me to the body and then I can tell you what I know." I closed my eyes and wished I could contact my guides for some kind of information. I never thought I would miss their guidance from beyond. I missed their tickling on the back of my brain when they wanted to tell me something. It was annoying, but I had missed it. I didn't know if they were there, but at least I could try because I wasn't getting anything except that, by the look of the body, it was the same killer. I wasn't getting any idea where he was, though. It had been a while since I had realized how much I relied on my otherworldly abilities before I turned my back on them.

*Are you guys up there?* For a long while there was nothing but a long silence, dead and black. When I was about to give up, I heard something echoing over a long distance.

*We are here. We have always been here. Waiting.*

A surge of hope filled my soul, and a great weight was lifted off my shoulders. They were there. I wasn't completely alone in the world anymore. I concentrated. Their weight grew heavier on my mind as they came closer to the realm I existed on. *I need your help.*

*Do you truly need our help, or are you acting on selfish reasons? Are you showing off for the ones you lead? Or do you need us to be part of your life once again? If you turn us away once more, we shall not return, and you shall be left with an empty void. What's your choice?*

*No. What I did was wrong. I never should've shunned you. It wasn't your fault for not warning me about Veronica. Or maybe you couldn't tell me, but I don't want to be without you again. Will you help me now?*

*We will always help you, but you must earn back what was lost. For now, know that the one you seek is of your kind. It kills to gather power. That is all we can give you now, but more shall come.*

*Thank you.*

*You should not thank us now, Raven. We are not on the same footing we were before. You must understand what you have done, how it throws off the balance, and we must reintegrate back into the Tapestry of your life. There are consequences for everything, but know this—we shall be here for you if you need us in a time of peril.*

Their voices faded away, and I was thrown into my body. My head spun from the sudden sling shooting back. I had been out of practice for a year. I thought about what they said and wondered what their message meant about consequences, but I figured it had to do with the way I had been treating everyone and not just them. But to know that I was not alone anymore gave me a glint of hope in my desolate future.

"So, has the great psychic found anything out about the body? Or are we on a wild goose chase, as the humans say?"

I turned to stare at Drago. He really was getting on my nerves, and now that I was more aware of my body, I was also very hungry and wanted to swat him. But I held in my temper. It would not do good to start a war with one of Zhen's children, especially when we were supposed to be working together. "Drago, as much as I love your wonderful interruptions, the more you do it, the less time I have to concentrate. For your information, this is not a wild goose chase. The one we seek kills pagans because he wants their power. But that is all I know for now."

"Great, you drag us out here and then you tell us nothing. What good are you to our Mistress when you can't even answer the simplest questions?" He motioned to his children and they picked up the body, leaving me in a blur that only came with age. I was left with nothing but the rotting smell of garbage and exhaust

fumes coming from the buses dropping off their loads at the subway station.

I shook my head and wished I could have helped more, but it was not my place. In the end, I would solve the mystery. But for now, with no other leads and no more bodies, I was hungry and decided to go looking for a meal.

The night enveloped my skin and helped clear my senses. I was glad to be hunting after I had been cooped up in Zhen's lair for so long. Besides, I had some sense of belonging again because my guides had come back. Now that they were there, I wondered if all my psychic abilities were bound to come along with them.

My shield wrapped around me, I flew to Boston Garden and came across the homeless sitting on benches. I scanned them, listening to their heartbeats, smelling them, seeing which ones were close to death. There were a couple breathing heavily, and the aroma of their blood was diseased, but that didn't bother me since I was immune to any type of human infection.

Part of my dismissed nature called for me to ravage these poor souls. In some respect, I could bring them mercy, a way to take them away from the pain of this life. Something in me knew I could have done more if I tried, but whatever that was exactly was beyond me.

I walked slowly over to a man with a grungy-looking beard. He was lying over a trash bag with clothes and papers sticking out of its numerous holes. These were all his worldly possessions. A dirt-stained trench coat half-covered him. I almost had pity for him, but it would be better to put him out of his misery than to let him continue on. I pulled away his coat and turned down his collar, assaulted by the stench of bathless days, dumpster diving, and subway grate sleeping, but I shut down my sense of smell and let my teeth slide into his skin.

His blood hit me instantly, rushing to the places that were still not quite repaired, clearing away the cobwebs in my brain, and wiping out the bitchy mood Drago had put me in. The rapture of his blood captured me. The warmth filled me, and part of me

wanted to feel his heart squeezed between my fingers, blood dripping down my wrist where I could lick at it like melted ice cream on a hot day.

That was not me. A hand clamped down on my shoulder, bringing me back to reality and leaving me with only half a meal. I turned quickly. I grabbed the arm of my attacker and growled until I saw who it was because it had to be some otherworldly presence that would interrupt me.

I was greeted with a hooded cloak when I spun around. The coldness of the atmosphere told me who it was. A seam in the dimensions showed endless space with faint stars in the distance sealed behind him. The feeling of the place seemed infinite and cold, reminding me of something.

"So now you prey on the helpless."

I sighed. "I was feeding on one to end his suffering. It's the right thing to do. It's what Veronica would want me to do."

Azrael laughed, his chuckle even hollower than his skeletal sockets. "I see you somehow survived your trial by fire, and instead of slaughtering mortals, you are taking over my profession. How quaint. It is my duty to bring them into the afterlife and not yours, vampire."

"What do you want me to do, Azrael? Starve? I should have been feeding this way a long time ago, but I lost my way. It would make Veronica proud to see that I'm no longer going crazy or hurting the ones I care for." I sighed and stared at the skull exterior. Everything about him was cold, and it made me wonder if he had truly left me in the sun to die or if it was a way to teach me a lesson, to show me how much he had truly suffered too.

How could I right the wrong that I had brought on him? "I think Veronica would be pleased that I'm asking for forgiveness." I hung my head and stared at the ground until I saw Azrael move.

Death walked to my victim and plunged his arm into the man's chest. The mortal shook in convulsions almost if his heart was being torn out. The Angel of Death stared at me the whole time, and the look on his sunken face was something I had never seen

before—enjoyment in pain. Always, he was compassionate when he took the souls of the dead and was never such an asshole. I didn't think he had the capability to be such a shit head.

"Two can play at the game of being a fiend. It is my role to bring death upon those I wish. And I choose his life. You were going to take it anyway. My forgiveness is something you shall never earn, vampire. If you think by changing how you feed it will attract my attention, then you know nothing at all."

He took the silver orb and placed it inside his robe. What happened to the souls after that, I didn't know. Maybe he had a storage compartment in his coat? I did know he brought the souls back to heaven or hell or wherever the fuck it was they went before being reborn.

I remembered what it had been like for me a year ago when I had his power to take souls; I had taken the essence of the vampire who was after Miranda and me. It felt good, all-powerful, and with the awesome power, I was becoming something different, something that wasn't exactly a vampire. I didn't know what I was becoming. Azrael had never given me an answer, and I always wondered.

Now, since I was seeking redemption, I wondered if those powers would return, but in my heart of hearts, I doubted I would be worthy of such a great gift once again or have a friend who had saved my life many times. And all I had done was push the dark angel away.

"Azrael, once upon a time, I had a power similar to yours. You placed the one I took somewhere and then saved my life. I never thanked you for that. I know it's overdue, but thank you. I understand that from now until the stars burn out, you won't bring me peace. After what happened on the beach, I'm angry, but not at you, just at myself for being so blind. But thank you for everything you have done."

He stared at me, not sure of what to say. His indecision was evident. Even my guides were holding their breaths in the back of my mind. I was sure they'd all interacted with the Lord of the

Dead, but it wasn't their place to say or do anything to provoke him since I was in such hot water. Deep down, they knew I wanted his forgiveness and maybe something else. For a moment, I thought he would crumble, but he was an ancient being and more set in his ways than anyone I knew, dead or otherwise.

"You are welcome," he whispered. His skull mask wavered and I caught a glimpse of the real him underneath with dark, wavy hair and moonstone skin. His beauty caught in my throat, and it wasn't because he was an angel. It was because that was how he was. An ache moved into my heart at everything I had lost with him, and I wondered if I would ever feel the caress of his wings against my skin.

The skeleton hardened and compassion passed. "You will not starve, but you are right to think you will be spending eternity here. Never will you be reunited with Veronica or any of the loved ones you watch perish over the years. You are doomed to remain on this plane for now and always."

With that, he was gone with not even a ripple in the universe. I stared at the spot where he had been and then over at the now dead homeless man. He was already turning blue. His blood was no good to me, and the thought of another victim turned my stomach. After such an eventful night, I just wanted to go relax, but I couldn't face either Xavier or Miranda so I headed toward Cambridge, making the walk in the cool night air.

I spent most of the night wandering through Harvard Square, stopping at Algiers, a Turkish coffee house, for tea before wandering down to JFK Fountain down by the Charles River. Watching the fountain, I sat on its steps, secluded from much of the world as cops rode by on bike patrols. I wondered if they were looking for the killer or just keeping a sharp eye on me because I was alone and a woman. But I could finally take care of myself. I went back to my house, feeling lonely and hoping the place would be empty so I could sulk by myself.

But even carefully laid plans can be dashed.

All of the lights were on when I got to the house, and I sensed a faint hint of danger. The emotions inside were high. For the first time in a while, I could tell that. They were dim, but I sensed them. I shook off the surprise of the empathy and ran. I found Xavier in wolf form growling at Miranda, who was backed up against a wall, holding a knife to her wrists. Both were slit and blood leaked slowly. They would heal, and then she would cut them again. Both looked over at me. The darkness in Miranda's eyes said Mira was trying to gain control. She figured if the body could lose enough blood, she would gain a foothold, and Miranda would be driven crazy by the hunger. She would have to find a victim to kill or another vampire to finish the job, but Mira had agreed to wait and not drive Miranda out. What had happened?

"Stay away from me, bitch. Any closer and the knife goes deeper," the beast growled.

"Mira, we had an agreement. You said you'd wait to be turned. Forcing the decision on the both of us won't do you any good."

The beast smiled, its mouth a maw of razor sharp teeth, and with it, I caught the scent of decay that I had smelled earlier in the house and in the alley just a few hours ago.

"Motherfucking cunt! You think I'd trust you. You would make me into your slave. Our Master would never have done that. He loved us, and you killed him and stole his pet. That's all you are, Grandpa, nothing more than a dog to be put down." The beast laughed.

Xavier growled. He paced along the area that he had her contained in. He glanced over at me, waiting to see what my answer would be, but I had none. From the smell coming from Miranda, I knew Mira was going crazy and she would drag her counterpart down with her.

"Mira, listen to me. I wasn't lying about what I said before. I meant it. You just have to wait a little bit longer. Right now it's too dangerous for you to be out. There are Enforcers in the city, and if they find you, they'll kill you. You have to stay hidden and keep yourself together until the killings are over with."



“What makes you think I’ll believe you? You think I’m going insane because I want to be whole, but I can smell you. The stench of madness clings to you. It has for a while. You would pull me into the abyss with you.”

“Both of you listen to me. Miranda, I know you can hear me. She hasn’t gotten a complete hold on you yet. I’m tracking the killer with some of Zhen’s brood. It’s an obligation I owe her. Mira is right, I was going insane, but I’m not anymore. I’m better. I know you don’t trust me, neither does Xavier, but believe this—I want to make things right. This is the only way I know how. I wouldn’t offer to complete your transformation lightly. You know how I feel about your kind. Think about it.”

The knife wavered from her wrists. She stared at Xavier and me. There was a split second of recognition. Miranda moved further into the mix. A spasm clutched her body, and she fell to her knees. The knife clattered to the floor. Her hands went to the side of her head and she screamed, tearing at her hair and eyes. Xavier stayed back, not sure what to do.

I took a step forward, ready to take her into my arms and comfort her, but when I did, a board creaked and her eyes snapped open, the eyes of the beast. Before I could take hold, she darted between the werewolf and me and crashed out of one of the windows, landing on the street.

Without thinking, Xavier leaped out after her. I stood dumbfounded, knowing he would catch up to her sooner or later because Mira wouldn’t be able to deal with the stress of fighting Miranda and keeping control of the body while Xavier was running after her. Even immortal strength can give out once in a while.

I picked up the knife and stared out the window, then noticed a man staring back at me with a slight smile on his face. He looked vaguely familiar and when I sent a mental tether out to scan his mind, there was nothing there and he was gone. I shook my head and wondered if he was a ghost caught in some time loop. If that were the case, then he was the first one I had seen in over a year.

## Chapter Seventeen

*My name is Azrael.*

After my encounter with Brenna, I found myself by the ocean wondering why I'd acted as I had. The crashing waves and rolling surf soothed my troubled emotions. The moon peeked out from behind dark clouds, shining down on the deep, which tossed the foam and seaweed onto the shore. The sand was wet underneath my feet, and my wings caught the breeze as the tide came in. Salt settled on my face like human tears.

This place was tranquil. The sea reminded me of where I had been born years ago. I loved to stand out and watch the water. My mother had always said the sea would bewitch me if I was not careful. I'd never listened to her, but in the end, she had been right. It was bewitching. I had forgotten that, forgotten about my mother. I had another mother who gave me the love and support I needed. She had shown me kindness and had given me another path to choose from.

The Source had chosen me above all to be one of Her angels, and I was happy to be living in Her service, bringing Her children back to Her.

I had the ability to take lives, and tonight was the first time I had bathed in that power. His life had been warm and vibrant in my hands. The feeling of absolute control filled me, and that was something that had never happened before. Now, I questioned. I was an archangel and was not supposed to enjoy the taking of lives.

I sank into the sand with my wings wrapped around me. The stars were dim under all the city lights, but I knew each of them by heart, knew which ones held civilizations, being born or destroyed, which ones had nebulas that were birthing stars, or which ones were going supernova. All of life pressed down around me, and I was lost.

“My brother, why is there so much indecision in your thoughts?”

I glanced away from the stars and found Michael staring down at me. He was one of the original beings created and had known the universe since the beginning of time. He’d looked down from the center of it all, watched the Source give life to all other forms, and knew those who had come before me.

“Why have you come here, Michael?”

“I was sent because He is worried about you. He sent me to bring you comfort.”

His wings encompassed me while he brought me into his arms. Within them I felt Love Eternal from the Source of all, from She. It filled me and washed away my fears and power lust, but only for a moment. The coldness of indecision and the lust of life came back from the depths of my soul. I moved away from Michael, my brother, who had shown me the secrets of time since I’d stepped into the universal realms.

“Why has this being turned you from the Light?”

“It is none that concerns you, Michael. She is my responsibility.”

He bowed his head. “As you wish, brother.”

He looked upon me and then, he was gone. I ignored his departure and explored the stars, hoping to find some peace in the twinkling jewels.

## Chapter Eighteen

*My name is Bridgette.*

My children were out feeding while I kept an eye on my eldest. I'd been following him most of the night with an ill feeling in the pit of my stomach. My instincts told me something was wrong with my blood son.

Now, I sat gargoyle still on the top of a human dwelling across from my blood sister's. My teeth ached with the thought of her freedom. She should have been judged and executed for her crime by the Elder of the City, but I could do nothing while the bitch was still in her favor. My concern was for Sean. He had been behaving strangely, and by following him, I realized he had disobeyed me.

My wings caught the breeze, and they billowed. I was about to jump down and show my wayward child who his Master was, that my sister was not his concern. But I heard a loud crack, followed by someone jumping out of my sister's window, followed by a werewolf. My child stared at the house while my sister stared after her child.

As the draft blew up, I caught the hint of insanity, and it was from the one who had escaped. For harboring one that was insane, my sister could be punished. This was a wonderful break. That must have been why my son had locked onto Brenna. He knew she had one of the insane. I had no need to worry about disciplining my child. I would talk with him and take action.

I jumped down to the street. Sean strolled off, probably hunting for the night, and I climbed into the broken window and looked around the house. A couch with a lopsided afghan was opposite me along with a television and a large wooden chest that was being used for a coffee table. Drapes fluttered from the wind, and there were rugs strewn on the hardwood floor. The walls were sparse, painted an eggshell color, and all the exposed wood was walnut.

I heard noises coming from the kitchen. There was a smell of something Italian cooking, something with some kind of acidity to it. Underneath it, I smelled the decay of the insane one, and under that was the scent of my Mistress. This had been her house. This had been the house where our grandsire had changed her. This was where her birth and mine had been.

She had told me about it once, mumbled something on cold lips about being human, and I had seen it when she shared her blood with me, saving me from myself. I had been so helpless and so infatuated with Veronica that I would have done anything for her, and I had. I gave up my life so I could be with her. She had no idea what I had sacrificed, what our Mistress had sacrificed.

My other coursed through my veins, awakening with the rage shaking my soul.

*How dare my sister take everything away from me! She killed my Mistress and then she took her house. It should have been mine.* I let out a primal scream that shook the timbers. Dishes clattered to the floor in the kitchen. My sister came running out.

"You bitch!" My talons dove at her neck. Her punishment would be mine. I felt her blood running between my teeth. The attack was unexpected, and I knocked her to the floor. My hands wrapped around her throat. I went to move into her mind, but all I found was a wall. That was impossible for how young she was. But she felt the intrusion and quickly sent her tether into my thoughts. I tried to swat her away, but she was too fast and locked me down.

"Get off of me!"

Brenna threw me off. I landed hard against the chest, but I didn't break it. She stood over me, the silver flecks in her eyes dancing like stars.

"What the hell are you doing here? You have no right to be in my house."

I stood up slowly, letting my teeth slide from their holdings. I dusted myself off. Brenna stood monitoring my thoughts, but she was not able to take control of me again now that my mental shields were up.

"You're Bridgette, right?"

"Wow, I'm surprised you remembered when you don't seem to remember it was you who killed our Mistress."

"Look, I didn't kill her. So can the sweet act, and tell me why the fuck you're here. I really don't want to deal with you right now. I have more important things than you on my mind."

"Yes, it seems that way. I saw the werewolf chasing after your child. It's a shame when one's child goes crazy."

"She's not my child. Why does everyone think that? Miranda is unique among the undead, and I would never turn a human."

"Whether or not she's your child, or that she is unique doesn't matter. It's against our laws to harbor the insane. They are a threat to all of us. It means death to both. Now won't that be a shame? I'm sure our Mistress would love to see your demise since you killed her."

The pain across my face was sweet. My sister's talons scraped my cheek. I caught the blood with my tongue and moved out of the way. My sister came at me and went flying over the trunk, landing face first. She got up slowly.

"You leave Miranda alone. If you want a chance at me, fine, but stay away from her."

I chuckled. "Oh, I think not, dear, dear sister. I'm going to make what is left of your life hell. Bye, bye." I ran out the window, changing into hellhound form. My being was light when I thought of the hatred in my sister's face.

Tonight was turning out to be better than I thought.

## Chapter Nineteen

*My name is Brenna.*

The events of the night before still played in my mind while I carried a tray of coffee from Crimson Liquids to the Tearoom. Miranda wasn't in, and none of her crew expected her to be. I hadn't seen her or Xavier for the rest of the night after my so-called sister left the house.

That morning, I called someone to come and replace the window. I think that was the third time it had been replaced in three years. Bridgette's words weighed heavy on my mind. I had hoped Miranda would return so I could talk to her about her spiraling insanity. If I could get it under control, then hopefully nothing would happen to the girl. If I had been there when she needed me, then Mira wouldn't be dragging Miranda down with her.

But she hadn't come back, and now I hoped she was okay. If Bridgette was serious about her threat, then Drago might get a hold of Miranda and execute her without a second thought. That was another one of my worries. No other bodies had been discovered, and without them, I wasn't sure where to locate the insane vampire. Now that my guides were back, they might be willing to help me, but I wasn't pushing my luck. Any breadcrumbs they wanted to drop, I would scoop up. I had to get back in their good graces too.

I carried six coffees for the psychics and a chai tea for myself. We had all decided to reopen the place even with the tragedy. Everyone wanted to get back to work. I knew everyone's favorite coffee and hoped it would be a peace offering since I had been such a bitch lately. All the psychics were caffeine junkies, if not also addicted to cigarettes.

Glancing up at the sky, I was thankful it was cloudy, but my skin was still crawling from the rays. I didn't want a repeat of a few

weeks ago, and I doubted I would ever get my total immunity to it back.

I rode the elevator up until it stopped on the third floor. I stepped out and lost my balance. The elevator opened a foot above the floor. I almost dropped the coffee, but caught it just in time. I would have to call the owner to have it fixed for the fiftieth time. It had always been a problem. I walked into the Tearoom, set the coffee on the host station and let everyone get it themselves. It was still early, and not everyone was there yet. The ones who were there were in the back, or out getting something to eat, or still mourning over the loss. Lennox had been a strange mortal, but I had always liked him. He had been stoic and thoughtful.

I sighed and then sat at my table. The runes were still laid out. I hadn't put them away yet, along with several bags of tarot cards. I closed my eyes and thought about my guides. I sensed them in the distance, but they didn't answer my page. For now, I figured it would be a good thing to get back into doing readings. I picked up one of the bags hesitantly and shuffled, wondering if the first card would be Death. Irony was never my strong suit. This deck was one of the newer ones, and they slid easily together. As I passed them over and over again in my hands, I felt them spark. The slightest bit of energy moved from them into my hands. I smiled and felt tears come to my eyes.

*Thank you!* I silently sent to my guides. My abilities were truly reawakening. While I shuffled, one of the cards fell onto the floor. I bent down to pick it up, but a meaty hand held it.

"Judgment. Interesting." Xavier handed it back to me. He sat down in the chair opposite me. His gaze swept over my table, studying it. I had opened all the bags and set out a few crystals. He looked no worse for wear, just a little sleep deprived. There was a pink scratch on his cheek that could have been from a gash.

"What happened last night after you went after Miranda? I waited up, but you never came back."

Xavier's stare hardened and his hand unconsciously moved over the place where he had been wounded. "When the fuck did



you start caring? I hunted her all night to make sure she didn't do anything rash, but I lost her near morning and I don't know where she is. Besides, someone's out to get her. One of them was following us. I couldn't track him. He was different from the others and he smelled worse than Miranda and you."

"How was he different than other vampires?"

"Why does it matter? Are you going to hunt him down and kill him? Have you started back on hating vampires again, or are you just going on some kind of fucked up vengeance kick?"

"Xavier, I'm not kidding. The one who tracked you, he's the one who killed Len. Zhen has a death warrant on his head for killing at least two of her children. I'm leading a team of hunters. It would be great if you came along and maybe—"

"Maybe what? Use my nose like an animal and help you sniff out the killer? You know, if I truly believed your bullshit, then I'd help. I'm tired of your twisted games, telling Miranda you'll turn her when we both know you never will because you're too high and mighty and would never make another vampire."

Before I could say anything, the elevator thumped to stop again, and I smelled blood instantly. It wasn't human. I glanced over at Xavier, our argument forgotten. He smelled it as well. We ran into the hallway. The elevator door was half open. It slowly tried to close with someone wedged in between the frame. I stepped back in shock. Blood was smeared all on the sides of the elevator, matting the victim's hair. Half an eye hung from the threads of its socket. A large portion of his intestines bulged from the side of his abdomen, only held in place from a newly formed layer of skin that was barely there. The veins and bones of his neck were half torn away. This was the wound that would eventually kill Viktor if he didn't get any blood in him, but by his color, I didn't know if that was possible.

He looked up at me with his blind blue eyes and moaned something. I glanced at Xavier, and quickly, we picked him up, carried him into the back room and closed the door. I would worry about the trail of blood later.

"What the fuck is this?" Xavier asked.

"Shut up and help me for once." We laid him on the floor.  
"Viktor, what happened?"

He opened his mouth, but only hollowness came out. I made it easy for him and sent my mind into his. *Viktor, tell me what happened.*

There was a pause and pictures formed in my head. I saw him at the Black Rose. He and the others were talking in Zhen's lair, mostly about how I was no help to them and that, no offense to Zhen, I shouldn't help the team even if I were Zhen's lover. Which I wasn't. Can't a girl have a fling? Drago smelled something fishy about me and mentioned in front of Zhen that I might be insane. Viktor watched as Zhen's taloned hand slashed across his face with enough force that he lost half of his cheek. His teeth were visible through the wound, as was the humiliation of being punished in front of his own brood.

"But, Sire."

"You dare say anything again and you will be no more. She has suffered more than you know. I always protected my children, and you knew nothing until I let you upon the world."

I smiled inwardly because Zhen stuck up for me. She truly was my friend. Not that I didn't think she was, but she was even defending me against one of her own children.

Drago drew himself up and stared at Zhen, something Viktor thought he shouldn't have done.

"You shielded me from the truth. You might be the Eldest among us, but we are all tainted with your blood. Do you know how we are seen in the community?"

"I've heard enough from you. Why do you think we have the power we do? Do you think I've survived this long without dealing with accusations from the rest of our kind? Your grandsire may not acknowledge his bloodline, but we are what we are. Without him, you would never have been. You would think that in two thousand years you'd have gained some wisdom. Show respect for those that came before you, for me who gave you life. Remember why I made

you. Now, get out of my sight before I take your heart and make you wish you were buried under layers of earth."

*Tainted blood?*

*What did Drago mean about tainted blood and her sire not acknowledging his bloodline?* All vampires bathed in the fact that they were all-powerful fucks and could manipulate the world around them. Why would Zhen's sire not be proud that his child had such a huge brood? It would show a lot, for his bloodline survived. She had mentioned he hadn't died, so I assumed he was still alive, probably somewhere in Europe or Asia, and she had come to the New World to get away from his reign.

Drago began to back out of the room when he almost tripped over a kneeling vampire that had not wanted to interrupt their conversation. In Viktor's eyes, that was the right thing to do, showing respect to elders, but Drago raised a hand and was about to swipe the youngster. Before he could strike, Viktor caught it, surprising himself.

"I'll deal with you later." Drago walked out of the room, leaving his children.

"Mistress, there's someone above with information on the one you're hunting."

Zhen's ears perked up and she stared at her child. "Bring them to me."

A few minutes later, a redhead came into view. It was Bridgette. She bowed before Zhen and didn't meet her eyes.

"What do you know?"

"I've found one who harbors an insane one, Ancient Mistress. By our laws, I have come to you for punishment."

"Viktor, go with this one and find the one who killed my children. Bring it back here so I can kill it personally."

The Viking bowed and followed my sister out of the club. The next thing I saw was the outside of my house with the boarded up window now open. Inside, Viktor looked around and smelled Miranda. He smelled the scent of decay that came off of her and it was worse than before. There was also another aroma, darker, like

graveyard dirt that was rotten to the core. It permeated the house, and Viktor knew the scent. It was from the one that was truly insane; he was sure that it was the one they were looking for.

Noises came from the kitchen and when he walked in, he found a beast vampire hunched over, fucking Miranda from behind. Talon marks raked across the table. Both looked up when he entered, but the one on top didn't stop. Miranda was too far gone. Mira was out, groaning. Blood dripped from both their fangs. I felt Viktor change his form as he and his beast merged together, not fighting with one another.

It was an interesting process. I had never been inside the mind of a vampire where the two halves acknowledged themselves. The two blended together seamlessly. Their acceptance of each other was amazing, and part of me couldn't understand it because I had no other half. Fingers became talons and fangs grew from average teeth. His eyes shone opalescent.

The one on top was the one they were going to kill. In a blur, the other rushed him, leaping off of Miranda, and before Victor knew it, he was on the floor fighting tooth and claw with the other undead trying to get into his mind. We both got a glimpse of what was really inside the mind of the crazy vampire. The beast was the main personality, thinking of sick and twisted things that only survived in nightmares. Also, the human personality was dominant too, which surprised Viktor because, normally, it was only the beast vampire that was left, but human and beast worked together. The reason they got along so well was that, before being turned, the human had been a sociopath waiting to happen.

Viktor got glimpses of his childhood, torturing pets, wild animals, cutting the heads off his dolls, lighting things on fire, and even killing a small toddler and having no feeling whatsoever about it. But there was something else. A dark room and the sense of claustrophobia. The heavy scent of blood that called to my hunger. Underneath it all was chanting, like a drumbeat, saying one word over and over and over again.

Their combined minds were grotesque, and Viktor backed away, putting up more of his shields than he was used to, taking his attention away from Miranda, who had gotten up. The beast on top of him tore at his skin, trying to get to his neck. Viktor pushed him off and slammed into the table, destroying the one I had just replaced. God, how many kitchen tables was I going to go through?

"I want his blood," Miranda hissed at the other who was getting up. Victor was taking stock of the situation. He sent a tether into the street, looking for the one he came with, but she was gone.

The insane vampire grunted and Miranda came at him, but Viktor lashed her with his mind and found hers to be easier to access and, without a thought, snuffed out her consciousness so she fell to the floor in a deep sleep.

The other vampire looked at Miranda and roared. He leaped and Viktor dodged, but he caught his stomach, ripping a large gash so his intestines spilled out. I felt the echo of it in my own stomach. The sudden pain dropped the Viking to his knees. Viktor had once been a great warrior, wielding a heavy axe against his enemies and killing many, going into battle fearless, and that was what had attracted his maker to him, his ability to face death and not back down. But he was used to fighting with others, and he had never taken on one this strong by himself. Usually, it was his Master and his blood sister, and with three it was easier, but this one had the best of him.

With one hand, he held in his stomach contents while blood rushed to that part of his body to repair the wounds. But the other vampire was too quick, and he jumped on him again. This time, Viktor couldn't fight him off, and the other clamped down on his neck and tore out a huge chunk of it. Viktor heard the crunch. Once part of his spine was severed, he would have no more time left. He squirmed under him. Blood rushed to his neck. He tried to get away when he saw movement from the corner. But as he rose, he sensed there was something different about the female. She wobbled on her feet and there was hardly any smell. Once she saw what was going on, she ran over and tried to pry the beast off of

Viktor. As she did, the one on top scraped along Viktor's face and caught his eye, ripping it in half and out of its socket, leaving it hanging by a thread.

Miranda faced the other, giving Viktor the moment to get something of his strength back. "Where is your Mistress? Have to warn her."

Miranda didn't say anything, but telegraphed an image of the Tearoom. Viktor used the last of his waning strength and began running, holding in his side and the wound on his neck.

I came out of his mind. He was dying and trying to hang on. The cold tunnel of death was coming for him. His soul was going to depart. I felt it, intertwined with him as I was. I had been with Veronica when she died and tried to hold onto her. I'd given her strength, but in the end, she'd left, going on the current that took her soul along with Azrael, and soon, either he or one of his lesser angels would come and take Viktor.

"Mistress, Brenna, you must tell others. You know him now, from me. You can find him. Tell Master I was loyal until the end."

I closed my eyes. I couldn't let him die. I could only imagine what Drago and Zhen would say. From what I'd seen in Viktor's mind, I now carried at least part of who the killer was and even many of Viktor's memories, but he was not going to be lost. Every fiber of my being told me that he had to be saved, but I wasn't sure if I could save him. My abilities were only just coming back, my guides only just there for me. I had done it with Veronica, so maybe it would work with Viktor.

A sense deep inside of me told me I could make the transition between death and life easier, but whatever that had been a year ago was no longer part of me, just the whisper to be able to take souls. So I took my wrist, bit into it and gave it to Viktor.

"What are you doing?" Xavier asked.

"Later, now hush." I wrapped my mind around Viktor's thoughts and called my energy. He sucked weakly on the life-giving liquid. I thought of golden light. It flared through my head, arms, and out my fingertips pressed against his neck and stomach.

Beads of sweat trickled down my forehead. The sudden explosion of energy engulfed me. His skin began to knit together. I focused all my energy and felt Xavier's hand on mine. I opened my eyes and saw him staring at me in amazement. The wound under my hand on his stomach was healed, and the fatal wound at his throat was also mended.

Xavier released his hold on me and sat back. Viktor got up slowly, amazed he was still alive. It worked. We had forged a bond, and we would be linked until the end of time. I tried to stand, but once I did, I felt woozy. The golden energy left me quickly, and I stumbled when Viktor led me to a chair next to Xavier.

"Will you please tell me what is going on? How did you do that?" Xavier asked.

"Should your pet know, Mistress?"

"Viktor, Xavier is not my pet. Once upon a time we used to be friends, but I screwed that up."

Xavier said nothing.

"He's your equal. How strange. Are you well, Mistress?"

"I'll be fine." I turned to the werewolf and explained to him what I had seen in Viktor's mind and what I was doing with Zhen.

"Do you believe me now? None of this is for show."

"Whatever. What about Miranda? The other could have killed her, or worse. I'm going to check on her." He stormed out of the Tearoom, and I heard Peter's voice saying something when Xavier went out, but I just stared at Viktor now that the golden glow was gone. I swallowed. I had forgotten all about the blood in the elevator. But when I sent a mental tether into the other room, brushing Peter's thoughts, I saw that he had already begun cleaning it up without a word and had the elevator stopped.

"How do you feel?" I asked Viktor, coming back to myself.

"I'm fine, Mistress. You saved me from the High Beings. One of Lord Death's minions held my soul before you healed me. Her face was beyond the beauty of this world. I was ready to go, but you brought me back. No other of our kind has that power, but then again, you are not like the others of our kind. I can taste the same

taint in your blood that runs through mine, but richer. I suspect even richer than what runs through the veins of my grandsire, Mistress Zhen."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot say. It's forbidden. There is only one who can answer your question."

"Let me guess, Zhen."

Viktor nodded. "If I may ask, why is the image of trumpeting angels and dead rising from their coffins in your mind?"

I blinked, surprised he had gotten the glimpse of the Judgment card in my thoughts. I hadn't realized I was still thinking about it. "It means my time has come to be judged, for secrets to come out of their coffins, for angels to look down upon me and give their wrath, and for those from whom I seek forgiveness to either deny or accept my plea." I smiled sadly, wondering how much he had gotten from my mind.

"It reminds me of Ansuz. It reveals a message of good insight from the spirit world, but reversed it can mean misunderstandings and delusion. It is related to the god Odin, who always has his own agenda."

I was surprised he had made a connection with runes. Especially one that had been in my reading that was still on my table. "You mentioned runes before."

"My mother was the prophetess for my tribe. The sight runs in my family, and I still have glimpses of it. Like when you saved me. You changed my fate."

*Great, Azrael's going to have a field day with me.* "It's rare that we keep our otherworldly gifts when we change. Your Master doesn't know you still have the sight. He wouldn't understand, I'm sure. He can barely stand me."

"Mistress, I love my Master, but he can be difficult. For my life, I owe you the life of the one you protect. She can still be saved. I'll not tell my Master about her, only about the other, but if Drago finds your child, I won't be able to save her."

I nodded. A life for a life, the vampire way.





## Chapter Twenty

*My name is Azrael.*

The stars were a staircase while I paced up and down, my restlessness making my concentration hard, making the reason I still gathered souls a meaningless experience. More than half of myself was here and the screaming dead were being ignored. All my brethren from the seraphim to the greatest angels called to me, trying to lift my spirits, but none understood my plight. Their presence did nothing more than remind me of the pure power of the life I took and that I could do it whenever I wished.

One of my brothers kept an eye on me more than the others, and that was Michael. He remained close, far enough off that he looked like a distant sun, waiting for me to take my wrath out on the vampire that drove me mad. It was because of her I was unsettled. I should have taken her soul and put both of us out of our miseries. With her gone, my reality would never have been shattered, and nothing would have taken me away from the grace of the Source.

Now, I was bogged down with petty human emotions that my kind did not possess, but since I interacted with souls so often, they had rubbed off on me. The sheer silence of the vastness of space could not soothe my troubled heart. While I pondered Michael, it took me a moment to realize that one of my angels was waiting urgently to speak with me, something rare.

"Yes, Erizael."

"Brother Azrael, the winds of Fate have been changed, and one slated to rejoin the Father has slipped through my grasp."

It was rare indeed that Death was thwarted and a soul moved through my hands. But for the threads of Fate to be rewritten when it was time for a soul to come back to the Source, there was some kind of intervention. "Take me to the one you were supposed to harvest."

Within moments, the universe folded and I was back on Earth, invisible, observing the goings on of humans and the other creatures who shared the realm with those demonic spawn that had set up home disguised as humans, and that included the undead. I sent the lesser angel away. The one who had rewoven the fabric of Fate was going to answer to me. No one ventured into my realm without my knowledge.

The soul came into view, one of the demonic spawn that fused with a human spirit, becoming what were the vampires on Earth. This one was old. He had seen over five centuries, descending from the Nordic races that were valiant fighters in their day. There was another next to him, and that one I knew more intimately than the other undead.

"Stupid, pathetic little vampire. Reweaving the very fabric of the universe now, are we?"

The Viking's look of wonderment was not lost on me when he stepped back once I came into view. He bowed and almost cowered in the corner when I appeared in the small space of Brenna's domain. Brenna stared with wide eyes, realizing what she had done. "Azrael, I did it to save him, not to screw up the fabric of time and space. Get over it for once."

The other stared at Brenna, amazed that she spoke to me the way she did. He was right; she should not be addressing me as if I were a common seraphim or even a lesser angel. I was the Lord of the Dead, and no one disobeyed me.

"You dare converse with me, vampire? You of all know who I am and what my sentence was that I passed on you. Do you want more punishment?"

The other stepped forward. "Please, Lord Death, she means no disrespect. She has lost much blood returning me to health and has used her life energy to heal my grievous wounds. Forgive anything she has said."

I glanced over at the Norseman and then back at Brenna. There was something vaguely different about her. "Is it true what he

says? You risked your existence and brush with me again to save this demon spawn."

Brenna appeared haggard. "Yes, Azrael, if you put it that way. I wasn't thinking about myself. Viktor was only doing his duty, and he didn't deserve to die for that."

"Many have died for doing their duty. Why should he be any different? And why do you not condemn others for doing their duty after you shunned me?"

"I am not worthy of the great honor, Lord. I was only doing what I was told. My grandsire, Mistress Zhen, bade me to go and find the one who has killed her children. Mistress Brenna is leading our hunt, and she needed to know what I had seen so she could find the one that is insane."

"Amazing, the little vampire is doing something unselfish for once. I find that hard to believe."

Brenna looked down, and I thought I saw tears in her eyes. "Believe what you wish, Azrael. I cannot change your mind. I only wish I could," she whispered.

"Will you forgive her, High One?" The Viking stood before me. His eyes were downcast, but I did not feel enough sincerity in his voice. What Michael had said rang in my ears. These were just beasts that needed to be blighted from the face of the planet, demon scum infecting human souls, destroying the purity of the mortal existence.

I glared at Brenna. She watched me intently, only seeing the image of a skeleton and nothing more. I smiled down at the Norseman and, without warning, plunged my hand into his chest and grabbed the orb that was his soul. Yes, he was good enough to pass through the Source, and I had done something I should have done ages ago by beginning to eradicate the undead on the planet. I had the power, so why not use it? I pulled out the orb and placed it in my robe.

Brenna cried out and threw herself against me. "What the hell did you do that for? He had nothing to do with what is between you and me."

My hand wrapped around her chin and I squeezed. It would be so easy. The other hand scraped along her cheek, drawing blood. I stared at the berry-red drop and watched it slide down so it hit my nail. It trembled for a moment and then fell. Sudden pain formed in my heart and soul.

I cried out and pushed Brenna away from me, denting the wall. She was nothing to me. Nothing. I folded space and moved to the darkest part of the universe to rid myself of the ache, to delve my feelings in the vacuous darkness where there was nothing except great silence and peace, but even in that place, devoid of nothing, there was no serenity.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*My name is Brenna.*

I stared at the crumbling ceiling, wondering how Azrael had turned into such a shit. Was it because of what I had done to him? If it was, then Viktor was dead because of me.

I sighed, thinking of what the angel had said about me shunning him. Why would I avoid him after I hadn't shunned Viktor for doing his duty? That was wrong, I know, but didn't everyone deserve a second chance, even when they were dead? Couldn't I make him understand I was wrong and I would apologize? Would that ever happen?

The clatter of cockroaches in the wall drew my attention. They didn't bother me after my stint in New Orleans—with roaches the size of rats there, these were just babies. They were probably stirred up from Azrael throwing me. As I listened, I heard a faint rapping in the wall. It was a tapping made with a metal hammer.

At first, I thought it came from the apartments upstairs, but then I realized it came from out back. So I dusted myself off, stepped over the pile of ashes that was left of Viktor's body and followed the sound to Sophie's table. In her chair, I saw the cobbler sitting there with a shoe on his knee, tapping it with a ghostly hammer. He looked up straight at me and knew I was there. I stared, wondering how it was I could see him. Maybe being thrown into the wall had jarred my abilities.

*It's about time*, he said. His voice wasn't strong, nor was his image. It wavered in and out, but he was there.

"How? You?"

He stared up at me. When he smiled at me, his white mustache turned up on the sides. *Beats me.*

Then he focused back on his shoe and disappeared. I smiled at the sure sign that my abilities were returning. Hopefully, they would help me find the killer and maybe, one day, if Azrael

permitted, let me speak with Veronica. The pure thrill of knowing I was getting my abilities back was wonderful. It made everything that had happened seem meaningless for a few minutes, until I remembered the ashes on my floor. I had to bring them back to Zhen.

I was amazed Viktor had stood up against Azrael when it was not in his nature. How was I going to break the news to Drago? I went back and grabbed a small tin that was sitting on the shelf and used that to collect his ashes. Azrael was a prick. He didn't have to kill Viktor just because I had interfered. It wasn't right.

"Brenna, are things all right? I heard a noise." Peter poked his head in.

I looked up into his human face and shook my head. Without saying anything, he came in and wrapped his arms around me. I lost it then and he just let me cry. Finally, I pulled away and wiped my eyes. "I'm sorry, Peter. You shouldn't have to put up with me. With all of this, the elevator, me. You've been so great, and I've been a bitch."

"It's okay, Raven. That's why I'm here. I know things have been hard for you, but I've never given up hope. All the other stuff comes with the territory. I know you don't want to bring the Tearoom into harm's way, but this place follows along with the owner in a way. You've brought it and us into a whole different world. We support that difference, even though the others don't know your secret. It was Veronica's time. Don't mourn her. Just remember who you are. Veronica would love you no matter what. Besides, you're better now and no matter what your problems with the dark angel, you'll be on top."

I just sniffled and nodded, not sure what to say. "I hope that's right. Thanks, Peter."

He kissed me on the cheek and left the room. I stared at the wall and the dent left by my impact. I sighed, and my heart sank. My relationship with Azrael was over. *So much for angels lifting me up on high.*

I swallowed my sorrow and focused on the task at hand. Finding the killer and giving Viktor's ashes to Zhen so she could give them to Drago. I was sure she would want to know that my lovely sister had set me up. And I had some burning questions to ask her about Azrael. I was beginning to wonder if I could ever mend the rift between us, but I didn't know the mind of an angel. I still didn't blame him for anything he did to me. He was just expressing his anger, but what he had done to Viktor and that poor homeless guy was beyond being an asshole.

I walked outside and noticed the bite in the air. The moon overhead became cloud-covered. While I walked, the rain fell slowly at first and then faster, coming down finally in a deluge. It was cold and hard. With each drop, I played over the scene that Viktor had shown me, reviewing the glimpses of his life and what he had said. That he still had some of his sight, which was rare in my kind. Yes, I truly was one of them and that was something I had come to accept.

*You shouldn't despair so*, one of my guides chimed. I was surprised because they were still trying to trust me, but maybe I had proven myself to them by saving Viktor and not trying to gain brownie points with anyone.

"That's easy for you to say. You don't have an angel taking out his revenge on those around you or the threat of staying on this plane forever."

*He's just being a dick. You must realize he doesn't know how to deal with emotion. Any kind of feeling, be it love or hate. Angels were not created like humans to handle feelings, and even though he's different than most, he's been what he has for so long that the simplest things such as anger or dismissal throw him into chaos. You have to put yourself in his position. Millennia without having any contact except his brethren and only snippets with other souls would turn you into something that was as cold and unfeeling as a star.*

"Yeah, you're right. I can't imagine being what he is, but I wouldn't think he'd act this way toward others. I just have this sense something's wrong with him besides the fact that I fucked



around with his feelings and now he doesn't know how to trust me."

*Don't blame yourself. It'll all work out in the end.* Their warmth shined down on me, and it was their way of giving me a hug. At least I wasn't totally alone anymore, which gave me some hope that not all was lost from my ego trip into insane hell.

At the Black Rose, I slipped into the stage door, went back to Zhen's viewing room and placed the tin on a nearby side table. Music pumped upstairs, but they were doing sound checks. Tonight it was only open to other undead. They'd be here in all stages of transformation, sucking on victims they either brought or willing ones they found here. If another vampire had claimed the meat, then they had to stay away. That seemed to be the only rule among the undead—if victims had already been claimed, then it was wrong to touch them. Then there was the right for a blood feud and the vampire could kill you. That was the way it had been with Julien and me since he had claimed Miranda, but I had also had cause to challenge him.

He had killed Zach, but that was ancient history.

For now, I sat and relaxed in Zhen's oversized chair and looked at the picture of the dragon. Its coils undulated and the stars twinkled. Zhen's illusions were perfect, as it appeared it might fly off the wall. She'd known many secrets when she'd become a vampire and retained some of her power, along with all of her knowledge, and over time, she had become a damn strong creature.

Zhen never really told me about her past, only tidbits. Over the year I'd known her, I had told her more about my life than I knew of hers. But that was fine because she listened to me and was there when I needed her. My attire wouldn't be right for the club even though I wouldn't be doing much, but still, I walked through the wall and pulled out a pair of black vinyl pants and a red velvet halter-top. While I was getting undressed, I heard someone rooting around in the other room. I poked my head out of the illusion and saw Zhen getting something from the fridge.

"Boo."

She jumped and it wasn't for effect. "How in the hell did you get in here?"

I walked through the illusion and pulled the shirt on over my head. It was a little short, but it would do the trick. "I walked in, why?"

A scowl crossed her face. "Nothing."

I sensed something was wrong and she wasn't going to tell me about it. "What's the matter?"

I couldn't break into her mind. I wondered if she already knew about Viktor or even the insane vampire and how he had tried to get Miranda, but I had a feeling she didn't. By the look of her, there was something else going on.

Still, it was odd for me to surprise my friend. Her powers had come with age. Mine had developed out of instinct. Now that my psychic abilities were coming back, maybe my ability to incinerate vampires would too, and that would be a good thing to have, especially if the red-haired bitch of a sister came back. I would be ready for her, but then again, who knew if she was my sister. Now that she had sent Drago's bunch after Miranda, I had more cause to kill her, in addition to her falsely accusing me of killing Veronica.

"Brenna, we really need to talk. God, I wish this had been easier. You need to come upstairs."

"Zhen, why are you acting like it's my last day on Earth? You and I have always gotten along with no secrets. You are right about needing to talk. Viktor is dead; I brought his remains in the tin. Then there is Azrael and the one who is killing your children. Going upstairs can wait, now what gives?"

"Just come upstairs. All the other things can wait, even Viktor's death. Now come upstairs please. I don't ask you this as a friend, but as Elder of the City."

I just gazed at her. She had only pulled vampire rank on me once, and that was when we had first met and I owed her a favor. She had wanted me to kill Julien, and that hadn't been a big deal since I wanted him dead anyway. I was in serious shit if she was

pulling vampire rules on me, considering I really wasn't one of them.

"Fine." I shrugged.

We walked through the hallways and back upstairs. Everyone was going about their business getting the club ready for the night. A dungeon had been set up on one side of the dance floor where mortals would be chained and beaten until they bled. But they would not be killed. Zhen wouldn't have it, and she ruled with an iron fist on that. Once in a while, there was the occasionally overzealous vampire, but she took care of them, especially if they were new to the lifestyle. One warning was enough. They never did it again. I didn't know what she did to these, but I could only imagine.

When I first met her, she had sent out two of her best bodyguards to find me so I could join her harem. One I killed and the other I seriously maimed. Then I had snuck back to her nest under South Station and taken her by surprise. Her nest was still there, but she frequented the club now and only went to the hive when she had to. She had told me it was due to the rat infestation, considering the Big Dig had displaced all of them.

As we walked into the salon area, there were antique velvet chairs, several coffee tables in the center of the room, a pool table in the right hand corner, and a round settee next to the stairs of the liquor room. In the corners of the room, there were televisions that played snippets of all different types of movies. Tonight there were snippets of porn movies, splatter scenes from horror and, of course, vampire movies. Zhen had given the job of screening movies to one of the bouncers, whom I think had an eye for me, but he was human and there wasn't any way I was getting involved with him. All of the staff knew what Zhen was and she owned them, so none of the other vampires even tried using them as juice boxes.

Zhen led me across the main entrance and into the second dance floor where mostly rave and industrial music played. There was a bar at the end of it, where she took me to sit down. She ordered me a drink and then sat next to me.

“Brenna, there’s someone here who has made several grievous accusations against you. One—that you killed your Master and the other that you are harboring a mad vampire, particularly the one who has been killing my children.”

“You seriously don’t believe that? Why would I want to give refuge to the creature that’s been killing your brood? It killed Len. Besides, we both know I didn’t kill Veronica.”

“It’s not what I believe. She was being true to the laws of our kind. Before you had your problems, I know you wouldn’t have done anything to harm me, but since your near break from reality, you’ve been different. I admit you’re better, but a slight stench still lingers around you. Now, if you did kill Veronica without cause, then she has a right to your head, but we both know Robyn did that. I have to address the other accusation. Viktor went to your house, and he’s dead by your own admission. You have the right to face your accuser.”

She looked over into the shadows and the red-haired bitch that had confronted me in Crimson Liquids appeared. I scanned her quickly. She was almost a century old. Her red hair had been chopped short into a pixie cut since she had come to my house. Maybe she was telling the truth. As I stared into her eyes, I saw they were purple. Not iris-purple or lavender-purple, but sparkling purple, like a petal magnified through a dewdrop. She had Veronica’s eyes. She had been telling the truth all along. I swallowed at the realization, and my guides confirmed with a mental push that she indeed was my family. When had Veronica had the time to change her? Or the gall, if she’d been under Devon’s control? She had never told me about Bridgette, never let me into that part of her mind.

I looked back at Zhen and then back at Bridgette. I began to get up, but Zhen clamped her hand on my shoulder and forced me to stay put.

“She came to me and said she knew where the insane vampire was. Of course, I sent Viktor to investigate and he never came back, but she did. She also told me her theory on your Master, but I told

Bridgette nothing would be done until I had time to face both of you. I had hoped you would come in before I had to send Drago out for you. He is so fond of you. Here the both of you are, and I think it's better you talk and tell me what happened. Remember no killing, swatting, or anything else. This is neutral ground. Understand? Now, Brenna, who are you harboring that is insane? I hope for your sake it isn't the one who killed my children."

The weight of her mind pressed against mine. Bridgette smirked. I looked between the both of them. "Miranda is having trouble containing Mira. She has been for a while. I neglected her because I was caught up in myself after Veronica died. Mira is killing or trying to kill any vampire she can so she can have enough blood to complete her transformation."

"Why would you leave a child only half changed? Do you know what an abomination it is? Ancient One, just for that, she should be punished. Only dangling eternity in front of her child. I have seen the one she speaks of and the taint is there—"

"Enough, Bridgette, you don't know the circumstances behind Miranda. But Brenna, why haven't you finished her transformation or brought her to me? I would have done it. We are not meant to live half-lives, trapped in between. No wonder Mira is going crazy and dragging her host with her."

"I offered to complete her transformation against my better judgment. You know how I feel about things. But I told her it would be a while because I was doing some things first, looking for the killer of your children. I didn't want to get Miranda involved, and I know it doesn't make up for how I treated her. I thought it might make some peace between us on both sides. But I don't know. Look, Zhen, if you don't believe me, look into my mind and see what happened. I have Viktor's memories of what happened. I've never hidden anything from you, so take a look."

"Mistress, you can't just take her word for it—"

"Shut up!"

Bridgette's head snapped back. I was sure Zhen had done something akin to slapping it mentally. She closed her eyes and her

mind dove into mine, and for a moment, I felt consumed by a wave of water and couldn't breathe. But the wave receded, and I knew she had found what she needed. She looked at me and nodded.

"Take time between yourselves. I think you need to resolve the issues between you. Because of what you did, you are exonerated, and we now have the scent of the other. You will have your chance to redeem Miranda, but I fear it must be soon or else you might lose her to either Drago or Mira. I'll be close if you need me."

I nodded and turned to face the bitch, who stared slack-jawed after Zhen. The finale of seeing my head roll was not going to happen anytime soon. If we had been raised together, or if Veronica had still been alive and I had known about Bridgette, then we would be family. That was the way it was in the vampire world and the human one, but to my human family, I had all but died. The last year had been hard, and I'd had to reestablish the connections between them, but as I looked into Bridgette's eyes, I saw nothing of familial love.

"I don't know how you tricked the Ancient One, but you'll not fool me. You killed our Mistress. You good for nothing motherfucking bitch," she seethed.

"I did not kill the one who made us. Besides, how do I know you're not trying to deceive me?"

"You know the same blood flows in our veins."

I moved one stool over so I was closer to her. "Maybe, but I want to hear it from you. I knew of no other children besides me." I hardened my voice and let my teeth grow somewhat.

Her purple eyes went black a moment from the beast, but she clamped down on it. She didn't want Zhen to punish her, as her omnipotent presence hovered over us.

"Mistress wouldn't tell you about me. You were an accident provoked by her Master, the asshole that he was. When he found out about me, he locked her away for a year and didn't feed her. He would drop just enough blood onto her tongue to keep her alive, but never enough so she could heal. Bugs began to take root in her dead flesh and lay eggs. She felt them move inside, eating away,

working their way out. After six months of this torture, he forgot about her, which he would do on occasion. It was then I was able to rescue her and nurse her back to health. He came after the both of us and thought he had killed me, but I was stronger than he thought. He took Veronica away and I had to search for her, and then when I heard she had escaped, I followed her trail, pursued the blood scent. And then I felt him die.” She stopped and stared at the bartender, but she was looking beyond him, drowning in her memories.

She truly loved Veronica—that much was clear. I was surprised she had felt Devon’s death. I had my thoughts about other vampires feeling his demise, but I wasn’t sure. I know it had affected Veronica, but that was because he had made her. I found it interesting that she had felt his end as well since he wasn’t the one who had created her. I hadn’t felt it, but then again, I had only been a vampire for a month or so then.

“I tracked her down to New Orleans and found Devon’s grave. At first, I thought she had killed him, getting up enough courage just as she had gotten up the gall to run away from the bastard. I spotted her. She brought flowers to his grave, and then I followed her. She was beautiful, but something seemed different about her. I’d always known she was a meat-lover, but this time, she seemed at peace. Then I dropped in on her. She was surprised and thrilled to see me. When I asked her to come stay with me, to meet her grandchildren, she turned me away and said there was someone else. Mistress told me about you. About everything you had done for her and how you had been able to give her the tranquility she had never known. Peace. What kind of peace could you ever give her that she couldn’t have found in my arms?”

She grabbed my wrist and held onto it. She brought it to her nose and sniffed, getting a whiff of my blood. I pulled my hand away and growled. Her beast rose, and her fangs grew.

“I didn’t kill her. One of Zhen’s bodyguards did. He’d been ordered to by another vampire, another who wanted me for his harem because of my unique abilities. He thought by getting

Veronica out of the way, he could have me. He also wanted Miranda. She is descended from his first child. When Zhen found out about it, she captured Robyn and then I killed him. Veronica died in my arms. I was there when Death took her soul, and I've been devastated ever since. I recently regained my sanity. Trust me, if you think you hate me, join the club. I've screwed over a lot of people in the last year and you aren't the first. But no matter what you believe, I loved Veronica. I tried to save her, but she traded her life for mine."

Tears streamed down her face. "You would say that. The Ancient One wouldn't have let one of her brood get out of hand. She would have killed him first. It's the way things are done. It's the way our society is run, but you wouldn't know anything about it since you aren't even one of us. Whatever Mistress saw in you, I don't understand. Now I have my own brood, and they'll understand what happens to those who destroy their Masters." She hurled herself at me, knocking me off my stool.

The bartender jumped over the bar and went toward Zhen. I pushed the bitch off into the other stools, knocking them over. My blood boiled, and the skin danced on my back. My wings wanted to come out. Bridgette was egging me on, trying to get me into a fight and make me break the carnal rule of neutral ground. She got up and dusted herself off. I closed my eyes and clamped down on my rage. I picked up the stool and slowly met her gaze. I, too, brushed off the discarded butts and ashes.

"I may not be like other undead, but Veronica gave me the best she had. She saved me from death and chose me to be with her. I don't know what it was she saw in you."

"Bitch!" My sister screamed. "You manipulated her even to the very end. You killed her."

"I didn't kill her. I don't know what else you want me to do. Your call for my head isn't warranted, and you can't use the excuse about me harboring an insane vampire either. Zhen knows the truth about Miranda now."

"What's going on here?" Zhen asked.



I looked over at her. "Nothing. I just knocked over a few stools."

*Really?* she asked me mentally.

*No, but what am I supposed to do? I've tried to convince her I didn't kill Veronica. She thinks you would have learned of Robyn's betrayal and killed him because it was the law.*

*She's right, but Robyn wasn't my brood. He was blood-bonded to me. He hadn't been with me for very long. I never completed the process. I had no idea he and Julien were involved with one another,* Zhen responded.

*Yeah, well, fucking tell her that. I'm really not in the mood for another fight. I've already had my share of exhausting days.*

*I tried, before you came, but it is no use. She wants my judgment. Why, what happened?*

"Look, if I can interrupt the both of you. Madam, I appreciate you allowing me the privilege to come here and talk with her, but it's time to end this." She pounded her fist into the bar, leaving a dent in the splintered wood.

Zhen looked down at the indentation and then back at my sister. The air around us thickened. Zhen's eyes turned black and burned red. Her fangs glowed ivory against her lips.

"Look, both of you. Bridgette, you say Brenna killed Veronica. I wasn't there to substantiate the claim. I do know one of mine killed Veronica. Robyn is dead. The only way to prove that Brenna didn't kill her is to go directly to the source. Since you can't have her death, we shall settle the matter between you. Blood-family should not fight. Maybe one day you will realize that."

"The source?"

"You have to ask Death."

"What?" I blurted out. Zhen had been the one to tell me Azrael wasn't worth the time of day. Of course I hadn't listened to her, and I'd ended up a vampire kabob on the beach. He would have my head if he saw me again, and he was being an ass. Then again, I craved his forgiveness. Even the sight of his skeletal face filled me with emotion.

"I thought you said —"

"I know what I said, but it's the only way unless you want me to pass judgment. As Eldest in the city, it's my right to do what I wish. All crimes are brought to me. Even though you are hunting for me and we are friends, that means nothing. Trust me, it isn't pretty. I've had to do it before to those I loved. All of my power would come down on you, on both of you. I don't want to do that. You should be celebrating one another, talking about what you have in common. It's a gift you have, sharing the same blood. You would have been brood-sisters and next to your Master, that's the hardest bond to break. You shouldn't be ready to go at each other's throats."

"Mistress, forgive me, Ancient One, but Lord Death—"

"It's the only way if you truly wish to verify what Brenna is saying is true."

Zhen stared at her, and I knew they were saying something silently to one another. I could only imagine the thrashing she was giving the other vampire. My sister was scared. She was even more petrified of Zhen than of dealing with Death. In some way, I pitied her.

*You know if you do call Azrael, then you're toast, one of my guides said.*

"I know," I mumbled.

*Run away, so you won't end up dead or worse.*

"No," I whispered.

"No? You won't summon Death? Are you that afraid to clear your name, or are you just proving your guilt?" Bridgette barked.

"That's not what I meant. If you wish to call the Lord of the Dead, then go right ahead. I just hope you know what you're in for."

I stared at Zhen. She had seen what Azrael had done to Viktor, but I didn't think she had seen what he had done to the poor homeless guy. She just returned my stare, and there was no changing her mind.

"Good, that's settled. Now, let's go downstairs so we don't scare the incoming clientele. Angels would not be one of the most

welcome of things here, even if he is the one we face and escape when we are transformed.”

Zhen led the way. We filed down to the coat check, weaving through incoming foot traffic. All the junkies disgusted me since I couldn't understand how they could give themselves over to vampires. But then again, I shouldn't be so hypocritical; I had made one myself.

I swallowed, remembering the taste of his blood and our little display in the club. He had been such a good fuck, too. He would do anything I asked him. I realized I could connect to him easily enough and he was close, outside the club, hoping to find me. He was alone and desperate.

I pulled back on my hunger and withdrew from his mind, regretting that my mental bandage had not worked. When I'd been human, I had wanted to be a vampire so badly, but I wasn't running around baring my neck so one could crush me like a soda can, or reveling in the scars the bites left behind. Zhen used humans. Her other half was interesting, but also frightening. They were one in the same as well as separate, but with five thousand years behind her, she was a marvel in the undead community.

*Zhen, I said mentally. I can't talk to Azrael. He'll fry me. You don't know what happened earlier. I pulled Viktor from death when I wasn't supposed to. Azrael came down on me because I fucked with the fabric of the universe or some shit, but I had to try and save him. You saw what happened.*

Zhen stopped her speech to the coat check boy and then looked over at me. She didn't blink but kept on going. *If you want this resolved, then you have to. It doesn't matter what you did. I'm sorry for what happened, but we all have to face our demons, even if they are angels.*

I sighed and followed the vampire, hearing a death toll in my head.

With a wave of her hand, candles appeared on the walls. Bridgette was impressed. I stared at the flickering flames, a sudden heat ignited inside my heart. I hadn't sensed that in over a year and had thought I'd never regain that one particular power. It was like

a lighter being flicked over and over again and there were sparks, but no flame. At least it was a sign. And all signs nowadays gave me hope.

"If you wish to call upon Death, then you must make the call."

She looked at Zhen and back at me. The panic on her face was genuine. She thought Zhen had been kidding, but now that she was faced with doing it, she would rather fight me.

"I don't know how to call him, Ancient One," she whispered.

Zhen laughed. "Child, just call. Death is always listening, especially to us, considering we bring many of his children back to the Source of all Creation."

Bridgette's courage returned, but it was all a front. I breathed in slowly, hoping she couldn't detect my feelings, but she didn't seem to be the type.

"Oh, Lord of the Underworld, I, Bridgette, one of your children, summon you."

I bit my tongue and tried to keep from laughing. Zhen glared at me. I shrugged. Pomp and circumstance were not needed to call upon the angel. But then again, I was not the one who was calling on Death, and knowing our history, well, I wasn't putting it past him that formality got his attention.

For a moment, nothing happened. The room remained silent. Suddenly, it grew dark and Zhen's illusionary candles winked out. The laughter died in my throat, and shivers played on my spine. The environment condensed, heavy and thick, almost tangible. A large slit appeared in the atmosphere, a tear in the fabric of the universe that expanded with skeletal fingers and a head appearing all cloaked in black. I moved into the shadows and prayed Azrael wouldn't see me.

The angel looked around and his eyes settled on Zhen. His stare passed over me, but I wasn't out of the River Styx yet. "Zhen, it's been millennia. You seem well."

A scowl crossed her face, and her disgust at the angel's appearance squeezed through my shields. What had gone on between them to make her hate him so much? It wasn't because he

was an angel. This was personal. There had to be some reason why she told me not to get involved with him. I pulled my shields tighter, trying to wrap the very air around me.

"It has been, Lord Death. Things are prosperous, thank you."

They stared at each other for a long moment, almost conversing silently, but I doubted any words were passing between the two of them. He broke the stare and swept over to Bridgette. He stiffened and his hood fell back, showing off his bald bonehead. Bridgette held in a scream. Her fear was delicious. I would have loved to be the one to scare the piss out of her, but she wasn't afraid of me. It only took Death in person to freeze her heart.

"Why have I been summoned?"

She found her voice. "I need to know who killed my Mistress so I can have the bitch's head."

Azrael looked over at Zhen and then back at Bridgette. "Why not brawl? It is your way."

"There's a problem. I can't corroborate the death, so it was my idea for you to settle it, since you were involved personally with the demise."

"Who is this other you both speak of?"

I gulped and stepped out of the shadows. My shields slipped away. The room went silent, and the angel glared at me. "Hello, Azrael." My voice caught in my throat. My hand absently traced the scratch he had given me earlier. It still hadn't completely healed.

I didn't know if it ever would.

"Brenna, I should have known."

"I never asked for this, all right?"

He laughed, chilling the room, and then went to Bridgette. "How can I help you?"

I heard the smile in his voice, and it made my heart sink to think he hated me that much.

"She killed my Mistress, and I want her head."

"Who was your Mistress?"

"Veronica, Lord Death." Bridgette lowered her head. "She claims another vampire killed her, and I say it was her."

Azrael chuckled. He came close to me. Just his very presence was frigid, and my breath came out in white clouds. Underneath his skeletal mask, I knew his face was set like a granite statue watching a grave. He stared into my soul, studying me, deciding what to do. "Do you wish justice by me, or do you wish to carry it out?"

The instinct to run came upon me, but there was nowhere I could go because he would find me. He did have the power to split the essence of time and space after all. He was pissed. I doubted the skull illusion could bleach out any more. The bone was the closest I had seen to pure white on anything, reminding me of glare off of newly fallen snow. Bridgette smiled. She wanted the satisfaction of seeing me squirm. Plus, she wanted me dead, but the thought of the Angel of Death doing it was even more worth it. I stared at Zhen, but there was nothing she could do, not against an angel.

"You piss people off, don't you?" Bridgette said to me.

"Stay out of it. You know nothing about it." I hissed.

"Be my guest, Lord Death. As long as she pays for what she's done."

"Oh, she will pay. Her soul will wander eternity alone, never feeling the warmth of those she loved in life. She will be a phantasm until this planet explodes, and then she will still be conscious, caught in between dimensions." Azrael reached out his skeletal hand and let it hover over my chest for a second. My soul was lured toward him.

I stared up into the empty sockets, trying to see the stars in his dark eyes. "Don't do this. Please," I whispered.

"Well, the little vampire has learned to beg. I am impressed. Maybe if you plead long enough, you might find someone who will listen."

He plunged his hand into my chest, grabbing my soul. My whole body convulsed as he ripped my essence from me. I felt the gossamer like strands connected to all parts of my body breaking.

My nerves screamed in pain. Everything in me cried out to stay where I was. It wasn't my time to go. I knew that and so did he. His hand gripped my spirit tighter and began to squeeze. Black stars erupted in my vision. My blood began to run cold, and all my organs were shutting down. This was worse than the pain I had experienced on the beach, even when he had unleashed the full force of his power on me. It hurt worse because it wasn't physical anguish; it was the emotional pain that he forced into me, letting me know how he felt, and his mind was endless. That was his point. He could make this kind of suffering go on forever.

"Azrael, please," I whispered. My hand found his chest. I tried to hold myself up and push him back. He stopped and stared down at it, trying to swat me away. I struggled against him, but in the end, it was futile. Zhen looked on, not sure of what to do, and Bridgette laughed giddily.

"Why do you not attempt to seize my own soul?" he whispered.

He didn't know I had lost my powers.

"Because I can't. I don't have the ability anymore. Think about when you left me on the beach," I breathed.

He drew me up to his face so I saw the spaces in his teeth. His breath was cold and smelled no longer of the scent of jasmine and frankincense. His robes reeked of must and decay, and the tears in it seemed centuries old.

"You lie," he sneered, but I felt the doubt in him.

"Then finish me off," I whispered. "Yes, I've learned to beg for forgiveness, learned to plead with those I turned away. Take my soul. Put it into hell and live with yourself forever knowing that what you did goes against everything you are. You say I'm a vampire. Well, for a little while, I jumped in headfirst. I made a slave with no thought to his welfare. But what are you doing to me? What does it make you? An angel who no longer shows compassion for those who are damned. You've become just like them, just like I was, taking life for the fun of it, all because you can. Power can be wonderful in the moment, but desire eats you alive

until you realize the thing behind the hunger. Then you have to reconcile with what you've done. Is that what you want, Azrael?"

"No," he responded. Then, the next thing I knew, shelves were toppling down around me. Azrael crossed the room to Bridgette. "If you wish her head, then you take it. I shall collect her soul then." As always, he was gone.

Bridgette shrieked and came lunging at me while I was still on the ground. She was on top of me. I pushed the wood off, and she began slashing at my face with her talons. I tried to protect myself, but I didn't have the strength since my soul was realigning itself with my body. Everything spun, and I was disoriented and didn't really feel the pain of what she was doing. It hurt to breathe, and my heart beat erratically.

"There is no fighting in this club. Now get out. Death has made his ruling." Zhen didn't move her finger, but had stopped the crusading vampire with her mind in mid-slash. She gave my sister enough room to turn and look at her and then back at me.

"Lucky bitch. Death may not have taken your soul tonight, but just you wait. I'll be back. Veronica will be avenged." She ran out of the room.

Zhen got me to a chair where she wrapped me with a blanket. Another illusion, I suspected, but it was warm and that was all I cared about. I couldn't feel any of my limbs, but at least my vision was starting to clear and Zhen wasn't moving in circles anymore.

"What the hell just happened?"

"Y-y-you don't-t w-want to kno-ow," I chattered.

"Well, whatever it was, you sure made him leave in a hurry. Here," Zhen offered me her wrist. "It will make you feel better."

"Th-thanks."

My fangs lengthened and I bit down and let her blood warm me. It was ancient, but there was something else. It reminded me of the taint Viktor talked about and that only Zhen could explain to me, but I could barely think and the power of it gave me back all of my strength and helped reattach everything that was me. Through



her blood, I touched the beast within her. I opened my eyes and Zhen was smiling down at me.

“I told you Azrael was bad news.”

“What happened between you two?”

“I’ll tell you about it later. Let’s just say he screwed me over one time too many. Now, let’s go upstairs and see what’s going on. Bridgette will be coming after you and, well, I don’t know about Azrael. But it seems you always get yourself into trouble, don’t you?”

“It seems that way.”

## **Part Four:**

## **Resurrection**

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*My name is Bridgette.*

My fist connected with the brick wall outside the Ancient's club. Technically, I was outside, and she could do nothing against me. I'd almost had Brenna in my hands, almost had her head for taking my Mistress. She had only gotten away on a technicality when it came to harboring her child. If only it had been the one the Elder was actively seeking.

Lord Death's appearance shook me. He had been ready to destroy my sister, but somehow, she had manipulated him. It intrigued me how she had made an angel angry. Our kind interacted little with the High Beings, and I had only heard stories that, with their touch, they could burn us from the inside out, rotting the flesh from our bones. It was a story to keep little vampires in line, but still, the thought of them made my skin crawl.

It didn't surprise me that the Ancient One had interacted with the angel. She was so old, I was sure she had crossed paths with Death many times. My blood boiled and I wanted to kill something. Now was not the time. I was too close to the Ancient's nest.

Absently, I licked the blood from my hands. My broken knuckles healed. The dull ache was something I had learned to put out of my mind ages ago. Now, it just made me remember that I was still alive. I let my feet carry me out of Central Square and followed my nose. Taking flight would have been easier, but I wanted the ground beneath me; it seemed more comforting. It reminded me of the past and things that had happened ages ago. Things raced in my mind. If Death would not take her head, and the Elder had denied me, then it was my task alone to vindicate the wrong.

*What did my Mistress ever see in her?* That thought ran rampant while I moved in between the humans. The smell of wet pavement infiltrated my nose as it mixed with the rubber from the tires. Life

pressed on my head from all sides. I hated cities; I hated society today. Things had been simpler a century ago.

The city had not been so crowded. Horseless carriages were just beginning to take the place of horse and buggy. The sounds of horseshoes on cobblestones were everywhere, and the streetlights weren't lit by electricity. Towering buildings didn't overshadow Boston Garden when the city was raw, and the ports were busier, bringing in whales when we tried to rival some of the other ports.

I had been a guttersnipe who lived on the street. My mother had died of the pox, and my father had used me any way he could until I ran away when I was ten. For seven years, I was alone in the grime and the muck, watching the first subway trains being built. I lived on the run in the slums by the wharfs and under the docks when I could.

While digging for mussels along the shore, I saw a beautiful lady with alabaster skin and dark hair. She wore a blue dress the color of the morning sky, and she was walking in the moonlight. It was easier for me to get the mussels at night because there wasn't anyone around, and I could have the run of the beach before the fishermen came back and set sail. I had been doing it for several years, and it enabled me to have a full belly when I needed it and, if I saved the money I sold them for, a rundown room for the night.

The woman saw me on the beach. I thought it was strange for such a lady to be by herself on such a lonely stretch of shore without a gentleman to escort her. I'd met some strange characters, but the locals knew me, and they didn't give me a hard time. It was only those running from the law who thought they could get between my legs. Once or twice, I had been raped because it was better to be fucked than dead. But I looked away for a moment and when I looked back, she was waist deep in the frigid water of Boston Harbor. Something about that struck me, and as I watched, she kept going and going, fighting the current and the outgoing tides in the dark water that even the moon couldn't touch. Something told me she was going to drown if I didn't do

something. I don't know why I did it, but I dropped all the mussels and ran in the water after her.

"Miss, miss!" I screamed.

She stopped and looked at me, the water up to her chest, the fabric of her dress plastered so that I saw the boning of her corset underneath, her hard nipples straining to be released. Her eyes were coal dark, and it seemed she didn't see me at first. I didn't feel the water envelop me as I tried to make it to her. It was frigid, and my teeth chattered. While I was going toward her, something hit my mind. It was disorienting. She wavered like a ghost and the next thing I knew, I was coughing and she was holding me.

I was warm. There was a fire near me—I could hear it crackling—but there was also a cold draft. I noticed she had the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. They were purple. Her smile was heartfelt, and she wasn't wet at all. It made me wonder if I had been dreaming the whole situation, but something inside told me it had really happened.

She handed me something warm and sat in a chair by the fireplace. "Are you feeling better, little one?"

I took a sip and realized I was drinking tea, something I'd only had a few times, and this had sugar in it. I sipped it slowly, burning the tip of my tongue, and even with my teeth chattering, I was able to find my voice. "Miss, are you all right? You were going to drown."

"Drown?" she questioned, and stared past me, remembering. "Yes, I guess part of me wanted that, but that is the past now. You came in to rescue me. I didn't think a human would do that."

I gazed at her, thinking she was crazy from the water, but when her attention moved back to mine, she was totally sane and her eyes held a light I had never seen. It was as if she truly saw me. No other person had done that. Mostly, they all looked through me as if I were a piece of trash.

"No one has ever tried to save me before. I didn't think anyone cared. Why did you risk your own life for mine?"

I moved closer, clutching the blanket. "Nobody is worthless, no matter where they are in life. I'm nothing, but I stay alive."

"Yes, you are free to do as you please and are not held down by a domineering master."

"If your husband be so bad, miss, then why not leave him? Death is not the way."

She laughed and stared at the window. "You don't know my life. You never would want to."

"Forgive me, miss." I got up and put my hand on her shoulder. "But it seems you made me part of it, bringing me here, keeping me warm an' all. I don't know how to repay you. I have no money. I can offer you service, even though my station isn't very high."

A look of fright replaced the far off look. "No, you owe me nothing. I must go. I didn't know how late it was. Stay here until I return. The servants will be no trouble to you. You and I seem the same size. There are clothes in the rooms. More than I need."

"But, miss, I can't just stay here. What will the others think?"

She grabbed my shoulder and locked my eyes with hers. I felt a pressure in my mind, and then she was gone. I didn't want to go anywhere except to sleep. I did until I was awakened by someone pulling back the drapes and letting the sun stream in. At first I thought I was dreaming, but then I remembered everything that had happened. When I sat up, the servant looked over and curtsied.

"Morning, miss. Our mistress said you'd be staying with us for a while."

I nodded. The girl curtsied again. A few moments later, there was a tray brought up and I ate breakfast. I gazed around the room and everything about it was something I had never seen. The maid came in with a dress and helped me. For the first time, I wore a corset, and I hated it. The servants never said anything about me being there, and every time I thought about leaving, I didn't want to.

I waited two weeks before I saw my mysterious woman again. By that time, I was bored and the compulsion not to leave had all but worn off. There she stood in front of me, looking paler than

before, more worn. It was at night that she came. We stood in the library of her house and she was there. She looked otherworldly, the moon showing on her gray gown and the black cloak that surrounded her as if she were a child trying to hide.

"You are well?"

I rose from my chair and set down the book that had different pictures of birds and wildlife. I started to go to her, but she backed away. It was then that I noticed that something seemed different. Her face was hollow. "I am well, but you have to eat something. I'll get the servants." I went to ring the bell.

"No, they have nothing that will satisfy my hunger. I made a mistake coming here. I should leave. I'll make provisions for you so that you can stay and have a good life. I know a few people who you can call on if you like."

"Miss, wait. I don't know anything about you or why you let me stay here. The servants don't seem to know anything about you, and for some reason, I think you are not entirely human. I would think you are a ghost, but you are more solid than that, and why would a ghost want to drown herself, unless that was how you died before?"

She laughed. It gave her life and brought a small smile to her face. It made her seem more energetic, even though her skin seemed to be losing color. It was almost waxen, and her eyes were getting dark circles underneath them, and her lips turned a blue color. She seemed to be dying in front of me. "Oh, poor human child. It has been ages since anyone has made me laugh or even brought me joy. I had almost forgotten what they were. My life has been overhung by such a dark cloud. You are right. You deserve to know what I am, or at least why I keep you here. I am no ghost, but I haven't been alive for over a hundred years."

I stared at her, not sure what she was going to do to me then. My eyes grew wide and a rope of fear coiled around my heart. I found it hard to breathe. She came near me and dropped her cloak to the floor. I tried to back away. Her footsteps were silent on the carpet, which was faded and full of holes, something I hadn't

noticed before, and the windows were broken, and the curtains were moth-eaten, and the bookshelves were covered in dust. I really began to wonder if she really wasn't a spirit, or if I was already dead.

"How come everything is different?"

"Because I wanted you to see things for what they are, not for what I made you believe they were."

"What about the servants? Do they see things like this, or do they see them the way they were before?"

She stepped closer. I waited for the glamour to fall away from her; it didn't. She was still drawn. I swallowed but couldn't find my feet. "The servants are dead too. They are ghosts bound to serve me. They are real enough when summoned, and only when I come here do they come alive. Most of the time, the house is left empty until someone wanders in, and if not me, then the spirits do what they will. I have found a few dead here, frightened to death, but you are different. You are my guest and since they know this, they will treat you as such."

"If they're dead, how can the clothing be real and the food they brought and the bed I slept in? Everything was new, and there were no holes."

"I come here at times and keep the room you stayed in repaired, along with the clothes in all the closets. The food I eat, so I keep things stocked. There are only a few rooms in the house I don't go in. My parents' old bedroom and the one I shared with my sister."

"Why don't you go in those?"

"Because that is where I killed them. The stains of their blood are still there, even though their spirits fled this house long ago. Why the servants remained, I have no idea. Maybe because of the way Devon butchered them."

The door swung open and one of the maids floated in, and I could see right through her. "Ma'am, do you require anything?" the ghost asked.



She shook her head and the ghost looked over at me, but I just stammered. "Nothing tonight, Amelia. Tell the others they can retire, too."

The ghost curtsied and then vanished. All of this had been too much for my senses and before I knew it, I was on the floor trying to catch my breath, trying to make sense of what I had heard, but even though my eyes saw the truth, my mind didn't want to accept it.

"If you're not like them, then what are you? Are you going to kill me too?"

She sank down beside me and put a hand on my cheek, but I cringed away at the contact. "I won't hurt you, but I need something that you have. It won't hurt, I promise." Then, the world was nothing more than her flame purple eyes, which were growing dark and swallowing my soul.

The next thing I knew, I was warm again. One of the servants tended the fire and there was a tray with some kind of food. The maid looked at me and smiled, and for a moment, she seemed real. Then I remembered everything I had been told and I was scared to even move, but I got up the nerve to address her.

"H-hello."

"Afternoon, miss. You must have been right tired to sleep so long."

"Can I ask you something, Amelia?"

"Anything, miss."

"Veronica said you are a ghost. Is that true?"

The maid just looked at me and laughed. She shook her head and left the room. When she left, she didn't open the door but walked through it, showing me she didn't realize she was dead. I shook my head. I felt a soreness that hadn't been there the other night. When I ran my hand over my skin, I felt two scabs

The next night, she came again when I was eating. She looked better, almost alive. The hollowness was gone and she didn't float through life. She was solid.

"Hello, Bridgette."

"Hi. Are you going to tell me what you are?"

She was amazed that I remembered what had happened. "You don't need to know what I am. You need to pack whatever you wish and leave this place as soon as you can."

I was shocked. The other night she had seemed so inclined I would stay, and now she wanted me out, but I was stubborn. Seven years on the street had taught me a thing or two. "I ain't leavin' until you tell me what the hell is going on. Here I am, living in a house full of dead things, and for some reason, I can't seem to leave. I want to know, is all this some kind of game? I just wanted to save you from drowning, not become some dead bitch's pet."

"Look, I didn't mean for that to happen. If you don't leave, then he'll kill you too, or even worse. He destroys everything I care for."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Devon."

"Your husband?"

"If only. Then I could leave him or kill him. Devon is my Master. He is the one who made me into this undead beast that craves blood and has the depravity to kill. He forces me to do things that haunt my dreams, and my kind doesn't dream very often. These nightmares are my life. I wanted to end it all when you found me in the water, but when you dove in the frigidness after me, I couldn't let the sea take you. Human life is so precious. But if he finds you, he can corrupt you with just a look, a suggestion, and you would be his."

"If he's so awful, then run away. Tell him you wish for your freedom. No man should rule you."

"If only it were that simple. Part of me loves him, worships him, and I can't get away from that part of me. That was why I went into the frigid water the other night. I wanted it to end, but my other half whispered to me that you were there, that we should save you, if not for a meal, then at least because you had tried to save us. But if you don't leave, he will find you and do the same thing he did to me, possess you utterly."

“Veronica, what are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

She stared into space and looked over the books on the shelves and the decrepit furniture. I had a feeling she was seriously considering something. “Bridgette, do you know how lonely an eternity gets when there is no one like you? Do you know how long the night stretches before you? Your life has been hard. I’ve seen your memories, but you have survived, and you have a passion for existence. What if I could give you an eternity where you wouldn’t have to pry mussels from rocks or sell your body to scrape by? What would you say?”

I stared at her and knew what she proposed would change my world. She would not be offering lightly because I got the feeling she wasn’t too happy about her situation. I only knew a little bit about this strange woman and the fact I was being waited on by ghosts didn’t bother me anymore, so I figured why not? The prospect of living my life differently was what everyone in my situation wanted.

“I would say yes. Anyone would to such an offer, but only on one condition. You have to come with me. I have always wanted to see mountains. I’m tired of the sea. What do you say?”

Veronica only smiled, and the light returned to her purple eyes. “We can see mountains.”

\* \* \* \*

I stopped walking and noticed I was in Harvard Square where a bunch of humans gathered around the subway station were trying to stay warm and dry while they talked and some played music. They were the modern day homeless and misplaced youth who lingered in every major city across the country. Some were lost, either in their minds or in their life, while others had nothing, had been surviving for years on what they could find, like I used to. Others were rich kids wanting to have their parents pissed at them, so they ran away to live on the wild side. But in all, they were trying to survive, waiting for their next break, even if it was half a

cigarette butt thrown away or the random dollar that wasn't tucked away in someone's wallet after change.

I didn't envy the youngsters now and wondered if life was easier back when I had been human. Out of these lots, I had chosen my own children, lifting them above mortal society so they could have a second chance.

After that night, we never did get to see the mountains. Once she turned me into a vampire, she was able to get away from Devon for only brief periods of time, teaching me when she could, but mostly, I fended for myself, but that was nothing new. I stayed in the house so I would have a safe place to sleep. But after I was turned, I never did see the ghosts again. There were times I felt a cold chill pass through me, but I never took any notice of it. After I changed, my eyes turned violet like my Mistress' and my hair grew redder. Somehow, I appeared older, but I had always wanted to.

For ten years, I lived my life revolving around Veronica in the hopes she would leave Devon and get the courage to acknowledge me as her child. Since I had turned, I understood the devotion that I and my other half had to our Mistress, but Devon was just an asshole—both parts of me agreed on that. In the long run, she was too petrified to run from him, scared that he would hunt me down and kill the one point of light she had in her darkness.

I wanted to travel. I gave Veronica an ultimatum, told her she must leave Devon or I was gone. It put her in a bind because she was bound to Devon in more ways than I understood at the time. I didn't know how much control he'd exerted over her, how much of a dick he was. Devon discovered us trying to leave and saw that she was choosing me over him. He locked her away where he used to punish her in the basement of the house they lived in. Devon showed up and tried to control me. I had been headstrong and independent from the get-go from all my years on my own, and he couldn't rule me. Instead, he tried to tell me I was nothing and tried to make me believe that by invading my mind.

He showed me things, did things to me I'd never wish on any human or vampire. I had learned Devon was one of the more

sadistic among our kind. It seemed to go on down through the bloodline, but neither Veronica nor I were like that. I didn't follow in the footsteps of my Mistress, but I also didn't mistreat mortals, for the most part. I still remembered being one. I was not so removed from people that I wanted to torture them. My Mistress had been so traumatized by the killing of her parents and sister that she never recovered, and the guilt of their demise weighed on her conscience for years. That was one reason she had hung onto her house.

After Devon had his way with me, he left me alone to rot, but I picked myself up and found the nearest victim and drank my fill until I was healed. My young body had never undergone such trauma, and it took me two weeks to heal properly.

It took me another two months to find my Mistress because Devon kept moving her when I would get close. Finally, he grew careless, and forgot about her. When I found her, she was living in filth, chained to the wall dressed in a torn gown and with dried blood all over her. Her skin was sunk into her bones, yellowed. Her teeth appeared to be falling out, patches of hair were missing, and her eyes were glazed and filmy. But the worst thing was that parts of her flesh were crawling. There were holes in her skin, gnawed away by rats and other vermin and maggots. The stench about her was horrific.

When she sensed someone there, she turned her head toward me, unseeing, and only sniffed and made a grunting sound. When she opened her mouth, I saw she had chewed off her own tongue to get any kind of blood into her system. I wasn't sure Veronica was even in there and thought maybe it was Ronnie, her beast, that was left. Probing her mind, I found shreds of her there. I hadn't fed and it was almost time for me to take another victim, so I knew my blood wouldn't help her much, but it would do something until I could find a human and get her out of there.

I ripped into my wrist. Once she smelled blood, she howled, but I shushed her. She clamped down on my wrist and began sucking the life out of me. I pulled my hand away when I felt

myself grow dizzy and knew that, if I hadn't, she would have killed me. My blood didn't have much of an effect except, I could see the bugs inside her stop moving. The vampire blood attacked them and killed them immediately. Our systems expelled anything unwanted.

I left her there and went to find a victim for myself, which I killed quickly, and then brought back another for my Mistress. When I returned, her eyes were clearer and so was her skin, but that was all the nourishment my blood could provide her.

When I brought the human, she was more alert, and from her eyes I saw that she shared her body with her beast. I undid her rusted chains. If she had any strength, she would have ripped them out, but Devon kept her weak. As soon as I let her go, she fell. I caught her just in time and held her. I slashed the human's wrist and held it over Veronica's mouth. Once the blood hit her, she came alive, and I didn't have to do anything except back away and watch her feed.

It was the worst I had seen her. She tore at the body, her talons digging into the flesh to get at the heart. Even I didn't do that all the time, though the compulsion was there. The heart held the sweetest blood and the tastiest meat, but it was not the best to leave bodies with missing hearts around the city.

My Mistress dug into the neck, trying to get any sustenance she could, and I wondered from all the damage done to her if she might need a second victim. In the years that I had known her, she rarely killed, only taking blood from those close to death to end their pain, bringing them mercy when any others of our kind would torture them to get the rise of fear that spiced the blood.

She was brutal to the human, and in the end, there was hardly anything left of it except mangled flesh and gore. After she finished with the heart, she rested her head against the stone wall, and I watched the healing blood inside her work its magic. She was being restored. The lumps underneath her skin that had been bugs were now completely gone, somehow absorbed into her. A slight fuzz

adorned her scalp, and her eyes were their once brilliant violet color. She was beautiful once more, a light in the darkest night.

When she was done healing, I stayed with her for a few more weeks, urging her to leave Devon, but with what he had done to her and what he had done to me, she didn't dare show any kind of disobedience for fear of what he would do. Nothing I could say would convince her. We both knew it was the best thing for me to do. I wanted to get on with my life. From there, she severed my bond with her and it wasn't until I felt her die that I realized my beloved Master had finally left her sire, changed another, and had never contacted me, even though a century had passed.

Not a word, just the feeling that she was dying. I saw through my Mistress' eyes. I saw my sister peering down at her with a smug look on her face. Brenna had to die, and it had taken me a year to track her down. I would not be denied my vengeance, even though Death himself had rejected my plea.

It was time to take matters into my own hands.

After everything, I found myself back at our lair, which was an abandoned building that had been driven out of use by the Big Dig. It was temporary until we could find better lodgings. I was hoping to claim my Mistress' house, but when I saw my sister using it, I knew it was not an option until I could have her head.

I looked up at the deserted warehouse, part of an old brick mill from days gone by when the country needed such things for manufacturing. Now, machines did everything. My children didn't mind. They followed me wherever I went, all except Sean. He had left me behind as I had left Veronica, wanting more freedom than I could give him, but we were always connected, and he would find his way back to me after years of wandering and discovering the country and himself.

He was my first child, the one who saved me from myself, saved me from loneliness and an eternal night of nothingness. He had been a squatter. But I was fine. I was just having fun with the mortal because I was bored. I had come to understand what Veronica meant about having an endless eternity spread out before

you and there being nothing that could be done for it. As much as our kind liked to be alone, we also craved those of our bloodline, mostly those that we were brood siblings with. It was like a regular human family. They comforted us and understood that, no matter what, even though we had a tendency to want to be dominated and fucked, that was still our beast, and the human side had some say in the whole process.

But Sean...I saw something in him, a light that could guide me through my travels since I didn't have that connection to my Master. And he agreed to join me. For thirty years we traveled the world together. I saw mountains. We trekked all over the place until his spirit of independence emerged. He grew distant, and the best thing was to let him stake out on his own. It was devastating, but by then I had another child that we had chosen together, and she stayed with me.

Along the way, I had chosen to create three more and they, too, were with me. Now, all I wanted to do was bathe in their love and expectations, feeling their minds entwined around mine. I knew their darkest secrets, felt their flesh under me. It sent a shiver down my back at just the thought. We would play tonight. I would take them all on their first hunt, and my blood-sister was history.

As I walked into the building, nothing seemed out of the ordinary except that the place was devoid of my brood's heartbeats and the fluttering of their minds were silent. I raced up the stairs. The smell hit me first when I dared take in a breath, which was a conscious effort because my body had lost the automatic response to inhale years ago. When I did, I smelled blood, a lot of it, and it wasn't human.

I rushed up the remaining steps. When I entered the room we occupied, I saw blood and gore splattered everywhere drying shit brown, some of it in clumps. There really weren't bodies, just pieces. A finger here, a torso there. There were no heads to be found. I did spot a piece of an eye, or I thought it might have been some other internal organ.



Overwhelming loss hit me as I stared at what used to be my children. Everything I had worked for was gone. All my fledglings had been destroyed. There was nothing left, nothing. It was that little insane bitch that my sister harbored. My talons balled into a fist and I let out a scream, shaking the foundations.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. They were the first ones I had shed since I had lost Veronica. I was nothing again. I fell to the floor and sobbed, curling in a ball, wishing the sun would come and take me too. But my instincts would kick in and force me into darkness, while their remains would burn to nothing in the light.

"Mistress, what happened?"

I gazed up through my tears and saw Sean. I wrapped my arms around him and wouldn't let him go, making sure he was real and not some ghost come to haunt me. After a second of hesitation, he enfolded me and made me feel safe. I listened to his slow moving heart and knew he was truly alive, but there was something strange about him, a smell.

"Where've you been?"

"I was out hunting. They were all here expecting you. I thought you'd be here when I got back. I hoped I'd get all of you together—"

"What?"

"Nothing, Mistress, I'm just babbling. The shock of seeing all of them like this and you so vulnerable."

His finger slid down my cheek, wiping a tear away, but his finger trailed down my throat and across my breast until he grabbed a handful of my tit and squeezed hard enough for me to cry out. My eyes widened. His other hand wound in my hair and yanked my head back, forcing me to my feet. His fangs were poised at my throat, his jaw slightly wider than it should be, reminding me of a snake, which at his age, was something he shouldn't have been able to do. It took ages to master changing one's shape. Even I couldn't change my physical appearance very much. Sure, I could transform into our hellhound counterparts and our beast/gargoyle form, but to have such a localized change was interesting.

“Sean, what the hell are you doing? Put me down. This is no time to play games. Your blood-family has been destroyed.”

“I know, and you’ll be the sweetest conquest of them all. The blood that created me will free me at last. I should’ve known how much power you’d have instead of those stupid humans prancing around in the moonlight, begging me not to kill them. They were nothing, disbelievers, all of them. They claimed the Horned God, but knew nothing of the true Horned One. He promised me power through their blood. The old ones knew so much and said the best blood was through family. That it would give me the best power. And you’re next, Mom.”

Blood drained from my face. I recognized the smell emanating from him, and it was getting stronger. I elbowed him in the stomach, hard enough that he loosened his grip. I wasted no time and ran for the nearest window. My wings emerged when I jumped. I took to the skies. I gazed to the east and saw the first rays of sun breaking the horizon. I could only last an hour in direct light. I’d never had much tolerance for it, and my children had been worse. I knew Sean wouldn’t follow, not yet. The only place I had to go was to the only remaining family I had left.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*My name is Azrael.*

The wails of the dead cried out, but I still disregarded them. The lower angels gathered the wailing spirits. They were slower than I and couldn't get to all the souls in the time I could, but that didn't mean anything to me. The crashing waves of the sea still echoed in my thoughts, still calling to my past, to my family, and how I had been before I came to this darkened void. My mind wandered to eons ago, to humans long dead and reborn hundreds of times over, of souls I had even held in my hand, of a mother who abandoned me to priesthood because the priests read my destiny in bones and said I would become something extraordinary.

At five, my mother gave me up and I remember her with pride on her face, but it meant nothing as time went on and the memory of her dimmed. I learned many secrets in the priesthood until I was seventeen, but it didn't matter what I discovered or that I was going to be chosen among them all. I craved power. Because of that, I ran away, searching the settlements for more knowledge to contact the gods to learn the mysteries of the universe. I turned from the Sun Gods and started to worship the moon and the stars. Their power shined down on me and gave me the most strength. It was in the night that I belonged.

I missed the crashing sea and the power of the waves. My people used to worship the ocean and instead of fearing it, we held it with awe. Now, as I stared down at the planet, I did not know what I wanted. What Brenna had said was true. When I ascended to this expanse, I learned compassion, and everything that was corrupt in me fell away. Or I thought it had. An angel was wrought to have Divine Love. I was everything my brothers were. With my emotions aside, I accepted that the Source placed Her faith and love in me. It got me through the cold nights of the void I existed in.

Now, I felt shut off from that love, and I did not know how to return to that state. My thoughts were tumultuous.

Michael's words of destruction echoed in my mind, of taking Brenna's life and extinguishing it. By taking her kind and wiping the scourge from the planet. I had almost done that and was surprised the Source had not ceased my action. But I could not reach out and ask for Her help. I needed to see if my heart had turned from my Divine Mission or if I only wished to use my power for my evil urges.

"Azrael, child."

Unimaginable light split the dark void. It should have suffused me with warmth, but it didn't. I turned from my perch and stared into the incredible face of the Divine.

"You turn away from me, why?" Her voice was layered with chimes, mortal voices, and sounds to create a harmonic effect. It used to be music to my ears, but now the beauty was muffled.

"Mistress, I am lost."

Her presence came close, but I moved away, not sure if I could endure it. The universe lit up like a great sun. All of Her surrounded me, trying to open my heart.

"Child, you have been with me for seconds in time but eons as the galaxies drift. Why is it now you are lost among the stars?"

She could read my mind if She chose because She was the Source of everything that created the moon and the stars. The planets rotated at Her whim. Life had begun at Her thought. She had given me my wings and created the other angels so that they could guard over all the aspects of the universe that She couldn't get to. They were watchers. Now, I felt as if I were spiraling into a black hole where I would go on forever falling.

"My purpose has been lost. I used my powers to inflict pain instead of taking it. And I enjoyed it."

Her smile was the reflection of a rainbow spread on the surface of the moon. "Azrael, I lifted you above others because there was a light in your heart that showed through the darkness. Now you say you are lost only because you have begun to feel and realized that

you still have a mortal heart, even though you have been chosen to be at my side for so long. The one thing you must ask yourself is, when did this indecision start?"

"Mistress, do you think I am unworthy to be at your side?"

She put Her hand on my shoulder. Some of its warmth went into my chilled heart, and I felt comforted. "It is only when you don't feel the warmth of Love that you will not be worthy of the wings you possess. You were mortal once and Earth still has a hold over you, but it isn't for the reason that you think. Search your heart, my dark angel, and you will find your answers."

With that, She was gone. She was telling me how to come back to Her, but I had to find the reason on my own. Even with the powers I had at my fingertips, I still didn't know where to start except to reopen doors I had not trod through for ages.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*My name is Brenna.*

I stayed with Zhen until Drago returned to the lair and informed him about Viktor. He was pissed and blamed me, but once Zhen showed him what happened, he quieted and began to mourn along with Sherna. He wanted to go back to my house and hunt for the insane one, but Zhen forbade it. Once that fiasco was over, I walked home still feeling the deep chill of Azrael's power tugging at my soul. I wondered if I would ever be completely rid of it now that he had touched me.

The sun was rising as I walked back to the house, and my pace hurried. I didn't want to be caught in its rays; the incident on the beach was still fresh in my mind. I didn't feel like being shish-vamp-kabob again. When I got to the house, I heard the commotion.

*Great, this is just what I need now.*

I put the key in the front door, realizing then that the window was still unboarded, but when I got in, I saw Miranda bathed in blood, her head thrown back and her hands traveling down over her naked breasts, her nipples pert. Her teeth were still baby points, but her fingers had become full-on talons. The blood-scent was human. Blood matted her hair and the ribcage was cracked open, exposing lung tissue and a half-eaten heart. The victim had a vague resemblance to Miranda with a frozen scream locked on her face. Her brown eyes were lifeless, and her clothes had been ripped to shreds. She was spread eagle as if she and Miranda had fucked and, by the smell of it, I assumed they had. The half-vampire had gotten caught up in the moment and torn out her throat.

When Miranda sensed someone else, she opened her eyes, dark and ink black. It was Mira who looked out at me, and the smell wafting off of her was horrendous. Her mind was cracking. She giggled and licked her fingers clean with a black, forked tongue.

One finger trailed down and encircled her hard nipple and the other moved to her hairless clit, but her eyes never left mine, and her smile only widened.

"Mira, what the hell are you doing?"

"I was hungry. Want some?"

The sight of her and the blood called to my demonic nature, and if everything had been the way it was before, I would have happily joined in. I shook my head and got the afghan from the couch.

"I knew I'd find the beast. All I had to do was follow the smell."

I spun around and saw Drago and Sherna. The African princess was poised and waiting for instruction, but there was a look in her eye. I didn't think she fully trusted her master.

*Hmm, I wonder why. Maybe because he's gone off the deep end.*

"Zhen told you not to come here, Drago. Why would you defy your Mistress?" I had a feeling that his warrior was thinking the exact same thing.

He glanced down at Miranda, whose flesh was rolling and bubbling. Mira was in control, and she wanted to switch her shape into a beast and fight, but because she wasn't fully turned, she couldn't and gave up. I dropped the afghan when I saw Drago smile. He was planning on having some fun.

"I no longer listen to Zhen. She might have created me, but she no longer rules me. I've made a name for myself among our kind by killing ones like her. They're nothing and should be put out of their misery. I've become respected and given my children a chance to create their own broods without the stigma of our tainted blood. Do you know how long I have worked for that without the other elders turning me away? Do you know how long I wanted independence among our kind?"

"There you go again with that whole tainted blood shit. What does that have to do with how you stand in the undead community? Why would it matter when we're all descended from

the same fount? Bloodlines don't really matter if you trace them back far enough."

He just smiled. "Obviously, Zhen hasn't told you about our Grandsire."

"No, not really, and honestly, I don't really much care to know right now. I've had a long night and want to get a little bit of sleep before I have to go run my business and then look for the asshole who killed Viktor. Now I want both of you out before I get really pissed off."

"And you think you can make me go? I'm not leaving until I have this one's head."

Drago reached out and grabbed Miranda by the throat, his talons poised to rip her heart out. I moved without thinking and was surprised to find my hand wrapped around his throat. I figured maybe it was the sudden brush with death.

"You will leave now and take your surviving child with you. And if you don't, I will tear your heart out and make you watch while I drain the blood from it. Now, get out." The heat inside of me ignited they it had done before when I was pissed and wanted to burn away the ones standing in my way. I felt the fire awakening in my eyes, but then the door opened and Xavier walked in. He surveyed the situation and then locked his eyes with mine.

"I assume I missed the party."

"They were just leaving. Weren't you, Drago?"

The elder vampire glanced between the werewolf and me and then back to Miranda, who was now herself again, fear leaking out of her pores. The vampire unwrapped his talons and backed away. In a flash, both he and Sherna were gone, leaving me and my family.

"Is this dinner or some kind of a joke?" Xavier picked up the dropped afghan and wrapped it around Miranda's shoulders. He took her into his arms and kissed the top of her head, trying to comfort her shaking form. "You knew this would provoke Mira and yet you brought it here anyway. Damn you, Brenna."



"She didn't bring the girl here. We were hungry. I was hungry." Miranda backed out of Xavier's arms and looked down at the carnage. "Brenna didn't do anything. She saved me from the others. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Why don't we go upstairs and get you into a bath. I think it might make you feel a little less icky." I motioned her ahead, but she flung herself into my arms and gave me a hug. It took me a moment to react because I hadn't had any physical contact with her in a while.

"You meant what you said in the café, about wanting to help me? And the other night about Mira, about changing me? You weren't just bullshitting us, were you?"

"No. I meant what I said. I just have to finish something for Zhen. A vampire's been killing her children. He was the one who killed Len, and he's the serial killer the police are looking for. Drago and I were working together to hunt him. That's what he does. He kills insane vampires."

A look of realization crossed her face. "That's why he wanted me. Because I'm going crazy. Oh God, I knew something was wrong with Mira, something I couldn't fight. There's a blackness that consumes us sometimes and we lose time. You won't let them take me, will you?"

"No. They won't take you. I promise. Before he died, Viktor said there was still hope for both of you. You have to hold on a little while longer. If you can do that, then there's nothing for you to worry about."

"You'll really change me?"

I nodded.

"Do you really believe her promises? How can you? She said the same shit before and then left you alone when you needed her most!" Xavier snarled.

Miranda turned to her distant grandfather. "I know, but she means what she says. You've heard her say she's not one of them. I believe her and you should too."

Xavier growled something and picked up the corpse before jumping out of the open window. What he was going to do with it, I didn't care. I stared up the steps, feeling weary but drained because the sun rose. All I wanted to do was sleep after such a fun-fucking-filled evening.

"Who's Viktor?"

"The tall, blond vampire who interrupted you, Mira, and the other while you were fucking."

Miranda's face drained of color. "I thought that was just a dream. Oh, God. Brenna, he's going to come back and claim me. He told Mira we were both the same and he'd been looking for me for a long time. He said he could smell me, her, on the wind. Oh, God, I don't want to end up like that. I don't want to lose my mind."

She started sobbing, and I led her upstairs. "You won't. I promise. We're close to finding him. Did you ever see him while he was in human form? Did you ever see his face?"

Miranda shook her head. "No, but I remember how he smells. And how his mind feels. There were things inside it that frightened Mira. He just wasn't right. Everything was dark in his thoughts. There was chanting and I could smell blood. His mind was a jumble of strange images and the things that he did—torturing those poor people because he wants to gain their power."

"Gain their power for what?"

"I don't know exactly. He's been practicing some form of Satanism, worshipping the Dark Gods. I'm not sure; it was very vague. I only got bits and pieces. I didn't want anything to do with it, and Mira didn't want me involved anyway. So I was happy to oblige. Oh, God, I killed that girl."

"No, you didn't. Mira killed her, not you."

"No, Brenna, Mira pulled away at the last minute and left me with the choice. I was the one who tore into her chest and pulled out her heart. The idea of it pumping so much blood was appealing. Sometimes I wonder if Mira is the animal part of me given a voice. I don't know anymore where she ends and I begin. I was born with her; she's been wrapped around my soul for ages

until she woke up in the hospital when I was sixteen and then Julien gave her strength. Sometimes I really wonder, you know?"

I flipped on the bathroom light and removed the afghan. "Yeah, I wonder sometimes, too."

\* \* \* \*

After six hours of sleep and a shower, I felt better and decided on coffee instead of my usual chai. I needed something stronger this morning. I sipped it as I walked up the stairs to the Tearoom—the elevator was down again, which was nothing new and might have been better considering the blood bath it had last night. Peter had gotten all of Viktor's blood off the stainless steel and hopefully no one noticed it. The energy of the place prickled on my skin, waiting for me to get there, and already I heard the cobbler grumbling in the back of the shop. I smiled, glad to know that my abilities had returned. I wondered if I should start doing readings again. Maybe it would give business a boost.

*You never know*, one of my guides stated.

I ignored the comment and walked into the Tearoom to find Peter relaxing on the sofa. Fredryck was off on another jaunt to New Orleans, but he was a globetrotter and always came back to the nest. Besides being able to make me laugh, he was one of the best readers we had. He was a staple who had been through the many incarnations of the Tearoom.

"Hello, Raven." Peter had the phone by his side.

"Hey, Peter. How are things this morning?"

"Same old, same old. Xavier was here earlier and said he was going to pick up Mae. Something about her car not starting. Mae left a message."

"That's fine. How about the trip getting back to Germany? Any plans yet?"

"I've thought about it, but I have to get my passport in order. I'm still waiting to hear if they received the copy of my birth certificate."

“Cool, well, just let me know when you need the time off. We—

”

“Hello, Boston Tearoom?” Peter picked up the phone and walked out back. I assumed it was a personal call from what the man was saying on the other end. I shrugged, sipped at my coffee and went over to my table. I glanced up at Edmund’s picture.

“Are you going to be coming back too? Or have you moved on to bigger and better things up there?” I whispered. There was no answer, just the sudden crashing of his picture as it fell in my chair. Peter’s head peered around the corner, but I waved him off. I put the picture back on the wall, wondering if that was Edmund’s way of answering me.

I listened for a moment but was met only with silence in my mind. He had been a driving force in my human years at the Tearoom, teaching me and always being the giver of knowledge even when I didn’t want it. Like Azrael’s old, witty sayings, his advice was always mysterious. Edmund had been the one to warn me to not push my friends away. If I hadn’t, then I might not be in this predicament to begin with. Like always, I didn’t listen. The last time I hadn’t listened to someone, Veronica was killed. The past couldn’t be changed, and as they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty. For now, I picked up one of my older decks and shuffled them. The energy in them was intense, especially since I hadn’t used them in so long and due to the fact that they were one of the very first decks I bought. I stopped and pulled three cards, laying them out side by side.

The first one was the Lovers card. The next card was the Universe. And the third card was the Death card. I sighed at all three of them.

The Lover’s card was the past, my relationship with Veronica and how she was behind me. The Universe normally meant that new things were coming, that there were new horizons awaiting me. Staring at the card, it was actually the stars that caught my attention. They reminded me of the ones I used to see in Azrael’s eyes, of planets colliding and how I had felt something for him,

how I still felt something for him. This card meant it was where I was in the present time. I had a universe ahead of me, more questions than answers, and if my luck held out, who knew how the universe was going to rewrite my fate? My faith over the years had never been in God, just a being. Pagans chose to see her as Goddess or God. I never really thought about the whole God whatever thing since I had been turned. All I knew was there were angels, so hell, there had to be something up there. Mostly, I figured it was Fate that fucked with my life, and I was sure she was laughing.

The Death card normally meant the rebirth of something. A way of life ending and beginning afresh. Rarely did it mean physical death. For me, it was an interesting future. Maybe it meant that I actually might die and Azrael would let my soul cross over, but I highly doubted that. My guides laughed at that idea, so I figured it wasn't the answer, but it also meant my confrontations with the Dark Angel were not over. The next time I saw him, I was going to be an ice statue.

I sighed and silently thanked my guides for the information even though I wasn't sure what it meant, but hell, I was taking anything I could get. Gathering the cards, I put them back in the pile, realizing I was in over my head yet again. As I put the cards away, I heard someone climbing up the stairs.

"How can I help yo—" I asked, getting up.

"Hmm. Nice place. I'm sure our Mistress helped you acquire it," Bridgette purred.

"You don't belong here, Bridgette. Leave before one of us gets hurt."

"Why should I leave? Our Maker would have wanted me at my sister's side." She sat down in my chair.

My hand wrapped around her throat. "Veronica didn't buy this place for me. It's mine outright. You're not welcome here. Now get out before I rip out your heart, bitch."

She laughed a twitter of a laugh. Her eyes blazed purple with the beast rising to meet my challenge. But she bit her tongue. "Well,

your welcome is wonderful, especially for finding a long-lost sister. Even if our Mistress never did tell you about me."

Her eyes grazed over my table and she picked up one of my decks and began leafing through it, but I grabbed her hand, pushing the bones together. It was bad enough she was here faking nice when last night she was calling for my head.

"Raven." Peter's voice signaled me. Bridgette and I looked over to him standing in the doorway. He saw us for what we were, but I wasn't worried about that. Bridgette gazed at me. "Wow, pet humans. You move quickly, already starting your own brood. And among those who are more aware than most mortals. Bravo, dear sister."

"This is my business, not a place where I'm looking to start my own little fucking power trip. I'm okay, Peter. Thanks."

He looked at the both of us for a second and then nodded, limping slightly out of the room. It would be time for him to get new shoes soon. I stared down at Bridgette and then let go of her wrist, all of a sudden feeling too tired with the events of the past day overwhelming me. Zhen's blood still raged in my system and it would stay there for a while, but it would not sustain me. Only human blood could prolong my existence. If a vampire went too long without feeding, then its own blood ate away at its system, making it go crazy. That was the extreme case, but some vampires were just born that way.

The look on Bridgette's face softened a little bit when she settled in my chair. I could throw her out, but at the moment, it was just too much work.

"Bridgette, please just tell me why you're darkening my doorstep. I have other things more important than dealing with you. You want to fight me? Take my head? Fine, but not right now."

She stared at me, and I felt her power brush against my mind. She tried to snake inside my brain, but I was too strong for her. Finally, she realized this and withdrew.

"It's obvious after last night you're a hard one to kill. I rethought my situation and figured we could get to know one another."

I laughed. "I'm not stupid. Last night you called up the Angel of Death to get involved with your little vendetta. What's the real reason you're here? Especially during the day?"

She flipped through the cards some, and I noticed she flipped over the Ten of Swords. It was a card of destruction, with ten swords impaling a body. "When I returned to my nest, I found all of my children slaughtered. All save my eldest. At first I thought he didn't respect me anymore, but there was more to it. He turned on his family, on me. He said my blood would make him powerful. I came here because I didn't know where else to go. Satisfied? You're the only family I've got, and I was taught that family is important, no matter how much you hate them."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Why else would I come here? Especially during the day when my tolerance is so low?"

"Why should I help you after you tried to kill me? Do you expect me to feel pity for you? Why do I care that your child turned on you? Now there are fewer vampires to worry about."

I turned and walked out back to talk to Peter. Bridgette telling me her whole brood was killed was a little too farfetched for me. Maybe she was telling the truth, but this might be another ploy. I shrugged it off and ignored her. I walked out back, thinking of the more important things I had to deal with.

*Veronica would want you to help her. She's your blood, your family.*

"She's nothing like me. She kills for the pleasure of it. I don't want anything to do with her."

*We didn't say she was like you; we said she was family. Veronica would want you to help her. It doesn't matter how she feeds. Up until recently, you were also killing for pleasure. You know that part of you wants to help her anyway. It's gnawing on you already. Don't deny it. We may be in a different dimension, but we can still see into your psyche.*

I sighed. My guides were right. My empathy sliced through my sister's hard exterior and underneath the hatred, there was raw anguish. There had always been a soft part in my heart for those in trouble. It made me wonder why her child would kill his own blood-family. Then, it dawned on me.

I stared at Peter and watched his eyes dart to the doorway. I turned and Bridgette was there. She looked forlorn and aged. Losing her children had destroyed part of her just as it had ruined me when Veronica died. How had she met my lover? What was the story she harbored? How did Devon not find out about her? The one thing I envied her for was that she had more time with Veronica than I ever had.

"Fine. I'll help you, but enough of accusing me of killing Veronica. I told you how she died. However, if you really want to know what went on between us, then I'll let you into my head one of these days. But you have to do the same and tell me how you guys met. We should get to know each other considering we are—" I swallowed at the thought, not sure I could even think it, let alone say it. "Family. We should have a truce."

Bridgette glanced at Peter, beginning to scan his mind, but I grabbed her hand and shook my head. "All those who work here are off limits. If you attack one of them, you attack me, understood?"

She stared at my hardened gaze and shrugged her shoulders. "Fine. Whatever. I didn't mean any harm. I was just curious how much—"

Peter casually blew out the smoke from his cigarette. "How much I know about what you are?"

I held back laughter when Bridgette looked stunned. Peter was aware that she had tried to get into his head. "Bridgette, this is Peter. I wouldn't try that again. He knows everything about me and Veronica, and I think he was the least surprised that I came back from New Orleans with a female lover."

"I knew it would happen all along." He laughed.



"Nice to meet you," she said tentatively. "So, when do you start helping me find Sean?"

"First, tell me where you think he's hiding."

Bridgette just shrugged. "I have no fucking clue. He's been cut off from me for years. He matured early and ventured out on his own. I had no control over him. He grew distant over the years, and I haven't seen him for almost a decade. Sean's been different since the last time I saw him. Why?"

"Nothing, I'm just thinking. Come by tomorrow night. First go to Zhen and tell her what you told me. She'll want to know."

"So you and the Ancient One are lovers now that Veronica's dead?"

"No, Bridgette," I snapped. "Zhen and I are friends. There hasn't been anyone, and I don't know if there ever will be. I thought you wanted my help." I gritted my teeth. She was already starting to get on my nerves.

"Sorry. It's just, ever since I found out about you, I've been jealous. I need to know how she truly died. Veronica severed our connection early on because she didn't want our grandsire to find me. Our bond wasn't completely gone, and at the moment of her death, I was rewired. I thought I would be there with her when she died. I thought she had ages to live and we could reunite."

She broke down and cried. I took her in my arms, almost reluctant to hold her. She had a hardness that Veronica never possessed. I smelled her blood, and its aroma was similar to Veronica's. A deep longing grew in me. I remembered the aroma and taste of Veronica and the times we spent together. My eyes filled up. The impact of seeing my lover turn to ash in my hands again swept over me, the feeling of her soul in my mind as she drifted away to the other side of reality and I would never see her again. I hugged Bridgette even harder. When I looked out into the other room, I saw Xavier walk in. The look on his face left much to be desired. He nodded at me.

Great, now I was going to argue with a werewolf, just what I needed to make my day even better. I let Bridgette go. "Look, go to

Zhen tonight. You'll be safe there. Tell her what you told me. I have some stuff to do before I can help you. All right?"

Bridgette smiled, still unsure of what I was going to do. Her feelings were confused over her newfound sister. I felt the same. She nodded and walked out, going past the werewolf, who was now on the phone. My sister stopped and glanced at the floor, catching the scent of old blood. My eye caught the dark red blemish where my blood had been spilled two years ago, and it reminded me this was the last place that I'd been human.

The police thought a Satanic cult had broken in and performed some kind of ritual. The reports were that it wasn't human, but at that point, I was still mortal. Devon held me in his arms waiting for Veronica to come and claim me, lining my lips with drops of his blood so I'd stay locked to my body. In the end, Edmund's ghost came and convinced her to turn me into a vampire.

What did Fate have in store for me now? With the events of the past few days, I had no clue what was going on with me. I wondered if Fate had the whole scenario with Bridgette planned and we were supposed to be drawn together. If that were the case, then were Azrael and I supposed to end up as bitter enemies?

"Brenna." Xavier called me.

"Yeah."

"I have a client who wants to book a party. She's asking for you, says that she knows you from New Orleans. Do you want to talk with her?"

"Xavier, you know I don't do readings anymore. Try to get her to book Sophie or Michelle. Amethyst even."

Xavier went back on the phone and tried to talk the client into something else. I looked at my table, wondering when I would be doing readings again. With my powers pretty much flipped on, it would be soon, but I didn't know if I was up to doing a party. Rows of people waiting for me to tell their fortune, snickering behind my back, saying that I was a fraud or drunk. It was draining. I still had clients call for me, but we told them I was too busy working on the business and didn't do readings anymore.

Then again, business was slow, but I had lost a lot of my clientele. I hadn't done parties in years because I wanted the others to make money where I got a cut of their readings and then whatever profit was left at the end of the week.

"She says that you're the best and doesn't want anyone else. It's in a month. It's only going to be her and another eight people."

Eventually, I'd have to get back in the game. Why not now? I sent the proposition up to my guides and they came back with a yes. It was worth a try. "Fine. A hundred an hour, and if she's outside of the area, an extra twenty-five."

He consulted the woman. I could hear every word of the conversation if I wanted to listen, but I wasn't interested.

"She says that's fine."

"Set it up." I stared into the Fire Room, at Mae's empty table, wondering what happened with Xavier and her car.

"Brenna, can I talk to you?"

I nodded and gestured to my open chair. He sat down and gazed at my table with his eyes settling on my cards. We had done this dance before and it ended up in chaos. The silence between us grew and so did the tension. I didn't stare past him, didn't want to make the werewolf think I was trying to stare him down. He poked a few of the crystals near him and smoothed out the dust-covered purple tablecloth that crimped up as it was stuck between the table and the wall.

"I'm sorry I misjudged you last night. Thank you for helping Miranda. We talked about it this morning, and we're not moving out. I'm sorry I didn't believe you before, but after everything that happened and how you were acting—"

"Xavier, it's okay. Really. I don't expect you to trust or forgive me overnight. It'll take time. I just hope that one day we can be friends again. I was a raving bitch, and I was going off the deep end. Zhen helped me through it. She's helped me with a lot, even with Azrael who is even more pissed at me than you. Trust me."

"Did he really leave you in the sun? Is that why you were gone for three weeks?"

I nodded, shuddering at the thought of it. Come to think about it, I had walked over here in full daylight and nothing had happened. I hadn't felt a twinge. "So, what happened to Rochelle's car? Peter said you went to go pick Mae up."

"I went to her house, and she wasn't there. And I don't know, maybe being here has rubbed off on me, but something didn't feel right about her house. There was a smell that I couldn't isolate. I just assumed that Mark came and got her and she's on the way in. But just to be sure, I'll call the house again and her cell and Rochelle's."

I nodded. A knot twisted in my gut, and I had a bad feeling come over me. "Anything?"

Xavier's face grew pale. He shook his head. "Rochelle has no idea where she is. She said that her car was fixed and Mae was going to take the subway in because Rochelle was going to be late and Mark's in Florida for a tattoo convention. You don't think..."

"God, I don't want to think that. Let's pray. Call her appointments and reschedule, and if she does come in, we'll pay her for the day. It's fine. All we can do is wait."

The day passed slowly, more hours than I could count, and Mae didn't show up. The more that time went by, the more the feeling in my gut grew worse, gnawing at me. All of us were on edge and it was hard for Xavier, Peter, and me to concentrate. I pulled cards on Mae and got no answer. The only card that kept being revealed was Death. If that was my guides' way of saying she was either dead or that I had to get Azrael involved, I wished it was the latter. I didn't think that she was dead, and my guides didn't confirm or deny the fact.

Rochelle called around closing time and wondered if we had seen her partner or if she had ever called or showed up, and once we said no, she called the police and reported the disappearance. The cops couldn't do anything. If the insane vampire and Bridgette's child were one in the same and he had taken Mae, then we had to find her before he decided to torture her, or worse. I just prayed that she would be all right.

Xavier and I were the only ones left in the Tearoom. Every time I had pulled cards with all my different decks, I got the Death card, so I assumed I had to call upon Azrael and see if he could help me in any way.

"Are you going to be able to find her? You said you were hunting the one killing the pagans?"

"I don't know. I hope so. From what the cards have been saying, I have to summon Azrael."

"I thought he was pissed at you. Leaving you to be a vamp-kabob."

I chuckled. "He made it clear the next time he saw me that I was worse than dead. I can only imagine what he'll do. But if it'll save Mae, I'll do anything, no matter what happens to me. My problems don't matter, not if I let down the ones who were my friends. It would be best if you left. I don't want Azrael's rage to turn on you; besides, you have to look out for Miranda in case anything happens to me."

"I won't leave you."

I saw his face, and I knew he meant it, but it was too dangerous even for the centuries-old werewolf. "Thank you, my friend. But I should do this alone. I think it would be best if I met the angel on his own turf, take him by surprise. I have to go astral for that, and I'm not sure if I can still do it. It's been a while. Please go, for me."

Xavier was quiet for a long moment and then gave me a quick hug before he left the Tearoom, locking the door behind him. I swallowed and prayed.

"Here goes," I whispered.

I closed my eyes and gathered my energy, letting it wash over me and spread into the Tearoom. The next second I was in a black void and it turned to rainbow DayGlo colors. An urge of panic came over me, but I calmed down. I sighed and thought of trying to find Azrael, but I had no idea what I was doing. All I knew was that I was on the astral plane, but in some corner that didn't seem to be inhabited by anything. Or I might have been in between dimensions.

I thought of a door with Azrael in mind. Instead of one door, several appeared; like any other door, they had knobs and keyholes. I had to step through one, but I had no fucking idea which one was the right one. A guessing game. I had seen dimensions intersecting before, shown to me by one of Devon's children, Aria. She'd befriended me, and then she brought me to her Master. She had once been a Delphic Oracle who clawed her own eyes out because she saw her future. Once she was turned, they grew back and she was Devon's slave.

I stepped close to one of the doors and hoped that I wouldn't lose my way. Grabbing one of the knobs, I opened the door. There was nothing on the other side save swirling multicolors that surrounded me. Tentatively, I put my hand through the opening and, with an inhaled breath, I stepped through.

When I crossed over, there was nothing but white space. It was neither hot nor cold, and even there, I wasn't a solid thing. The blinding space hurt my eyes, and I couldn't sense any life. I glanced around, wondering where the hell I was. This wasn't the place where Azrael dwelled. There would be stars and universes just as I saw in his eyes. But then again, it might be cold and barren because of the nature of his power. All of those were guesses. I sighed, glanced at the gate and stepped back through it.

I gazed at another door and moved through it next. When I got there, the sky was a shimmering shade of purple and there were four moons. The grass underneath my feet was green, but spikier, akin to crabgrass. There were no trees, just a long, plain field. In the distance there seemed to be deer grazing. They were black dots moving quickly on the horizon.

Suddenly, there was movement and when I looked up, I saw a large flock of birds rising into the air. But these birds were not feathered. They had scales and beaks with small sharp teeth. Two of the moons were only crescents, one waning, the other waxing. Another was a little past full and the other was going into the full stage. The sight was beautiful.

The warm wind blew in my face and caught some of my hair. It was odd; where I was not solid in the other reality, I was semi solid here and could feel things. The gate I had stepped through flashed. It would be nice to spend an eternity here, but I figured there wasn't any human life, or if there was, it was far enough away that I wouldn't be able to see it. I sighed, watching the birds, or whatever they were. I glanced back at the gate and stepped back to my own world. The passage back was harder, feeling like I was going through a veil of water.

I had to find some way to get to Azrael. His cold radiance was something I missed. Just the thought of him made my heart expand, and my body filled with cold. My heart was frigid, and I let it consume me.

Another door appeared. I closed my eyes and knew this was the way to reach Azrael. I could only imagine what he would do to me when I found him. I stepped forward and found myself in a place that was dark and cold. It was a void, a limbo where there were no stars. As I looked around, I knew that this was where to find him. But even before I began to look for him, I was cut off.

There was a blazing light in front of me forcing me to shield my eyes. The blaze hurt worse than the sun, driving me to my knees because, in this place, I was in the physical.

"You do not belong here, vampire. Go back through the gate and seek your prey elsewhere." A booming voice rushed over me, sending heat over my heart with a swish of his wings.

"Please," I pleaded. "I need to find Azrael."

"I know whom you seek, bloodsucker, but you are not welcome here. Go back before I pass judgment."

What kind of judgment would he pass if I stayed? He would understand I needed help, but then again, I was sure this angel could do anything he wanted and put me into some place where there was everlasting pain and torment. I remembered the pain Azrael had given to me to get my attention the first time I had met him. It chilled me to the core, even made me shiver, when I thought

about it today. This angel, well, I figured that with one thought, his power could melt the flesh from my bones.

It was a good idea for me to leave, but if I did, I'd never have the opportunity to step into this dimension again because the angels would be watching me, and I would never get my chance to help Mae. I dared looking up at him through spread fingers. His blond hair was cropped short. A golden-orange halo spread out from him. He was not really dressed in anything. He was just there. Crimson and orange feathers formed his wings. As his wings flapped, they emanated heat. His skin had a slight tan to it, and his eyes were golden. In his hands he held a sword that he leaned on.

"Please," I whispered. "I need to see him. He's the only one who can help me." I got up slowly, but kept my distance from the towering inferno that was an angel. I had a feeling this was Michael, one of the four archangels. I did not want to piss him off.

"My brother does not wish to see you, *nosferatu*. Haven't you understood that? All of you are the same. Seeking blood and pleasure and when you run into trouble, you seek our assistance. It's a wonder how your demon blood keeps going, destroying your soul until you seek your own annihilation. Now go back to your own dimension."

I didn't understand what he was getting at, but he was agitated. As I looked beyond him, there was still nothing, just a black chalkboard waiting for something to be drawn. My chances for finding Azrael slipped away. Taking a small step forward, I touched his hand. Even his skin was dry and hot.

This slight touch ignited his eyes. He stared down at me, his mind scorching my thoughts. His hand wrapped around my wrist and jolted pain through my arm. It felt as if my whole body was aflame. I looked down at where he touched me and saw steam rising from my wrist. It brought me to my knees.

"Please." All I wanted was my life.

"Silly little demon. You know nothing. Go back to the world you came from. And if you come here again, then you will know the true pain of my wrath."



Everything went black and I heard a snap. I was very aware of my body and how heavy it felt. My head pounded. Where Michael had grabbed my wrist, there was intense pain. Slowly, I opened my eyes and found Xavier staring down at me. His hand was on my shoulder.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

I looked down at my right hand. Above my wrist was black. There were perfect imprints of Michael’s fingers and his palm all the way around. I poked at it to see if it was healing, but it wasn’t. By now, it should have been flaking off with new skin appearing, but nothing was happening. As I prodded it, the black area cracked open and yellow pus ran out of it.

I stared back up at Xavier. “I don’t know.”

“You were screaming. I heard you from outside. I ran in and, then you were back. Any luck on Mae?”

I shook my head and cradled my wrist. Whatever Michael had done to me had infected me, and I didn’t know if my system could handle it. My body tried to repair the damage, but it wasn’t doing anything. So I tore a piece of my shirt and wrapped it around the wound, making a crude bandage.

Xavier stared down at my hand and wanted to examine it, but I held it close. The slightest movement made it hurt. I would go to Zhen later, but for now, an overwhelming sense of failure came over me. My hopes for finding Mae were now all for nothing. Xavier wanted me to go see Zhen, but my confrontation with Michael had tired me. It was more a wearing of the spirit, as if his infection were more in my soul than it was in my flesh.

Dealing with Azrael was one thing, but I’d never dealt with an archangel. I’d read about them and assumed they existed, considering I had met the Angel of Death, but his omnipresence was amazing. Where Azrael was ice, Michael was fire—everything about him screamed that. I wasn’t sure what his wound would do for me, but it wasn’t good.

Bridgette had lost her brood and instead of killing me, she wanted my help. I had a hunch that her child was the one we were

searching for. All my psychic abilities were back, except for igniting vampires with my mind and taking souls. I missed the coldness I felt in my heart, the silver line that had been in my aura and had saved me last time with Julien. Even with everything, I found myself thinking more of Azrael and the look on his face when he'd held my soul. There was pure glory in it, triumph that he had been able to take me with just a little bit of his power.

But I understood how he felt. I had let despair and anger get the best of me. My heart went out to him, knowing I had driven him to this, to turn aside from his duties and take pleasure in defiling his station and his powers. Even if he took my soul, I'd be truly glad to see him. I was scared because I knew his anger and that I would not be reunited with Veronica. Deep down, I still wanted to beg for my forgiveness. It hurt so much not having him around.

I walked through Boston Common on the way to my house, holding my arm close to me. I sat down on one of the benches and closed my eyes. I needed time to talk with my guides, to figure out what was going to happen. "Guys, I need help."

My guides descended from where they were and gave me their support. There were four presences around me giving me warmth and trying to help heal my wrist, but it wasn't going to work. Even though there were four, only one of them spoke.

*It isn't that bad, Brenna. It could be worse.*

"Yeah, tell me how. I'm going to at least lose my hand, and I don't know where Mae is. If I don't do anything soon, she'll be dead. I don't even know how I got involved with everything."

*Brenna, everything works out in the end. We can't tell you how or what will happen, but we have a good feeling about it.*

"At least you do. But what do I do about Azrael? I was the one who drove him to hurting people. I never meant for that to happen. I need to apologize to set things right. How can I do that when I can't get to him? Why does it hurt so much?" I whispered.

They all sighed. *Raven*, they said, using the name I used to do readings under. *Just think about it. And then, that was it. They were gone, back to the other side of the astral plane.*

I sat, but the pain in my arm grew worse. I unwrapped my makeshift bandage and saw the tiny red lines of an infection spreading into my system. The indentation of Michael's fingers had scabbed over a little, but yellow pus ran out when I touched it. I gulped. This was not good. I sighed and walked back to my house. I went up to the bathroom and closed the door.

My reflection looked haggard. My eyes had lost some of their luster, and the silver flecks had dimmed. My hair looked lank, and there was a bad taste in my mouth. All of this in just a couple of hours. It would be only a matter of a few days before I was going to be a pile of mushy flesh.

The bathroom door opened and Miranda stepped in. Both of us froze when we saw one another.

"How are you feeling?"

She shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Mira wants out, but you know. I'm dealing."

"Miranda, I had no right over this past year to be so hard. I just didn't know how to deal with the loss."

"We've been over this. I forgive you, but if Xavier hadn't been around, I wouldn't be here. While you were moping and bitching, we got on with our lives. Xavier practically ran the Tearoom and you treated him like he was some kind of pet. How do you think we felt? We saw you slipping away and couldn't help you. I mean, just a year ago, I thought you were a crock, but then shit changed. Hell, I sold my house and moved in here when you were a total stranger. I did it on the faith that you were going to help me. I learned from you about what I was and I thought we were friends, but then you go psycho on us and turn into everything you hated. How do you think I was supposed to react, how Mira would react?"

"I know how I acted. I've tried to change. I apologized to you, and I realize what you lost. You lost your best friend and weren't

the only one grieving. I know I should've snapped out of it, but I thought Veronica and I had more time. God, I don't know what I thought, and then I dug myself into a deeper hole with Azrael. Shit. I'm sorry. I don't know how many times I can say that. But you have to know. I never wanted to hurt you or Xavier. You guys saved my life. It was—"

I sank to the floor and began crying. The damage I'd caused was irreversible, even though both of them had said they had forgiven me. I didn't know if the stain on my soul could be absolved. After a few moments, Miranda took me in her arms, trying to bring me comfort.

"You've changed. We both know you're sorry. It still hurts. Gina was my best friend, and Mira, well, she doesn't know what to think of you, but she's losing her mind. I can't tell you what to do about the Angel of Death. Hell, a year ago, this was something I would have been reading in one of my books or watching in some fucking horror movie. Now, my life is one. Go figure. Now, are you going to tell me what caused this?" She was trying to be serious, but I felt the laughter bubbling over in her. Not that she thought it was funny, but because she was being so serious.

I dried my eyes, noticing that my tears were clear once again. "Let's go downstairs. It's going to be a long night."

I sat stroking Miranda's hair as she slept, thinking about how she courageously fought against the beast. She was keeping Mira under wraps, and I was glad to hear that. Hopefully, they had taken my offer to change her to heart. Miranda didn't need me much anymore to help her, but then again, she still wanted me around to keep an eye on Mira. Miranda didn't want to leave the house now that we had talked, considering she felt safer inside rather than seeing the walking human buffet outside. It was just too enticing to her other half, and with the state that Mira's mind was in, we were both afraid that if the vampire took hold one more time, Miranda might be lost.

We talked until the sun broke the sky. I told her everything, even about Bridgette, who was coming over tonight. As we talked,

the infection slowly traveled up my arm, inching through my body, burning. At the moment, it was at my elbow and small, poisonous wires decorated my arm, but the virus part had only crawled a little bit above my wrist. My bandage had soaked through with pus, and my fingertips were a little tingly. I was losing feeling in them.

The sun slowly traveled across the floor and crept in on me. I focused my will on the curtains and saw them moving, and when I opened my eyes, the rings scraped on the metal rods. It took great effort for me to do that, even though it wasn't that much of a big deal.

I glanced down at Miranda again. I didn't want her to go through any of the events I had gone through. She didn't need to be harassed. Mira resented me because I had killed her Master, but she seemed to be living with it. I hoped she could keep her under wraps until things had calmed down. For now, she slept peacefully without the thought of Sean coming for her.

Just a year ago, she had come to me haggard and withdrawn, her will pushing her forward, and she'd only barely slept because she dreamt of a demon. That was Julien, and at least that demon would never come for her again.

Now, as I looked on her, I realized this was how Veronica had felt when she looked upon me when I'd slept in her arms. My maker wanted to love me, desired to take care of me. But she knew that one day she would have to let me go. Just as I had to let her go. Her image was stuck in my soul, turning to dust, the feel of her soul slipping through the fingers of my mind. Grief of knowing she had traded her life for mine in the eternal scheme of things stung my soul. I thought, with my sorrow and coming to terms, that I had let her go, but I guess I hadn't. Veronica was dead, and I'd always miss her, but it was time that she found peace, not stay locked in my heart. I swallowed back tears and felt as if something went out in me, and it was comforting.

"Good luck, my love. One day we'll be reunited," I whispered.

I half expected her to show up, but the silence of the room lingered. I understood. She was already on her journey, and it was

a good thing Azrael had taken her; he had brought her peace. I was thankful for that. Staring at my wrist, I thought I would be rejoined with her soon. Of course, I might spend life in hell with my soul floating around, but I kept my hopes up that I would find him sometime. The only one that might have some answers was Zhen. As the progression of the infection increased, I had to go to her sooner rather than later.

So I moved Miranda aside, kissed her lightly on the forehead, and walked out of the house. When I got out, I realized I had forgotten my cloak against the sun, but the door was locked. I didn't want to use my fading powers to open it, so I went without it. Strolling down the street, I discovered that the rays didn't hurt. I was surprised, but what the hell? With everything that'd been going on, I had no idea how my body was reacting to the poison. For the first time in a year, I enjoyed soaking up the energy of the sun as I walked to the train station.

Riding the subway over to Central Square, I hoped Zhen wouldn't be sleeping with her nest under South Station. I didn't feel like backtracking into the city. She seemed to be my only hope. Maybe she could tell me a way to contact Azrael, or maybe had more info on where Sean might be holding up. Being so ancient, I was sure there were still a few tricks up her sleeve she hadn't shown me.

At the club, I pounded on the backdoor. It took a few minutes, but a very sleepy-looking young vampire ushered me in quickly to get out of the sun. It was the coat check boy I'd first hit on when I'd come to the Rose. Zhen had finally turned him.

"Is Zhen here?"

He gestured for me to follow. He practically sleepwalked down the hallway and then pointed to her lair. I smiled and burst through the concrete wall illusion and into her dungeon. I found her reclining in an overstuffed armchair with her black hair in a long braid rather than her mohawk. It gave her a different look. Her eyes were closed as if sleeping, but in truth, she was either traveling astrally or talking to her other half.

From my observation she, they, had developed a unique understanding with one another. It was interesting since I was used to all those around me either being consumed with the beast or fighting with it. Meeting Viktor and a few of Zhen's brood had made me realize that the duality could be shared, even though it took work. I would never have to deal with that. As I entered the room, she looked up and smiled, her hunger apparent in her olive pale skin.

"So, what brings you here at such an early hour? I thought the sun bothered you. Considering last time you were crispy."

"Yeah, well, it did, but not anymore. That's not why I'm here though. Something happened last night. I have a slight problem." I stretched out my hand, showing her the bandage, which was starting to turn pink from blood and pus.

She began to unwrap it. I flinched at the searing pain when air passed over the open wound. Internally, I sighed. The tenderness shouldn't have been that bad; I never got used to the sudden jerk of pain, but I'd had worse injuries inflicted on me over my two years of being a vampire. Now, my immune system wasn't responding, and I felt oddly human in some way.

Zhen poked around the sore and saw black skin had flaked off with the bandage, showing raw red muscle underneath. Even as I looked at it, I could see the inflammation spreading up my hand slowly, working into my skin, moving into my bones, working outward.

"What the hell happened to you? There's only one way you could have gotten this, and I hope it isn't what I think it is."

She had warned me not to try and find Azrael on my own. She told me dealing with angels was a danger in our business. Like any good little vampire, I went along and did exactly what I needed to and didn't listen to her. Zhen knew about some of the dreams I had been having, and something made me wonder what Miranda had said about chanting and darkness, that they might be one in the same. I thought they were about Azrael, but maybe I had been tied in with Sean. Maybe my abilities had surfaced in my dreams and

they were trying to warn me, but I hadn't made the connection until now. It would make sense because they had been all jumbled and strange and even scared me, invading my sleep when vampires hardly ever dreamed.

"You went looking for Azrael, didn't you? What did I tell you?"

I shrugged my shoulders and hissed in pain when she poked again. "I had to try and find him. Mae's gone missing, and I was hoping he could help. Instead of getting him, I ended up bumping into Michael. Is there anything you can do to stop this? It hurts and it's been spreading since last night. What can I do?"

Zhen let go of my wrist and sat back in her chair, shook her head, and started laughing. "Brenna. Oh, Brenna, you never cease to amaze me. You expect everything to have a simple answer. The only thing that can stop your wound is Azrael or another angel. I can slow it down, but the infection will spread until it eats you alive. My magic and knowledge can't save you. It will consume your power until you're nothing but an empty shell. It's the way the angels punish our kind. They hate that our souls have been infected with demon spawn and half-breeds. Mastema loves it because his herd grows, but there are very few of us who hear his call. And you, I can't believe it. I told you there were other ways to call out to Azrael. Just as Bridgette did the other night. Every time you kill, you summon him. Most of us don't sense him, but since you've had experience, you'd feel his presence. You would feel him even more because you have a touch of his powers, or at least you did, and because—"

I stared at her. This was a first about angels hating vampires. And who was Mastema? "Zhen, who were you talking about before?"

"It doesn't matter who or what Mastema is. You—" Zhen stopped in mid-sentence, as if she were going to say something she wasn't supposed to. She knew something.

"Zhen, tell me the truth. I've tried to understand what I am, what Azrael has to do with my destiny. Hell, what you mean in my



life, for that matter. What everything means. Even Drago mentioned how others look down on your bloodline because of the taint in your blood, and Viktor said it was in my blood too. So am I just dumb, or am I not seeing what's right in front of my face?"

I flung myself into the adjoining chair. I had known there was something going on with the angel. Veronica had asked him to watch out for me. Now Zhen was saying the same exact things. I didn't know what to do. Who knew what was going to happen? I was facing losing my life; in some ways, I didn't care. I wanted to make things right.

The one thing my heart truly longed for was the caress of his wings. They shielded me against the wind, the touch of his silky skin against mine. Tears came to my eyes, and I thought of the first and last time I had kissed him. His lips were unwoven silk against mine and it was just for a brief moment, but I remembered it.

The tears I shed weren't over the kiss. I had been cruel to ignore him, to write him out of my life for taking Veronica when it had only been his job. It should have been a blessing that he appeared to me. He had given me help and I had thrown it all back in his face. I deserved to have him ignore me because it was what I had done to him. As I wiped the tears, I realized something I had known for a long time, even right after Veronica had died. I was in love.

Something I never thought was possible again.

Zhen's feather light touch caressed my mind while she surveyed my thoughts. When I looked at her, she smiled and nodded. I'd answered my own question.

"How long have you known?"

"How many times does a vampire fall in love with an angel?" she whispered.

"I'm not a vampire."

Zhen smiled. "No, you're much more than that." She got up, grabbed a bottle of her secret concoction, ripped off a piece of her nightgown and poured the distilled blood onto it. Once the clear liquid hit the wound, it stung and foamed up. As she dabbed at the

wound, I had to keep myself in place and not jump up from the pain. Zhen wiped and picked at the blackened skin and wrapped it up with another clean bandage.

Her cleansing made the pain stop. It felt fine, and I could move it again without it feeling like it was going to fall off. She also handed me a large bottle of blood.

"This is the best I can do. Drink the liquid when you feel the pain increasing. The blood will only keep it at bay for a while, but the infection will slowly worsen unless you can find an angel to cure you. If not then—damn, Brenna, you should've listened to me. Even complete strangers listen to me better than you do. Shit, fledglings always think they know better."

She was worried about me, and in truth, I was worried about me too. I didn't want to die. I wanted to keep on living and enjoying the night. I had come to some peace and that was a good thing.

"So how long do you think I have? I mean, I'd hoped to go out and have Italian tonight."

Zhen smiled and then hit my leg. "This isn't something to joke about. This is the one thing that could kill a vampire. Well, besides you. It's a shame you put aside your powers. You could've done so much with them. You could have been an Enforcer like Drago. I'm sure he would have enjoyed having you on his team."

I sighed. This was the same speech I had heard from her before. I had put aside my ability to extinguish vampires as well as steal souls, which was an ability only the Angel of Death had, so I had always figured I was related to him somehow. "Yeah, I'm sure your child would love it. By the way, tell him to stay away from Miranda. Trust me, if I could, I'd turn my powers on. I've tried, but nothing has happened. So, how long, Zhen?"

I grabbed her chin and forced her to meet my gaze. There was a sadness there I had never seen before. It showed her age, and for once, I saw how tired she was, that maybe she was thinking about being embraced by Death. It was a quick feeling that crossed my mind from hers, and then her thoughts were closed to me again.

"Days. A week at best. The blood can only hold it off for a bit. There's nothing I can do. I'm sorry, Brenna."

I stroked her braid for a moment and then got up. If I only had a week, then I had a lot to do. Zhen got up slowly and stayed with me. I smiled and then kissed her cheek. She had been a good friend taking me in my bitching modes when Veronica had died. Now she was doing all she could.

"Thanks, Zhen. I'll be around." I walked out, taking the bottle with me, knowing that there really wasn't any hope.

"Brenna, you were going to tell me about Mae."

"She never showed up today at work. I was hoping Azrael could help me find her. Bridgette showed up and said something about her child. I think he might be the one we're looking for. I wasn't in much of a mood for conversation when she arrived at the Tearoom."

"Since when did you and she team up? That's why you went to find Azrael, isn't it? Damn, I should have realized and told him that when he—"

I looked at her oddly. She and the Angel of Death were talking. She had been reluctant to even mention him and then when Bridgette wanted to summon him, I'd felt the disgust in her voice about the whole situation. Now I wasn't so sure if I wanted to know why he had been here.

"Zhen, was Azrael here? Look, I need to talk to him, to find out where Mae is, to tell him... Shit, I don't know what I want to tell him."

Zhen put her fingers to my lips. They were warm. "Brenna, he was here. But he's not the person or angel he was. We haven't spoken in millennia, since things happened between us. We used to be friends, but when he was here, he was different, very unsettled. I've only seen him like that once and, well, it was a long time ago. I wouldn't recommend going after him right now. I don't know what he'd do to you."

I laughed "Zhen, after leaving me in the sun to fry and the other night with my soul in his hand, I don't think he could do any worse. Even if he did kill me, what else could he do?"

Zhen blanched. It was the first time I had seen her scared or even close to it. "He can do worse than you think, especially since you realize how you feel, when all he does is hate you right now. Oh, and he's quite pissed. But underneath it all, he does feel something for you. I never thought it possible. In all this, you fucked with an angel and I give you credit for that. Standing up to High Beings is hard because it is in us to flee from them. Even with Azrael, and he is closer to us than most realize. You might not listen, but you have balls to go looking for Death even when he told you to stay away."

"Zhen, I caused him to become like this by driving him away. I pushed his buttons and now I want to set things right. It isn't about me anymore. I don't care what happens so long as the others are taken care of. Will you see to Miranda if things don't go the way I hope they will?"

"Of course I will. You don't have to worry about that. If you can find him and not have him lash out before you ask him, you might have a chance. I don't know if I would tell him how you feel though. I don't know if he's ready for that."

"I won't last long anyways. But I'll be honest; I don't think I can tell him how I feel. I don't even think I can admit it to myself. After Veronica died, I never thought I'd feel for anyone again, but when Azrael stopped coming around, I missed him, yearned for his wings protecting me from the breeze, the touch of his skin. And then he shunned me, and I don't blame him for it. I blame myself, and I want to set it right. If only vampires could time travel."

"You really do love him. Maybe that's the key to getting his attention. Let your heart guide you. Love and Death go hand in hand; opposites attract. Angels and vampires or one becoming another. Since the first time I met you, when you came into the club looking for Julien, I knew you were different. That was why I wanted you, but see how everything turned out? You need to find

out what you are by yourself. Good luck with him. Underneath all the prickles, there's something there. By the way, don't send Bridgette over here again or anyone else. Just because you're my friend doesn't mean she is. I appreciate the lead and I have Drago on it, but never assume."

"Sorry," I muttered, and grabbed the bottle of blood and began to walk down the hall.

"Hey, Raven, make sure you don't misread your cards. You have to be careful when handling Death. Trust me."

I shook my head and didn't really care what Zhen said, but it was worth knowing she'd given me an idea of how to call upon him. If I was just admitting to myself how I felt, then it wasn't the way I had to summon him. He would see the ulterior motive, and I needed him to see I was being straightforward.

*What would you think about me loving someone else? Would you approve? Are you even watching me anymore? Oh, Veronica, I don't know what I got myself into. But isn't that the way with me? I just need something. Someone.*

I listened for an answer as I made my way out of the club, but there was nothing, just the distance in my mind that separated this world from the next.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

*My name is Azrael.*

Conversing with Zhen brought me some comfort, but it did not heal the dark crevasse that had formed in my heart. The Ancient One was as shocked to see me as I was to venture to her for advice. Our understanding reached beyond time and was not discussed anymore. She told me things I wished not to believe, that I did not wish to hear. I tried blocking the vampire from my mind, but nothing could. The ignored connection between us still existed, and being within such close proximity made it hum once again. Before it had been she who sought advice, and this time, I needed her guidance. Strange how roles reversed.

But even though that bond had been reestablished, nothing had altered for me. I still had regrets. My heart was turning from the Source, and I did not know where to go. Should I give in to the urges, the uncontrollable lust for power and much more, something I was not ready to acknowledge? And if I did, would I Fall?

My mind needed to be focused. The calls of the dead were just whispers on the winds of the universe. None of it mattered anymore. My celestial family meant nothing. Staring up at the stars, this was the last time that I would ever touch them. Already I felt the implications of gravity pulling on me. My soul, if I even still had a soul, had been tainted and was hearing another song. I sighed and looked at the radiance of the world that I existed in.

Some things were just too much to give up. Primal urges overwhelmed me, and I was not sure if Her warmth would reach me again or, if from now on, I would be calling the First Fallen master.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*My name is Brenna.*

It was early afternoon, and I enjoyed the walk back from Central Square along Massachusetts Avenue, taking in all the sights and sounds back into the center Boston, back to my house, but while I walked, I thought about what Zhen had said about Azrael. He was the only one who could help me with Mae. She would be lost if nothing was done soon or if Drago didn't find Sean's lair. With his smell, I figured it would be easy, even though Boston was a big city and there were plenty of places to hide. If what Miranda had said was right, then he would come back for her. I just didn't want to wait that long.

Then there was my sister. It was almost too convenient that she lost her brood and came to me. It was my luck that got me caught in the middle, but I was always caught in the middle of shit. It followed me everywhere. Then again, I never knew when to say no to helping others. At least, that was the way it used to be.

I sighed, trying to ignore the pain crawling back up into my arm. The infection had begun to turn my upper arm yellow. I poked at it, and it was soft and clammy. I could still move my fingers, but not very well. They felt bloated. The rest of my arm tingled.

The rest of me worked fine, but I was right-handed so this arm was useless. My body was raging against the otherworldly infection. My powers were being sapped, taking away the time that I had to try and contact Azrael. At this rate, the disease would be in my brain by the end of tomorrow. I had so much to do and so little time, the age-old adage. I had to try again and split the dimensions, and so I walked up to the Tearoom and signaled Xavier, who was talking to one of the psychics.

"Brenna, what's up?"

"I have to try again to contact Azrael. He might be our only hope. Zhen's looking for Sean, but it could be too late. If I don't do this now, then I might never be able to again. Get everyone out of here. I don't want them around in case there are repercussions."

A look of anger crossed his face, but not at the thought of closing the Tearoom. He was being his usually overprotective self I had forgotten.

"How do you know that Michael won't do something to you again? Or that Azrael won't—"

I put up a hand and silenced him. "Can the speech. I already got it from Zhen, but if I don't do this, Mae might be killed. I can't risk that, not after Zach last year. Besides, I'm dead anyways. There is nothing that can be done."

"Zach wasn't your fault. I'm partially responsible for that. I thought Zhen would be able to heal you since she's so high and mighty."

"Only an angel can heal me," I whispered, trying not to get choked up.

Xavier stopped and stared at my arm and felt my finger, tentatively, noticing the color of my arm. Once he touched my finger, I didn't feel a thing. I kissed his cheek, which surprised him.

"You know I have to do this. Tell everyone they can go home, and I'll honor their appointments. Will you do this for me, please?"

He nodded and I saw tears in his eyes. I smiled, went to the backroom, and waited for him to clear out the place; while he did, I relaxed and moved beyond the sullen ache that had appeared in my arm. When the door was locked, I went out to find him sitting on the couch.

"I'm not leaving."

"All right." I was too drained to even argue with him.

I sat on the floor and closed my eyes, focusing on the place where my guides dwelled on the astral plane. Again, I tried summoning the power I had closed off. The power built and my heart sputtered. I sighed and then tried once more, squeezing everything I had into the cold, remembering how it had been when



Azrael first touched me. In that remembrance, I found enough strength to move beyond my body and into the place where the angel dwelled.

On the other side I was formless. I tried moving and watching the stars. It was peaceful. I felt a presence behind me. It was Michael, and this time, he would finish what he started.

"You were told not to enter here again. Was my judgment not enough or would you like more?" He reached for me.

"Wait." I put my hand up to stop him. "Please, I've only come here to speak with Azrael, not for me but for one I protect. She's been taken, and I have to find her before she dies. Please. If you think I deserve to be punished, then it is your will. I only want to do what is right after all the hurt I've caused."

The angel stared. "You speak the truth, vampire, about the one you wish to save. Your compassion for her is apparent. But you still came here seeking my brother for your own benefits. It was you that drove him away. Because of that, I should finish you right now. Why is it you seek him out for your own reasons?"

I stared into the vast space. There was no lying to the angel, and my coming here had been futile. "Because I understand I'm the cause of his indecision. And that an angel is not supposed to be pulled from what he knows. I wanted to apologize and I needed—" I whispered.

Michael dimmed his ominous presence, putting out some of the fires of his feathered wings. The dry heat didn't go away. "What is it you wanted to ask my brother about?"

I looked at him strangely. He was willing to help me? I opened my mouth, but pain had interrupted my visitation and found me in this reality. Either my body was dying or my energy was running out. I think it was me running out of steam, and I hoped that was what it was.

"Well, answer me, before I change my mind!" His voice came to me through a long tunnel.

I fought to stay where I was, to have everything stay clear, and I only got a few extra seconds, but it was long enough. "I need to know where Mae is being held before she's killed."

The angel laughed. "That's all? You could have asked even the lowest in this realm and they could have told you that. Even some of the race you once belonged to could tell you that. He will bring the witch to a powerful place."

"Thanks." Then, everything faded out.

When I opened my eyes, I was on the floor of the Tearoom. Xavier was still sitting on the couch, watching intently. I looked over at him, but found that when I turned my neck, it was sore and tender, almost cramped, and I couldn't feel my arm. That was what the pain was. Since I had been focusing on finding out about Mae, my body wasn't able to work on fighting the infection, so now it was at my neck, and it would be sooner than I thought before it reached my brain.

"So, what happened?" Xavier helped me up, but he was smart and picked me up by my left side.

"Michael told me he'd bring Mae to a place of power. But he didn't say when or exactly where."

"That doesn't give us a lot of information."

I tried willing my arm to move, but it didn't. "As far as I know, nothing of what angels say makes any sense until the last second when it hits you over the head. That was what used to happen with Azrael."

"What about your arm?"

I chuckled. "Out of luck. The way it looks, I'm not going to last much longer. Look, Xavier, take care of Miranda for me, and help Bridgette when she comes by tonight. I told her I would, but well, I can't at the moment. Zhen said she would finish turning Miranda. When I'm gone, make sure the Tearoom keeps going. Can you do that for me?"

"Brenna, you know it's not going to end that way. You and I both know—"

"That it's hopeless. And I need a miracle to heal me."

“What about Azrael?”

I smiled and touched his cheek with my good hand. “You’re sweet, Xavier, but I don’t want you losing your soul because of me, especially when it’s not your time. Now let me go. I’ll figure out something. And try to help Mae. I won’t be able to so soon.”

“Brenna, good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I walked out of the Tearoom and was surprised that it was night. It was cool and calming even with the people who walked by and their emotions pressing upon my mind. Even the presence of my guides was there, but they seemed distant. I found myself over in Boston Common staring into the dark water of the duck pond and listening to the ducks quacking in their sleep. I smiled at their sounds. Gazing into the depths, I knew Veronica was at peace, not because her ashes were at the bottom, but because she was beyond this life.

The water below was black and rippled slightly when the breeze caught the surface and lifted it up for a second and then released it back down. The scent of ozone and smog was light on the wind. The cars were not beginning to pack the city and exhausts were still minimal. Birds chirped around me and I enjoyed every minute of it. It was peaceful and calm and reminded me of the dimension I’d stepped through where the birds were reptilian. There, the moons had been beautiful, and it compared to this world right at this moment.

“Veronica, what am I going to do? Everything is so screwed up. I’m so lost,” I spoke to the thin air. The breeze kicked in and caressed my face almost as if it were her.

“This is all my fault. Just like you going. If I were like you, then you’d still be alive. Now, here I am about to die, but Azrael might leave me in rotting flesh. Strange, how things end up. I met Bridgette. I wish you’d told me about her. I guess there were a lot of things you didn’t tell me. But that’s okay. She’s not after me anymore, which is great, but there’s something else. I think I’m in love. I don’t know how he feels, except that he hates me, and I

think that hurts worse than even the thought of dying. If I only knew, but I don't."

I sighed and looked up at the stars, wondering where Azrael dwelled. Maybe it was a star like the ones I saw in his eyes. Even now I missed the display. Michael said he didn't want to see me. I had turned Death's whole world upside down because I was being selfish. But I had to talk to him, not because I needed the information, but because I needed to make things right. Thinking about him, I remembered that he'd told Veronica about what I was to become, and I wondered what else he had told her. Had she known this was going to happen?

She had given herself in return for my life because she knew that I was unlike any other vampire. In the end, I didn't really know what it was that my lover knew. In truth, I had never really known anything about her. I had shared my life with her for a year, and then she disappeared from it. There had been so many things that I wanted to learn; now all I had were beautiful memories. But those were fine.

"Did you know all of this would happen? Did you know all of this in New Orleans before you came back? Why didn't you tell me you had another child? If only I could talk to you again. Just to know."

Tears splashed into the water.

*All you had to do was ask*, someone whispered behind me.

I turned slowly, not sure who had spoken and, when I did, I saw the transparent figure of Veronica leaning on the railing across from me. I smiled and couldn't help but stare at the ghost. I had been waiting so long for this moment that I thought it would never come. I had resigned myself to it, but everything stopped and all I knew was her.

"Are you real or something caused by this damn infection?"

She laughed and then smiled. *I'm just as real as the thing spreading inside your body.*

I took a step forward, noticing the outfit she wore. It was a white dress that billowed in an imaginary breeze. Her skin had a

flesh tone to it I had never seen before. It was beyond human and healthy, but even though she was there, she was also a ghost, and I could see right through her. As I stepped beside her and felt the warmth she gave off from her aura, I knew she was real.

"You're here. I tried calling you before, but I couldn't find you."

*Brenna, you weren't ready to see me. You turned your back on what you are; you shut out everyone in your life you cared about. Slowly you've begun to come around, see all the hurt you've caused, and redeemed yourself. For me to come to you then would only have given you false hopes. But now, you're ready to see me.*

She lifted her hand and caressed my face. Her touch sent chills all the way through me and even stopped the aching in my arm. Something about it impressed upon the part of me that had been lying dormant all these months.

"Did you know all about what was going to happen?" I had to know.

*She looked down at the bridge and then back up at me. Things were said between me and Azrael; I wasn't supposed to tell you. When an angel tells you something, you assume it'll be true. Azrael and I bumped into one another, but he could have sought me out. I'll never know. I was in the cemetery where you put Devon's body, placing flowers at his grave. Oddly enough, it was there that I sensed Bridgette. When I looked up, I saw a hooded figure standing there. We eyed one another and I knew it was Death. He asked me what I was doing. And I told him what had happened. He remembered taking Aria's and Devon's souls. Then, he remembered you. Out of all the thousands of souls he takes, he asked me about you, and I told him everything I could. I knew you were important. But I never thought it would lead to this. Lead to you falling in love or dying. Brenna, I don't know what to tell you except that if you truly want to apologize to him, then call out. I'm happy you love him. I hold no ill will that you care for him.*

"I've tried calling out, and I don't know what else to do. Last time I did, he—" I began crying as I thought about it. Even in front of the woman I loved, I didn't truly know the extent of my own

feelings for Azrael. They went deeper than I imagined. And here Veronica was giving me her blessing.

*Oh, Brenna. I wish I knew the answer. But I don't. All I can tell you is I'm at peace for the first time in centuries. The vampire died when I did and from now on, I'll be there when you need me.*

She began to fade.

"Wait," I called. "What about Bridgette? Why didn't you tell me about her?"

She smiled and moved in close. Her lips brushed against mine and warmth spread into all of my veins. It even touched my wound and ignited the cold furnace I had lost over a year ago. The fire was dim enough to make me remember the things I had been able to do and make me feel Azrael. With it, the energy of the universe slowly filtered back into my body. The tingling of the stars against my flesh and the auric winds that blew the dimensions this way and that as the song of the moon filled my head. Then Veronica's lips detached. I opened my eyes and saw she was still there.

*Bridgette was in the past. Something I thought would never come up again. And if she did, I assumed we had more time. With us, there was always time. But for now, maybe you can figure out where Azrael is.*

"You never cease to amaze me," I said to her. "Thank you for everything. I'm—" I was cut off by a sudden pain in my arm as the infection spread more into my body.

*You never cease to amaze me! Don't give up all hope, love. You never know what the future holds. Didn't you tell me it wasn't written in stone? Things can always be mended even when you think all hope is lost.*

She smiled one last time and then disappeared. But it didn't matter because I knew, one way or another, I'd see her again. All I had to do was call out, and she would come.

I stared at the space where Veronica had been and knew she would always be with me. For now, some of the hole had been sealed, and she had reawakened the cold I had felt from before, but it was faint and fading fast. With it, I could find Azrael.

The infection was already up into my shoulder, its tendrils snaking up my neck. Xavier was working on trying to help Bridgette and Mae. I knew that in my heart.

I closed my eyes and reached into the deepest part of me that was forlorn, into the darkest depths where Azrael had touched me with his awesome power. I found it like a small, dark flame.

I opened my eyes and tried moving my arm to take my shirt off, but my arm wouldn't budge. So I willed my wings to come out, and they did, ripping the fabric, but the right one was slower than normal. I propelled myself into the air, and my wing didn't want to work. I sighed. The infection had gotten to it too. But I fought against it and willed myself to lift off the ground.

As I flew, I thought about what I'd say, and every time something came into my mind, it just went out with all my hopes and dreams. Whatever I said would do no good, and I only imagined how I looked with a useless arm and my skin slowly turning yellow. My arm was wrapped in bandages and slowly oozed blood and pus, making a pink mess. I sighed. I was a walking monster, literally.

I discovered I was at Revere Beach. I tried willing my wings back in, but they wouldn't go. I was in so much pain I wasn't sure what was going on. My head started to spin. I scoured the beach, and down at the far end I saw a figure standing off alone. As I got down to the shape, I reached out my left hand to touch his shoulder and, when he turned around, the smile fell from my lips.

The look on the mortal's face went from disbelief to disgust. His eyes widened and he was speechless. He backed away and fear exploded from his pores. Quickly, I gathered my power and tried to control his mind to make him forget what he saw, but I couldn't even scan his thoughts.

"What are you?" he blurted out.

"A lonely soul who needs comforting."

Puzzlement and wonderment crossed his face. I saw the wheels turning in his head. He was thinking that if he could catch me, he

might be able to use me for something. "Maybe I can help you?" He inched closer.

I lowered my head and began backing away. "You should leave. Just leave me alone. Go away!" I snarled, and with a final push of my power, I sent a small mental blast at him, and it was enough to push him over. He looked up at me and, this time, he screamed. The fear in his eyes was genuine, and whatever erotic thoughts he had vanished. When he ran away, a cold presence unraveled behind me.

"Thank you, Az-Lord Death," I whispered, knowing he deserved what respect I could give him. At that moment, his name was too intimate a privilege for me to utter. All I wanted to say caught in my throat and before I knew what I was doing, I had dropped to my knees, humbled by his presence. I clutched onto his robe and cried, glad to see him and frightened, knowing what he could do to me, what I felt for him, and everything in between. The power Veronica had reignited faded, leaving only the infection. And it hurt. It hurt so much that I wanted Azrael to take my soul just to put me out of my misery. This was worse than being frozen by his power, by the sun charring my flesh. It felt as if all of me was on fire, as if Michael had touched me again and the cold that had once been inside of me had been melted and then burned up by it.

Azrael just stood and let me cry. Finally, I realized how foolish I was. He remained impassive, and I wiped my tears. He was staring down at me, and my apology meant nothing to him.

"I meant no disrespect," I whispered.

Still, he said nothing. I dared not meet his gaze, so I moved away, feeling my heart sink and knowing it had been a mistake to seek him out. Veronica had been wrong. I sighed and wrapped my wings around me and began to walk away, letting silent tears run down my cheeks again.

"Why don't you fly away, little nosferatu?"

I turned back around. The malice I felt from him was amazing. Some dark seed had taken root inside of him all because of me.



"Azrael." It took a moment to gather my frazzled sense of whatever it was I felt, and then I walked a few steps closer to him. "I'm dying," I whispered.

"And I bet you came here to ask me for release from your torment."

I shook my head. "No, I came here to tell you—well, it doesn't matter now what I was going to tell you, but I'm not sorry I found you." I raised my hand but caught myself before I touched him. Everything ached in me to once more feel his caresses. I looked at my good hand and then balled it up, feeling the tingling numbness in my fingers there too. It wasn't long now.

I stared into his hollow eyes, longing for the stars, but there was nothing, just blackness. I began to turn away, but Azrael grabbed my right arm. The pain of his nails cutting into my open flesh felt like ice on fire, and it was agony. Stars exploded in my vision, and I dropped to my knees.

"Please let go." I gasped.

But he didn't. He just squeezed harder. "Why do you cry out, little vampire? Does my touch repulse you that much you have to drive me away again?"

"No. Please."

His hand sank into my tissue, molding the bone to fit his fingers.

"Mercy. Please."

He threw me down, and I landed hard on a patch of crushed shells. I tried to cradle my arm, but of course, it was no use. I curled into a ball, trying to let my wings protect me, but as they did, I saw some of the feathers falling away, revealing brown, leathery skin underneath. Azrael picked one up, running his hands over edges. He stared at me and bent down. He picked me up by my useless arm, and the pain was intense.

"No more, please." He pushed my wing back and then my hair to stare into my face. But remnants of the pain were all I saw.

"Brenna," he whispered.

I didn't bother to meet his gaze. How could I?

"Brenna," he said softly, and tilted my chin so I could look into the hollow of his skull. "What happened to you?"

"I needed to find you to ask for your help, not that I deserved it after everything I put you through, but Michael found me instead. And well—" I gestured to my wounds.

"What did you want? To say you were sorry? To ask for my forgiveness again?" He smirked.

"Yes and no. I wanted—I needed to know if you could help me find Mae. My guides said you were the only one who could help. She was kidnapped, and I thought I would take my chances, even though you warned me about calling on you again. I had to chance it, and the wrath of the angels has been bestowed on me. So you don't have to worry about punishing me because it's already been done."

Azrael laughed. "You were not being egotistical for once. That is hard to believe."

"Why? Just because I was a bitch doesn't mean people don't get second chances. Just because—damn it." I stopped. All the feelings that I felt for him crashed over me. I could even hear the waves, but then again, I was on the beach. Would he believe me if I told him? I doubted it, but I had to let him know, to at least die with a clear conscience knowing I had tried to mend the rift. "Just because I love you doesn't mean I can't come to you for advice. I thought you'd help me, maybe see I didn't do it for myself—"

"What did you say?"

His power built, readying to tear out my mind or my soul. At this point, it didn't matter. My body was falling apart around me. I wanted the others to be safe. But I found the strength to sit on my knees while the wind tried to blow me over. My hand settled on his bone cheek. It felt real and hard. It was a good illusion. His hand wrapped around my wrist, but he did nothing, just looked on me with confusion.

"I said I loved you. I don't know how it happened. Or when, but it did. It's impossible, I know. How can a vampire and an angel...? How can they? I love you, Azrael," I whispered. I half

expected him to push me off, or do something, but he didn't. He sat back on the sand and stared at me for the longest time. There was confusion in his eyes.

Everything about him melted away, his robe, his skeletal features. I yearned to reach out and comfort him, to take away some of what he felt even though I had caused it all. And his face, even though locked in puzzlement, was still the most beautiful thing I had seen, like a prayer made flesh. It filled my heart with bliss and hope. It was the last thing I saw before he faded out, but not before I saw his wings, and felt the brush of his power, and then he winked out.

"Goodbye," I whispered.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*My name is Azrael.*

I raced across the universe, bouncing off stars, planets, even the arms of galaxies, not knowing what to feel. Myriads of emotions confused me, all of them making sense and no sense, making me feel warm and cold and everything I didn't know how to express. The one thing I did know was, as I stared into her eyes, I saw truth nestled there. Her heart and her soul shone through and made me remember things I had put aside since I had become an angel. Now, I was lost.

"Child, do you love her?" the Source asked, finding me in this far silent corner of eternity.

It was the simple question I had not wanted to inquire upon myself. That was the true reason I had been running. I had been running to get away from her, from what I had become because of her. Brenna had caused all the indecision and uncertainty that raged within me. All of it had been because of her, but it was the question I had been avoiding. And I knew the answer. Because I had loved her since the first time I'd touched her soul when she was on the verge of transformation, standing on the gate of in-between that even I couldn't cross. A gate that I was all too familiar with.

"Yes," I said. It was the simplest thing I could say.

"Oh, Azrael. Child. You question yourself, but you've known in your heart how you feel for this being. You've hidden behind your wings for so long that you forgot you used to be human. That you could love and be more than you ever dreamed, more than the darkness I took you from and more than the light to which you ascended. So why do you deny yourself this when love is the ultimate gift? When it is part of me?"

"You took a damned creature and filled my heart with light. I am grateful for that. For thousands of years I have done what You

asked, but now, I don't know if I can. I wish to serve You; what I feel for her hasn't replaced Your Light, but the things I feel are dark and erupting from my past. I feel if I embrace them, I shall Fall, but there is conflict in my mind, more than I have known for eons."

The Source laughed. "Azrael, you are my child. You are unlike the others because you have a human soul and have forgotten that. Because of that, you are unique. You are in love, and the one you love wishes to heal your wounds. She is dying, all because she wanted your forgiveness and to save those she loved. She took Michael's wrath without a complaint and even dared it again so she could come here and find you. True, she wanted to fix what she had done, but her motive was pure. So was your pain. I understood why you placed your power on her and left her in the sun to char. But it wasn't her time to return to me."

I sighed and spread my wings, feeling the galactic breeze fluff my feathers. Her wings were just like mine, touched by midnight and darkness. Just a year ago, Brenna had taken a soul in self-defense, all of it because she was aside from those of her kind. "You were the one who rescued her from my punishment. Why?"

"Because she loves you. She has always loved you. She just didn't know it."

"What will happen to her?"

The Source swirled, cupping a sun in Her hands. As She twirled, I saw a new galaxy being born. Little stars formed around Her and then went out. She placed the sun in the center and then breathed, blowing the galaxy far away where it would settle and create new worlds for us to look after.

"The same thing that happened to you, if that's what she chooses, or if you allow it to. It was what you told her lover. But it's up to you. Go to her before her soul is collected by one of the seraphim."

"But—"

"Go to her, Azrael. Forget the past. It cannot be rewritten. Forget what happened. Forget what you were, and just know what you are now. Do not deny yourself the peace you can feel. You are

my child no matter what hungers you feel. Be what I made you to be. Be an angel and, in that, know what true love can be. I would not have had a hand in her Destiny if I did not think she would be worthy of a place by your side."

"You knew this would happen?"

She laughed. "Of course I knew. I did not chart the course of her life, but only the outcome, just like I did with yours. Now go to her and let both of your wounds be healed. Even in forgiveness, love can still show through."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*My name is Brenna.*

The stars winked out, fading into the purple of the dawn. The breeze had grown with the tide coming in. As I watched the crashing waves, I remembered times from long ago when I had come to this beach and cried while Azrael protected me from the elements and myself. I heard the jets at the airport getting ready to fuel up for their morning flights. Seagulls circled overhead, waiting for some scrap to wash up on shore, and I was waiting for my body to give out and for my spirit to accept an eternity of being trapped on the earthly plane.

My vision had diminished, but I could still see little things. I had lost all of my feathers, and my wings were nothing but bare skin. My heart had stopped beating and the blood settled in my veins, cooling and hardening. While the blood pooled, it made my flesh hard. I understood why this was a castigation for a vampire because it could take an eternity for them to rot away, but who knew what other punishments were doled out by the angels?

I didn't feel the breeze on my flesh, and I was stuck in a sitting position. It was getting hard to even reason, and I had no way to call upon my power. But I focused beyond, seeing my guides at the end of their tunnel waiting for me to join them, and I knew that Veronica was there too.

Now that I had told Azrael how I felt, I felt no remorse or anger for him going away. It was expected. I had shown him nothing but disrespect and hatred. In one small instant, I had caught a glimpse of his true face, and it filled me with joy to see that, once again, he had answered an unknown prayer I had in my heart. He had known I was being truthful, and I hoped I had brought him a slice of peace. Yes, that could carry me through an eternity. With the last of my strength, I listened to the waves and let them lull me into oblivion, thinking only of him.

“Brenna.”

I couldn't open my eyes. I was decaying. I barely even recognized my own name.

“I know you are still in there. Do you want me to take you so you can be reunited with Veronica, or do you wish to feel my touch and be healed?”

I sighed inwardly. Azrael was back. But I was so tired. Why wasn't he taking me? He had asked me something. To go beyond or stay? The lull of beyond tempted me with people who cared for me, human relatives long since buried and Veronica, who was a bright star.

But, oh, I wanted to be able to see his face once again, to feel his moonstone skin even if I never received his forgiveness. I remembered how he felt and how he smelled. Just one more glimpse before he wrote me off and shunned me forever. Even if it was the skeletal exterior and bone hard.

I remembered my body, remembered what it was like to be heavy, to have hunger and feel the agony of flesh and worries, but there was no strength left in me. I sensed I was only holding on by a stretched string, that I could snap and float away. Yet, to come back and face the demons of my past meant I had to move. And, somehow, I touched his hand.

That was all he needed. Something cool touched my lips. It was faint at first, and then it spread throughout my body. It brought me back, pulling me away from the light. Pain, sorrow, and anguish became my world once again. The blood-hunger and desires of the beast threatened to consume me. What he gave me made me feel again, made me know I could breathe if I wanted, for my heart to start beating. But it was there that the extent of his power reached. It was enough to make me see and know that he cradled me in his arms with his wings around me, shielding me from the breeze and the evils of the world.

“Hi,” I forced. My voice reminded me of some faint echo. Everything hurt. The infection was still in my body, but it had done



its job, and now the only thing left was for my flesh to fall from my bones and I would be gone. But his power prevented that.

"Hello." He brushed a stray hair from my face. "How do you feel?"

I didn't answer right away but just looked at him, memorizing his features. They were delicate, angelic, manly, all rolled into one. His dark hair was a halo around his pale face. His dark eyes were orbs I could see into forever, and in the distance, I saw stars residing there, the very things I had been missing.

But his question was important. Whatever he had done had revived me, but my blood was dead. "Your power is the only thing keeping me anchored to the flesh. Don't let me go. I don't want to leave you, not again."

Azrael placed his hand over my heart and closed his eyes. There was concern when he opened them, but also a trace of hope. "Miracles happen every day. Besides, I am an angel, chosen above all others set on high. If I will it so, then you will live. It is not written in the fabric of space and time that you die. I know someone who can help."

He picked me up, and his wings wrapped around me, sealing the space between us. The dimensions bent and, for a second, I was in a soundless vacuum, then there was light. Flickering candles illuminated a dank basement. The aromas of train exhaust, urine, and old blood settled on my tongue; I couldn't take in a breath without tasting the overwhelming stink of vampires. I closed my eyes and nestled into his shoulder, trying to taste the frankincense and jasmine that hung about him.

"Sharika!" Azrael yelled. The sound bounced off the walls and echoed in the underground tunnels.

I wondered who he called. This looked like Zhen's lair under South Station, but I hadn't been here in ages. She knew I hated her brood. Someone came out from the shadows he had been hiding in. The vampire kept his head bowed. All undead seemed to be afraid or in awe of Death.

“Forgive, Lord Death. She is not here. She had pressing matters elsewhere.”

“Where did she go?” he asked calmly, but I felt the rage in his voice. He tried to quiet his emotions, which seemed to be new to him.

The vampire cowered even more. Azrael was going to use his power on him, but I touched his chest lightly, and that seemed to get his attention and quiet his rage for a moment. “She was called away.”

The vampire looked up quickly and then back down, but I saw him stand a little straighter when he realized he wasn’t going to be annihilated with one single wave of Death’s hand. “The Enforcers have picked up on the scent of the insane one who has been killing our brothers and sisters. She went with Drago to personally be the one to take its head.”

“Stay here with her. I shall return with Sharika momentarily. Her hunt can wait. You are more important to me than one she wishes to kill,” the angel murmured.

“All right.”

“Take her into the Mistress’ chambers. Watch her. If anything happens to her, I will personally put you in the sun. Understand?”

The vampire nodded and took me from the warmth of Azrael’s embrace. He looked upon me and smiled and then was gone. The vampire carried me into his Mistress’ bedchambers. I realized it was Zhen’s. Sharika was an interesting name. I wonder where she got that from. I shook my head and relaxed into the current of Azrael’s power, keeping me alive, lulling me away.

“Mistress, may I ask you something?”

I sighed and looked over at him and realized this was Nathan, my nursemaid from when I’d been charbroiled. He didn’t dare meet my eyes. It was a built in instinct. I had it for all of about fifteen seconds and then it went poof, way back when Devon wanted to control me and when Malachi had tried enticing me.

“What?”

"The Lord of the Dead is not mad at Mistress, is he? I don't want to see her hurt. You must wish that too. She's good for the hive. You have seen her kindness firsthand."

"Hive?"

"The Hive is where we are. This isn't even the center, just one of the many places she has a room, to show us she still remembers we're here. We come here at night to sleep, but some of us have lives. She has given us that freedom."

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"Over a thousand I know of, but I have heard Mistress speak of more that have sired their own broods. She is a great grandsire many times over, I am sure. Something almost impossible among us."

*Zhen had sired over a thousand vampires. Shit. No wonder she was one of the oldest undead around. She certainly had enough mouths to feed.*  
"So most of the vamps in the city are descended from her?"

Nathan glanced up, amazed at my comment, and then he quickly looked down again. "Forgive me, I meant no disrespect, I—"

There were stirrings of independence in him. He wanted to flee from this place, wanted to set out on his own, but he wouldn't, couldn't, because if his Mistress got a hold of him, he would be killed, and he didn't have the courage to ask for his freedom.

"I won't tell your Mistress. And no, Death isn't mad at her. He needs her help for me."

Nathan stared at my feet. His fingers left trails on my arm even though his touch was light. My skin was beginning to take on a pale gray hue that had me worried.

"Mistress is old and has much knowledge, but why would one such as you need her help? You have been touched by the High Beings. You have the power of Death."

"Once I had the ability to take souls and incinerate my enemies. But I was punished by the angels, and Azrael brought me here because Zhen can heal me."

"Mistress has great power. She found me five centuries ago. I was her servant for ten years before I was blessed with her kiss. I wanted to be with her forever, and I agreed it was best for me to stay with her since I was so low."

"You and your Mistress agreed?" I asked, confused.

"No, me and Oslo, my beast, my other half. He was not ready to be on his own."

"It doesn't dominate you?" Not ever having a demonic half, it was interesting to meet others who were in tune with their other halves. They were seamless when they had changed. I had felt that, and I still carried much of him inside of me. It was the same for Zhen. I wondered if it was an inherited trait carried down through her bloodline. I'd have to ask her.

"Yes, we work together. Many of my brothers and sisters are like that. But some are not so lucky. They're dominated by it. Mistress doesn't have the heart to kill them, so they stay with us, and sometimes they mature. It is a drastic shock to our system to wake up inside of a human body, and we have to adjust. We are used to another Master we cannot remember. When we open our newborn eyes here, we see nothing except our mother and the one that was before is nothing but a dust of memory. And what about you, what is the name of—"

"Nathan, leave Brenna alone. She's in no state for your badgering. I'm pleased you looked after her, but enough."

The undead bowed his head and walked to the door, but he turned back around and glanced over at me. "It was nice to see you again, Mistress. I hope you fare well."

Zhen stared over at him. He disappeared back into the shadows of the tunnels. The look of astonishment on her face was replaced by that of concern. She stared down on me. Worry lines creased her forehead. She looked back over at Azrael. His power was coming in stronger, keeping me alive, but my body was dying around me.

"How are you feeling?"

“Like shit.” I laughed and started coughing up blood, black and smelly.

Zhen looked over at Azrael. “You should be the one doing this. Why me?”

The look Azrael gave Zhen was Death warmed over. It made me shiver even inside my rotting flesh. He hadn’t even looked at me that way, even in his most passionate moments of hating me. What had happened between them? This went deeper than him taking one that she loved.

“You know why, Sharika. We have had this discussion many times in the past.”

“Whatever.” And she looked over at me. “Brenna, all the blood has to be removed from your body. I’ll do my best, but in your state, I don’t know if I can get it all. Then you’ll have to feed. The process will be slow and painful even when you are drinking, because once you take in blood, everything in you will be expelled. It’ll be like dying all over again.”

“My power will help you heal. I shall not desert you,” Azrael whispered.

I closed my eyes. “Do it.”

Azrael entwined his fingers through mine. His nails were long and clear, deadly weapons if he wanted to use them. The scratch from his nails had only just begun to heal before I sought Michael out. Zhen stared at us for a second, looked at him and then back at me. There was a look of awe and something else, regret, but it only lasted a moment. Then, she stroked my cheek. The indentations of her fingers pressed against my teeth. By her touch, one of my fangs dropped out and landed on my tongue, and I spit it out.

My body was going fast. Even as I moved, hair fell out. My friend blanched when she saw the way her hand molded my cheek. It was the first time I had seen her really worried. Next thing she did was swipe at my neck, tearing an artery and taking the side of my throat with it. I screamed at the pain and Azrael squeezed my left hand. His face remained impassive. Something oozed down my chest. I felt only the pressure of it, and the smell was horrible. Zhen

said it would hurt, and it did. Pain seemed to be the only thing that remained in my body.

Her lips locked to the wound and she drew on it with everything she had.

"Fuck." She spit out the blood and wiped it away with the back of her hand. "Yuck." Her teeth and lips were stained black. "This is going to be harder than I thought."

She grabbed my arm and squeezed, working some of the dead blood up my arm, and then she would go to my leg, ripping holes over major arteries, wringing me like I was a used-up ketchup packet. With each grip, bones were broken and remained that way since I had no blood to repair them. Each time she went to my throat and every other major bite, she would rip an even larger hole to get the contaminated substance. This went on for several hours.

With each pull, the world grew more gruesome, and I felt something stirring in Azrael the longer that time went by. His mind was locked to mine and to help me escape the pain, I settled my awareness there. It was fuzzy, like floating in a gray fog as his power kept me alive and tried to repair the massive damage to my body. The stirrings in him were vaguely familiar, but each time he felt me getting closer, he blocked me, and each time Zhen's daggers interacted with my flesh, I was ripped away from the peaceful place that was his mind.

Zhen had done all she could and, short of destroying my heart, she had inserted her hand underneath my rib cage and pulled out globs of my insides along with the dried blood. It reminded me of being a living mummy getting ready to be buried forever. It would take a lot to heal me. I needed a miracle. I needed an angel.

"I got most of it, but there will be some that will come out later. You will be well again. I figure Death can count on that. I'll leave the two of you alone. I have to get the taste out of my mouth."

A snake of Azrael's power lashed out and went into the other vampire, but she didn't seem affected by it. She just looked at the both of us and smiled. Then, she settled her cold stare on him and made a point to meet his gaze as if she were challenging him. She

looked away, but not in defeat. I was on the fringes of his mind and did not get the communication that passed between them. What had gone on between them in the past to warrant such a display? This was the most unusual behavior from her that I had ever seen.

Azrael set his attention on me. The line of power flared between us and filled my body, throwing me out of his mind, trying to spark it to life now that the contamination had been cleared away, but I needed more than that, and he knew it. He stroked my hair. The gesture in itself was hardly more than I could tolerate. At that moment, I couldn't believe everything had happened the way it did. Honestly, I thought I was still stuck on that beach waiting for my body to collapse and this was all some wonderful hallucination, minus that pain.

"Do you remember when Xavier attacked you last year and you died? It was my blood that brought you back. It will be that way again."

I tried to speak, but I found no voice from my shredded throat. I could do nothing with my body, so with my mind I imagined touching his cheek, just the barest caress. Surprise grazed his eyes as he felt it. I telegraphed my gratitude to him and all the unanswered emotions I had lying beneath the surface. He had to know my soul, to understand why I had done what I had, all the pain I wanted to mend because I had caused it, not by ripping it out of me, but by gazing at it in his mind.

He said nothing, but dragged his nail across his wrist. Blood welled to the surface. I half expected it to be silver since his power was so cold. A sudden convulsion overtook me as my hunger rose. It seemed the beast in me survived even without me being fully aware of my body. It was a mindless thing, a white hot rage that seared me. My tongue couldn't lap at the blood, so for now, my angel held it over my lips and let it drip onto my waiting tongue. I could only imagine how I looked, like some ravaged and torn apart cadaver waiting to be buried. But above all that, I just wanted him.

It leaked into my mouth and down my throat. Where the blood touched, I felt the cells returning to life, beginning to divide again,

trying to remake my inhuman chemistry. Senses returned first, touch, smell, and the ability to reason. As his blood went down, it burned cold as I remembered.

Those first few drops ran throughout my body like little electric sparks. The flesh knitted around my throat. Fangs re-grew where they had fallen out, and I was able to latch onto his wrist with the slightest movement of my head. When I sank my teeth in, he jumped, not expecting the pain. But his power still kept me going.

As I latched onto his wrist, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the life and power. In the distance, I heard the dead waiting to be collected by his kind hand and taken back to eternity in the arms of their creator. These were only echoes of what Azrael heard, but through our link, I felt the coldness and vastness of space looming forever, and the crossing of dimensions. From his blood, my own cold furnace rekindled, along with the power to take souls and incinerate the undead with a thought.

The more I drank, the more my heart wove into his. The more I understood his loss and distrust of me. Part of him still blamed me, wanting to take my soul and place me in some well-concocted hell, but the overwhelming majority of him desired to believe that I was telling him the truth. That I truly loved him.

His blood had done miracles to my body, and everything was working again. There was no more infection, and the wounds had all but sealed, only leaving tender places that would mend with human blood. The only thing that remained was the indentations of Michael's fingers, something I would have forever to remind me of his punishment.

For the first time in a long time, I was whole and it wasn't because I was taking his blood. It was because I wasn't denying my feelings and that I loved him. Damn me to whatever hell there was, I loved an angel and I had a ghost's blessing. Veronica was in the back of my mind sighing now that I wasn't in any more danger.

Pushing his wrist away, I licked my lips to get the remaining nectar. My movements were stiff. There were still places in my



body that were hard from the diseased blood, but my system was already working to expel them.

Death's eyes were closed, and a piece of his hair had fallen to the side. I brushed it away, barely touching him. When he sensed the movement, he opened his eyes and they were deeper and darker, showing stars, but there was something else—a blackness that didn't belong to the vastness of space.

"What is it, Azrael?" I whispered, slowly sitting up.

"You would not understand. I wish you could, but I have to return to my duties. I have neglected them for far too long."

"You don't want to be an angel anymore?"

He sighed. "When you pushed me away, it made me feel things I had not felt for eons. I questioned what I was. I remembered power. The hunger that I once had. It overtook me, and I struggled with the two. I almost Fell. But now, you made me realize what it is I am supposed to be doing—helping those who are crying out for release. I am not supposed to be smiting the Earth of your kind or giving in to my passions. I will not Fall."

He stared down at his wrist, rubbing the spot where I'd drank, and then he stared off into space, thinking, remembering an event back before I was even a thought. The outline of his flapping wings was apparent to me. His energy pulled around him like a cloak. His whole demeanor grew darker, not just because he was the Angel of Death. A shadow of his former self lingered over him for a moment.

Still hesitant to touch him, I yearned to explore every part of him, to learn his secrets and desires. "Thank you for what you did for me. I know after everything that I've done to you, I didn't deserve to be saved. I don't know how to tell you I'm grateful."

"Brenna, you do not have to do or say anything. I know you are repentant for your sins." He reached his hand out and went to touch my face, but pulled it away before it even met my aura. There was so much conflict in him still, and that hurt. I wanted to make it all go away.

"Please, Lord Death," I whispered, knowing the formality would get to him. He seemed to be a sucker for conformity.

He laughed at my use of his proper title. "You do not have to call me that. Not anymore. What is it that is so important?"

"Come closer and I'll show you."

He did as he was told and I locked my eyes with his, not using my powers, but just holding his gaze. This time, he fell into my eyes. My own power wrapped around him. It was an unconscious reaction. My left hand settled on his cheek. He flinched at the contact. My right hand moved along his neck and then under his hair. All the while, his eyes never left mine. His face remained impassive. I pulled him closer and then brought my lips to meet his, pressing them lightly against his. His muscles tensed. Cold engulfed him as if the universe was about to split and he would run.

*No*, I whispered into his mind, trying to get him to calm down.

He stopped. All this contact and emotions were something new. But I held on to him, pressed my lips harder and began crying. I didn't know why; maybe it was because I had finally realized what I was doing, or the fear that he would reject me. Or maybe it was a human reaction of actually touching a slice of the divine.

Suddenly, he responded.

He pushed me away, kissing me lightly on the lips, no tongue, just a small, light caress of our mouths. His thumbs rested ever so slightly on the underside of my jaw. It was exhilarating and frustrating because my soul called out for more.

"I have to go," he whispered, and wiped a stray tear that had lingered on my cheek. In the distance, the dead screeched, and there was a sudden, overwhelming sense of loss that washed over me from him. "I shall come back. Fate is not so cruel."

I nodded. "I know."

He smiled, and then space bent around him and he was gone. I sighed. He disappeared. It was always his way. You start to get

serious by asking him questions and poof. He was gone. I shouldn't have expected any less.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and then looked over at the bed, letting the sights and scents of the place come into me. I took in a long breath, forcing myself to breathe. The aroma of diseased blood permeated the room. There were globs of black bile and tissue on the floor where Zhen had spat them out. This was a place she'd never use again.

The bed I had been on was a small twin with a white blanket over the top of it. On a nightstand was a candle with numerous wax drippings. Other candles were scattered about the room, a small rug lay at the foot of the bed, and there was even a chest that I assumed held some clothes, but there could have been a body in there. I wouldn't put it past my ancient friend to have stashed one in there, either.

Nathan had said this was one of Zhen's many bedchambers. I still couldn't believe that she had so many vampires. It was remarkable, but then again, she was ancient, so why not? It got me thinking about what had happened with the hunt for Sean. Had they found anything? She hadn't said anything about it, but then again, I had been in dire straits. Now that I was healed, finding Mae was the priority. I had to get back on the horse, but for right now, I wanted to know what had been going on between Zhen and Azrael. The way they acted told me they had been more than friends.

I headed into the tunnels, which had begun filling with undead for the oncoming morning. Many of them were sleepy and looked at me for a second while others hissed and growled. I ignored them and kept walking, getting lost in the labyrinth of tunnels. I strolled through at least ten, leading me deeper underground. I sighed and decided to turn back when Nathan jumped out in front of me.

"Mistress, why do you wander passageways alone? If you're not careful, some of my brothers and sisters might take you for an interloper."

"I'm looking for Zhen. I need to talk to her."

Nathan smiled at me. "You're healed. Our Mistress has done a wonderful thing." He made to grab me into a hug, which was very unlike him, but I moved away. I was not really in for more physical contact at the moment.

"Yes, she healed me. Now, do you know how I can find her, or can you at least help me get out of this maze?"

He laughed. "Come. I'll show you the way. Mistress went above to hunt. She summoned me to find you. But you're not like the rest of us. Not if you were chosen by the Lord of the Dead. Even Mistress is different from others of our kind. Her blood runs richly in all of us, but Death does not recognize us."

I followed the vampire through the maze, wondering what he meant. He said their bloodline was different, that I was different. One way or another, my friend was going to tell me the truth about her involvement with the angels.

Through doors, around bends, and illusionary walls, we walked forever. I figured we could have walked the length of Boston. As we went uphill, I knew we were close to the surface.

Then, he stopped at a wall. "Mistress would have you wait for her."

"Aren't you coming in to keep me company?"

His pale skin blanched even more and he shrank back. "No one's allowed in there. It's her private chamber. Not even her eldest children venture in without permission. You, she holds above all of us. Please, you go in, and I'll wait here."

It was obvious even if I dragged him in, he wouldn't go. So I nodded and stepped through the illusion. This wall was thicker than any of the others that I had gone through. It took me four steps to get through it.

When I did, I arrived in a lavish room I had never seen before. There was a screen off to the side painted with scenes of dragons and mountains. There were swords up on the walls of all different eras. A huge rug was spread on the concrete. A moth-eaten faded tapestry hung on the wall. There were bookshelves full of scrolls, old manuscripts, and books. I scanned them and knew they were in

different languages, some dead and others I had never heard of. There was a large clothes chest hundreds of years old. Another was a wardrobe. One door was open and I peeked inside, seeing finery from all eras; one that caught my eye was a silk dress that could have been worn by Marie Antoinette. There was even a trunk with stickers from every part of the world. This wasn't anything I didn't expect from Zhen since there was nothing she probably hadn't done or seen. It was amazing to think that she had survived almost as long as Azrael.

The thought of him made me warm all over again. I caught a glimpse of me in a mirror huddled in a corner and noticed something different.

My eyes had changed. The silver flecks had disappeared and were completely black, and in the distance, I saw stars. My fingers touched the warped glass. His blood had truly reawakened the power that I had lost. Or maybe it was the admission of love. In the long run, it didn't matter. The most important thing was that he was back in my life again.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*My name is Azrael.*

The dead called out, and for the first time, I went to them swiftly. I split myself into many parts and traveled to different dimensions, galaxies, and places as I brought all of the souls back to the Source. For once, the cold vastness of space calmed me. The stars twinkled in the universal sky. My soul was happy to be fulfilling my duty, and the one thing that kept me going was the feel of Brenna's lips on mine pressing ever so softly, akin to the caress of a rose petal. She wanted my forgiveness, and I saw her soul.

The feel of her pulling on my blood had been wonderful. I had touched her essence in a different way than what I was used to, and the kiss sealed our fate. She whispered inside my mind, a place I did not think she had access to.

My thoughts had been so scattered that I had not shielded enough, and she perceived my pain and my sorrow, but she also saw other things—the depths of how I was, of what I had been and still was. But she had not seen the thing that was hidden so deep that it had been buried for an eternity.

As many parts of me dashed across the sky, I stared down at Earth, looking at all of its colors, the blues and greens of land and sea, the white swirls of clouds and grays of storms. I narrowed my attention and felt her soul beaming now that she had been restored, and she discovered other things had been born inside of her.

"Brother, you are well," a voice boomed in my space.

I did not have to turn to know that it was Michael. His flaming wings were always giving off heat. I wanted nothing to do with him. He had cursed Brenna for entering into this dimension. "You should leave, Michael."

He was silent, but faced me. His eyes were white-blue, the color of the hottest flames. His skin was flushed pink from the

slightest burn as his temper rose. He was not used to being spoken to in such a manner. None of my kind were. That was one of the reasons I had such a hard time forgiving Brenna, because she had been such a bitch, and no one pushed an angel aside.

"I shall not leave, brother. I see you have taken pity on the demon who trespassed here. You should have let her rot. Their kind manipulates to get what they want. I do not understand what you see in it. It only wanted to use you, and you fell for it. Really, dear brother, you are smarter than they. He would not condone such a union of one of the Divine and one of the Damned."

"You do not know what you say. She was the one who placed Brenna within my grasp."

"You lie. I can understand why you were chosen among the rest. An experiment to see if the damned could actually be of us on High. You are our brother and have taken the place of Gabriel as the being of Death. But for Him to choose another hell spawn? I do not believe that."

Rage grew in me. Michael did not know how to interact with humans on a regular basis. He was what I had become until Brenna made me see what I had been missing. My fingers wrapped around his throat without him expecting it. His power of flame contracted against my cold and death. He remained impassive at first, the more my rage fueled my power, and after a while, I knew that the coolness of my touch was putting out his fire, touching his very core. For the first time, I saw fear in his eyes. It was the first time that he had experienced such a feeling for himself and not the hollow echo of it that he received from humanity. I wanted to hold him until my power overtook his, but a light burst in the darkness and The Source of all was there staring at Her battling children.

"Let him go, Azrael."

I did as I was told, watching Michael's eyes ignite. I looked over at the Creator of All and felt no guilt for what I had just done. She knew that. This would have never happened if I hadn't admitted that I loved Brenna or that I had feelings at all. It had been eons since I had even thought about emotions, that I remembered

what it was like to be human. That was one of the reasons that Sharika had turned from me, because she and I did not relate anymore.

"Sir, what happened here was—" Michael started.

"Enough," the Source roared. "I don't wish to ever see the two of my angels fighting again. There is no need for it. Both of you have duties to be performing; now go. Michael, do as you're told."

The angel bowed and then winked out, but the Source remained. I could only imagine what She wanted to say. I looked upon Her, looked through the light of Her being, and in the center, saw a beautiful woman with light green eyes and hair with shades of every color who wore a white flowing dress and a jade shawl. Flowers bloomed around Her feet. Michael and the other angels saw Her as something different. For Michael, she was a man. It was all perception where She was not just made up of one thing, but of everything that had been imagined.

"Azrael, child." Her voice cooled.

Her hand rested on my shoulder and, as it did, I experienced the love I had for Her swell enough to break my soul. It did not overshadow what I felt for Brenna, even though Hers was the ultimate.

"You would kill one of my First Children because he touched the one you loved? Because he took it upon himself to act on what he felt?"

"Angels are not supposed to have feelings. You made them that way, and Michael now knows what emotion is."

"True, my angels were never supposed to experience human feeling. What you culled in him was hate. He saw that you accepted the spawn of the First Fallen over him. In him, that hate will grow and become something else. You have made an enemy of him now. Others will stand behind him, as others will stand behind you. Fate has changed its course."

I lowered my head, realizing what I had done all because of old emotions, all because I had loved. Michael would try to push me out of Heaven. This was the beginning of the end.



“What do you wish of me, Mistress? I cannot change what I have done, nor do I wish to. If it means I Fall, then so be it, but I will fight with everything that I have. I know of nothing else. I’ve been with You longer than anything.”

“Would you give up the one thing that makes your mortal heart beat?”

I stared off into space. To give up all that I had found. Could I survive within the memory of what had happened this night?

“Yes, child, you have been with me for ages. But now you have someone else to think of, who yearns for you even while her new powers are forming. She is the one where your mind dwells, and this I understand because you, unlike so many others, have a soul. It took you long to remember this, but you did, and for that I am proud of you. There will be trials ahead, but it is up to Fate to put them in front of you. For now, do what I ask. Go about your duty. You are safe, and I’ll make sure that the others do not harm her.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Mistress,” I bowed my head, and without a glance, I flew off into a thousand directions.

**Part Five:**  
**Trial by Pyre**

## Chapter Thirty

*My name is Brenna.*

“Amazing, isn’t it?” I heard Zhen say behind me. She had appeared out of nowhere. She seemed to have the hang of shielding and sneaking up on people.

As I looked over, her beast receded. Her other half made me a little uncomfortable, not because I thought it was going to kill me, but because it was part of something that I would never have. She motioned me over to sit down next to her. She caught my hand and touched my cheek. She stared into my eyes and smiled while her mind moved into mine, running over my thoughts, and even if I wanted to stop her, I couldn’t. Then, she sighed and went out of my mind.

“You really are becoming like him,” she stated simply. “I thought you were before, but now it’s true, and it’s not because he gave you his blood, either, or his power. It was already inside of you, deep down; it was your destiny.”

“I don’t know what’s truly happening, but I love him. You saved me. I owe you a big favor. I owe you a lot of favors, it seems. You’ve been here for me all this time and haven’t said a thing, and you’re one of the best things that have happened to me in a long time. Thank you. For everything. But what the hell was going on between the two of you? At first, you told me not to contact him, and then you had Bridgette call him, and then he just happened to show up and need your advice. Then all that shit downstairs. What the hell was that about? You owe me an explanation, and I don’t care what it takes. You’re giving me one.”

She laughed, got up, and thumbed through the clothes in her wardrobe. She brought out something wrapped in plastic and in a cloth. When she removed it, I got the scent of mothballs and cedar. There were other aromas, herbs that I didn’t recognize, but they were strong and overpowering. Her fingers ran over the glass. Her

face went lax. She remembered something, and I realized this had been with her since the very beginning of her life. She handed it to me after a moment. I stared at it and saw designs and other things on the cloth.

“What is this?”

“This was given to me by my teacher. It tells about beings that were neither alive nor dead, but something in between. He told me to beware of them because they were damned. However, it also tells about a being lifted above all of it, one who became a star that traveled the heavens, taking the souls of those in need. My teacher began instructing me when I was only three years old. He said I had a special talent. I was like you, a psychic. It was only under his guidance that I would have protection from the dark forces and the demons roaming the shadows. I was with him for twenty years, and he treated me like his own child. We traveled the dimensions and spoke to nature. I learned things about the future that not many know, even today. It was on one of these journeys that my teacher had a heart attack. He was over a hundred. I met Death. Azrael was young then, an angel a little under a thousand years old, not enough to still be human, but not as withdrawn as the others. He was surprised I could see him.

“Something about me captivated him, and he decided he would keep me company. I would always know he was coming by the chill in my bones. He was handsome. For two years he appeared, and we talked about everything. He told me about other dimensions I had only dreamed of and beings that my teacher had warned me about. He told me of the original angel who fell. His name was Mastema, Lucifer. He controlled demons, created things that no human should ever see. Azrael had seen his realm, but was forbidden to venture there.

“One night, Azrael showed up unexpectedly. He was agitated. He was withdrawn, pale, and his eyes weren’t the same; they burned into my soul. When he saw me, it was like he saw only one thing about me. I tried asking him what was the matter, but he wouldn’t tell me. He didn’t even want me to touch him. Finally, he

calmed down, and he kissed me. His lips were soft, and he smelled like fresh earth. I fell into his embrace, knowing I was safe because of what he was. But something changed. He became rough. I tried to fight him, using magic and spells, but he was beyond that. Then, he was on top of me, holding me down. I saw what had happened. I saw the look about him. And then the pain came. I felt a tearing in my neck and I began to go cold. So cold.

"I remember thinking I was going to die, but I didn't. He stopped just as my heart was taking its last beat. The look on his face was sorrow, disgust; every emotion ran through him. Then, he bit into his wrist and blood poured out. I was transfixed at the sight, revulsion and anger burned in my heart, but there was something else. And he said something to me I could never forget.

"I know you can hear me, Zhen. I cannot give you back what I have taken. But if you wish to continue, then drink."

"I didn't want to die. So I took his wrist. His blood burned going down, not because it was hot, but because it was so cold. The more I drank, the more I wanted. When he pulled away, I was in a daze, not sure of where I was. And I was tired, so he took me in his arms, and I fell asleep. When I awoke, there was something else inside of me, my beast, as you call it. Sharika was what she called herself, and we were hungry. Azrael knew this and fed us human blood.

"Sharika wanted control of my body, and we fought. She would only answer to Azrael. He stayed with us for a year and taught us to live together. We learned to share our existence, and over the years, we grew on one another. But in my heart, I never forgave him for what he did to me, for taking my life, for raping my soul. He would check on the both of us once in a while. We both knew when he would come. The same chill would enter our bones. When he did come, Sharika would be happy, where I would be spiteful, and we began to fight over it. She wanted to please her Master, but I told her he wasn't in control of us. We had to live our own lives, and finally, when he would come, he wouldn't want to see her, but me. Then she became jealous, and then, one day, we

told him to fuck off. That was the last time we interacted with him. We've both seen him over the millennia, but he leaves us alone. Every time I saw him, my hatred grew until I realized that my humanity had slipped away and I had lived five thousand years."

It was hard to believe what she told me, but she wouldn't lie. I had some hunches that Death was a vampire, but to hear that he was the one who transformed her... It didn't change how I felt. It did make sense why she didn't want me to contact him and why Viktor said there was a taint in their blood. Why the other vampires despised her because she was begotten from an angel, why it would affect her line, and why it affected me. I sighed and handed the memento back to Zhen.

"Why did he turn from what he was?"

Zhen sighed. "I don't know. I assume it has something to do with him being an angel. Maybe the two conflicted. It's something you have to ask him, but you might want him to tell you what I told you. It's still in him, I can sense it, but he pushes it off by being what he is. It's amazing. That was what you saw tonight. He was trying to influence my mind by being my Master and shit. But that hasn't worked for years. Why would it when he denies what he is? After all these years, I don't blame him. He's been an angel first and foremost and has forgotten the vampire, denied his hunger."

"Zhen, does he have a demonic half?" I think that was the most important thing that I needed to know.

"No, he doesn't. It's just him. Just as it's you. He's the one that knows what he's doing. It's something you need to talk to him about. You know,"—she got up and put her memento back—"I never thought I'd meet anyone else like him, until you came to my club that night. I wanted you for myself. They sensed it, too. Maybe not what your true nature was, but that you were different and powerful. Then you grew on me, and here we are."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that, especially after you sent your two goons after me," I laughed, remembering well the two thugs she sent after me to try and bring me back into her harem.

“You know, Brenna, I’m glad you are what you are. It’s been an interesting ride, I’m sure, but you might be good for him. Who knows? Cosmic winds are blowing, but I have a feeling it isn’t good. For now, love him. It’s the best thing you can do. It’s what he needs.”

Zhen took me out of the hive until I got to South Station, where I emerged cloaked so no one saw me. The bustle of people coming into the city and going to work was amazing. Life swarmed around me. Outside, the sun broke through the smog. At first, I shielded myself against it, but it didn’t burn or even tingle. Instead, I drew in energy from the rays. I basked in it. People went around me, not knowing I was there. It felt good to be alive again. My hunger was sated in its own way. Part of me was cold from the blood Azrael had given me, and somehow I sensed that I was stronger than I had been before. Something inside was different. Maybe it was that I had gone through my trial by fire and I had come out on the other side? I still didn’t know how to control it, but it lingered in my soul.

I focused on people. They faded out until I saw the silver orbs inside of them with fine, spider web tendrils spreading throughout their bodies. These were their souls. I had the power to take them. Just like Azrael, who I felt off in the distance. I wanted to reach out and go to him, but it was impossible. There were also cold presences of beings I couldn’t describe clinging to the dimensions.

I started walking home, hoping everything was all right, but I had a sinking feeling that it wasn’t. When I got there, I found half the door ripped from the frame; splinters and glass littered the rug. A pool of blood stretched from the floor and into the kitchen, streaked across the wood. I followed it and found Xavier, naked with crisscrossed gouges on him everywhere. When I felt him, he was hot. I shook him and he groaned. His eyes fluttered open, and he tried focusing and only saw me for a moment.

“Xavier, what happened? Where’s Miranda? Bridgette?”

“Bridgette’s child claimed Miranda. I fought, but he had silver. Both taken—”

He turned over and then closed his eyes again. His pulse was racy. Focusing, I felt the silver attacking his vital organs and flowing into his brain. The blood on his body had dried black. I noticed dark lines traced his veins. I sighed.

*Damn it. We knew this was going to happen.*

Xavier couldn't die. It wasn't his time. That came to me instantly from the new sense that I had. Concentrating on my own energy, I poured it into him. With a golden cascade, warmth burned through me and into him. Through my senses, the silver was cold in his hot body, and the energy fought the metal and drove it out.

The power was so intense that I couldn't hold it in. It went to the core, crashing over me until the cold took over and put it out. It was odd, the energies counteracting each other, but the cold spread from me to Xavier and sealed his wounds completely and rejuvenated his soul. I took my shaky hands from him and sat back on my heels, feeling drained and lightheaded.

The werewolf came around and opened his eyes. He looked dazed and then began staring at himself and where his wounds had been. "I'm alive." His finger trailed over the perfect skin—his old scars had vanished too.

I smiled weakly.

"You're alive. You saved my life. How?" He wrapped his arms around me in a huge hug and started to crush me, but it was only a reflex.

"No problem," I blurted out. He let go of me, smiled, and then his brow creased.

"You're cold, but you're warm. What happened to you? How did you heal me?"

"I had a little divine help. But that doesn't matter. What happened here?"

He sighed and helped me up. "I did what you asked. Bridgette came over a little after sunset. Miranda and she talked. They seemed to hit it off great, which I was leery about, but she needs friends. Things were fine at first, and then Mira wanted in.



Bridgette wasn't ensnaring her; it just happened. Mira probably sensed that another vampire was around. Both of us got her under control and she went back in. Once she came out, though, both Bridgette and I were aware of how much she smelled. Her mind is cracking and will take Miranda with her if we can't get to her in time. We got friendly and started talking more about Sean. Miranda got scared, and Bridgette got pissed and crazed. It was strange. It got really cold in here and then she calmed down.

"Miranda went up to her room, and Bridgette decided to watch me cook dinner while she waited for you. The night went on, I ate, and we crashed in front of the TV. Miranda never came downstairs. Then, a couple of hours before dawn, I was dozing and sensed something outside. At first I thought it was nothing, but then Bridgette perked up too. There was a knock on the door and when I opened it, there was no one except the smell of a dead animal. I closed and locked the door and then the door was on top of me and Sean was in the living room. Bridgette tried to reason with him, but he said nothing. His eyes locked upstairs and he smelled Mira. He howled, and Miranda came downstairs in a trance. I pounced on him. We fought and Miranda wailed. He was stronger than me. When Miranda yelled, he stopped and transformed into human form. I grabbed him, but Miranda jumped down the steps and tackled me and pulled out a silver dagger. Bridgette tried to pull her off, but Sean threw her across the room, and she cracked her head pretty hard. Sean went at me and then took the dagger and did the damage you saw. When he was done, he licked the blade. I cried out to Miranda not to go with him, but she wouldn't listen. He dug his fangs into her, and then I passed out. I don't know where he went. I'm sorry. Brenna. I tried, but I wasn't good enough. I lost Miranda just like I lost Marie."

I steadied him while he sobbed. "No, Xavier. You did what you could. Zhen has others looking for him. We'll find them. I promise."

I left Xavier to clean up the door with the guilt weighing on his heart. There was nothing I could do now. The sun was up, and

Sean was not going to go out in the daylight. I assumed his tolerance was little to none, which meant I could get some sleep. My body demanded it with everything it had been through. But first I decided on a shower before I fell into oblivion.

I slipped into the shower and let the warm water wash away all of the dirt, grime, and dead skin. As the water ran over me, I found I preferred it to be cold rather than the normal scalding temperature. I examined my body and found everything to be perfect except for a few hard lumps that were still there from the dead blood, but I wasn't worried; my body would devour them. The only scars I had left were the imprints of Michael's fingers that would be there for the rest of my existence.

I wasn't able to get away unscathed from his punishment, but I doubted that any other vampire had lived through an angel's sentence. Other than that, nothing had changed about me in the past three years, and I would remain a perfect statue forever. I didn't know if I missed the concept of human aging, the natural effect it had on the body, watching lines appear and things begin to sag. Hair turning gray and then watching everyone discover the lessons that you had already learned. My perspective was different now that I had lived on the other side of reality for a while. It made me appreciate my human family even more. It made me want to reintegrate myself with them.

I turned the water off and threw on a black T-shirt Azrael had given to me a year ago when things had been so different. I could still smell him on the shirt—freshly dug earth, jasmine, and the slight scent of decay, all related to death. Closing my eyes, wrapped in his scent, I drifted off into oblivion.

The odor that greeted me was blood. I knew that scent. It perfumed the air. It was stronger than it ever had been before. The banging was louder too, right next to me. I opened my eyes and saw there was a crack in the door. I put my eyes to it, and the undertone of the chanting grew deeper, like the beat of a drum, and then, above it all, was a high-pitched scream. I wanted to pull away from the crack when I saw someone, a girl in a blue dress, being

dragged and made to kneel in a circle of red-robed figures. The scent of blood was from the circle on the floor, where the girl struggled against her captor. I couldn't see the whole thing, but there was a five pointed star painted in human blood on the floor. A pentagram. I swallowed in fear and wonderment.

A figure entered the circle and threw off his robe. He was naked except for a mask made of oak leaves and large horns around his face. Something about him wasn't normal, but the others didn't seem to notice. The girl grew quiet. He fixed his eyes on her. He yanked her neck back by her hair while someone gave him a silver knife. A jolt of excitement ran through me. I needed to see what happened.

"Great Lord, we beseech thee with thy sacrifice. You, who are the Father of all, come to this rite. Know me as one of your true children. Horned one, Lord of the Underworld, Fallen One, bear witness to me. Give me the power of this one so I can fulfill your dark destiny."

The knife slid across her tender flesh, leaving a slice of blood. He put his lips to it while its tendril moved down her neck. His tongue was black, long, and forked like a snake's. Then, I saw his ivory teeth from where they dug into the girl's neck. He drank for a moment, and then his fingers touched the girl's neck. As he drank, his eyes opened and they settled on me. He smiled, and I felt something come into my mind.

*You want it. Just like me. You want it even more because you can feel the power, can't you?*

Yes, I replied, realizing I wanted everything he had said. I felt the girl's power making him stronger. He extended his hand to me. I pushed open the door. He lifted his head from the wound and placed my mouth against it.

"Drink," he whispered. "Taste her power. Know it. You can feel it under the skin running through her. That power will make you strong, but the blood of your own family will make you even stronger. If you are strong enough, you can call on the one who made us. The one who first Fell. Drink, my son, drink and learn."

My lips touched the warm fluid. It was thick and tasted like the pennies I used to suck on. I glanced up and knew that this was my destiny all because my father truly loved me enough to give me this gift. I drank in the fluid, using my baby pointed teeth, and felt the darkness in me rise up and take hold. I felt Daddy smile. I had always been his favorite.

\* \* \* \*

I awoke with a start, gasping for breath at what I had just seen. This was Sean, ages ago as a child, and he was a vampire, or at least it was in him the way it had been with Miranda. It was nurtured from the beginning by a perverse asshole who ran some kind of fucked up coven. It clicked now why he was killing pagans. He was gaining their power. I bet he sensed they were more psychic than most, and that was why he targeted them. But why now was I able to get into his dreams more than I had before?

*Maybe because you're more in tune with yourself than you have been before. Didn't you think that a little divine help might boost your abilities?*

I jumped at the sudden intrusion of my thoughts and saw the ghostly figure of Edmund sitting on the bed, smiling at me. I pulled a sheet over me quickly and he laughed, still obnoxious as he had been in life. It always grated on me, but Edmund was my friend, and honestly, I thought he had drifted into oblivion since I hadn't heard from him.

*Not yet, sweetie. I'm not going anywhere for a while. Still got a lot of karmic bullshit to work out. Besides, I gotta be able to bug the shit out of you, and I can keep an eye on the Tearoom. You didn't think what I told you about being the Tearoom's guardian was bullshit, did you?*

"No, but I'm surprised to see you after everything that's happened. I wasn't sure you'd still be around if I got my abilities back, that's all," I commented. I got out of bed and got dressed in jeans and another T-shirt. Edmund's eyes followed me, but I wasn't worried about that. Being dead hadn't changed the fact that Edmund was gay.

*Of course I'm around. How have your dreams been?*

The smirk in his voice was apparent. I saw a phantom cigarette appear in his hands. The sudden scent of cloves filled the bedroom. I stopped brushing my hair and stared at him. He was the one who had been causing my dreams. I should have guessed. I just thought they were an aftereffect of me going mad.

*"How in the hell did you pull that off?"*

*Someone had to watch your ass and give you a heads up on what the fuck was going on. Fuck, Raven, they weren't some shitty aftereffect of you losing your mind. Just because you might have turned on everyone in your life doesn't mean I was going to let everything that you and I worked for go to hell. You've been doing a great job of running the Tearoom up until this past year. I wasn't going to let it go up in flames. Besides, the dreams were the only way that I could get through to your thick skull. I thought you would have put it together quicker than this.* He puffed on his cigarette and blew ectoplasmic smoke rings into the air.

*"And nearly decapitating me with your picture wasn't enough?"*

*Naw, that was just fun. I had to get your attention somehow. Besides, things are back on track now. Have a good night and don't let the fires get too hot.*

I watched in the mirror as he faded out, leaving me alone in the silence of the house. Xavier wasn't here, probably looking for Miranda, hoping he could find her in time.

I pulled open the heavy drapes on my window and smelled the rain-drenched night. Water pelted the windows and the sound of it filled me with pure joy. I focused on it for a while and blocked everything out until I heard the pounding coming from downstairs.

I dropped the brush and hopped down the stairs, jumping the last five and landing catlike on the floor. The door burst open, breaking the screws and nails Xavier had used to do a quick mend job the night before. Drago came in scratched and covered in dried blood, but the most important thing was that he was carrying Miranda.

He scowled at me and put her down on the couch. Sherna came in afterward carrying Bridgette. Zhen followed, her long, black hair flowing behind her. She glared at me. She looked at her children. Bridgette was better, but there were long gashes on her throat, and she was a pale blue color. Zhen shrugged.

"I brought these back to you," Drago said stiffly.

I could see the effort he was making to be polite, but he was chafing at the edges. His other child said nothing. I looked over at Miranda, and there seemed to be nothing wrong with her save she was in a deep trance and she was paler than normal. I listened to her heartbeat, and it was much slower than it had been. I just hoped that if she had gotten blood from Sean, Mira might be the stronger of the two. Behind them, I heard the clicking of claws on the stone steps and saw a large wolf enter the house. It was black streaked with silver along its back. Xavier. He looked up at me, growled at Drago, sat down and laid his head on Miranda. His bright green eyes looked directly into mine, and I knew he was concerned.

"What happened? Where's Mae?"

"She wasn't there. Only these two. This one is barely alive. The other we cannot wake. She is under a spell. We think—"

"Sherna, enough," Drago snapped. The other vampire bowed her head and backed up closer to Zhen. Zhen glared at her child and then at me.

"Tell her what happened."

"Why should I? She was supposed to be leading us, and we found his nest on our own. She is insane, Mistress, and so is this one she harbors. I should kill the both of them."

"Enough!" Zhen yelled.

Drago went stiff, and Zhen didn't break her eye contact with him. She moved forward. He was drawn toward her, floating into the air a few inches with the tips of his boots dragging on the floor until they both met each other. Sherna's fear passed through me. She was shaking. Xavier watched the scene with amusement.

Zhen's lips curved around a mouthful of sharp teeth, and she wasn't looking out through her own eyes. Her slender fingers turned to talons, and they slipped into Drago's stomach and cut upward, wrapping around the underside of his ribcage. Sherna quivered. More blood spilled out onto my floor.

"You seem to forget who your Master is, Dragon. Many years you have been free of my leash, but that does not mean that your collar has fallen off. I think I've let it get too loose. I'm tired of your disobedience. You will do as I say. You may be an Enforcer, but I am tired of hearing you trash my Master, your grandsire. He may be a High Being, but you should be honored that I chose you and lifted you above mortality. It is my right that I can squash your life in my hands if I wish. My bloodline is the most prolific among our kind. Your brothers and sisters have spawned more of our kind than any other, and you can taste the taint in them even if they are ten times removed from me. Remember that. Now, obey me, or meet your grandsire for the last time."

She threw Drago off of her talons and let her power fall away so he hit the floor. She proceeded to lick the blood off her fingers. Drago lay still, willing himself to heal. Then, Sharika looked over at me.

"You are as my Master is. We have helped you through many trials. And you have helped us lead the hunt to find the one that has killed our children, and for that we are grateful. You have also brought my Master back to me. You have made him face his nature and the connection between us has been reopened. We thank you for this. Between us, we are even. Do you accept this?"

I nodded, knowing it was a big thing for Sharika to say that for all that she had done. It seemed it was more important for her to be reconnected with Azrael than anything else. She smiled and then caressed my face with human fingers, stood on her tiptoes and kissed me.

For a moment, I melted into her embrace, tasting the remnants of her ancient blood, remembering the night that Zhen and I had fucked around. But she pulled back and faced Drago, who was now

on his feet. He looked at her once and then at the floor. I knelt by Bridgette and took my sister in my arms. She was getting colder, and her lips were turning purple.

"Tell me what happened."

Drago stared at me. "Your pet came to us at the club and said he could show us the way to her spawn's lair. He said that you ordered him to come and get us. We followed him, but the scent was apparent as we got closer. The one we hunted is totally insane. But we knew that. We found him in an abandoned house on the outskirts of Dorchester. We found these two with symbols painted in blood on the walls. Sean wasn't there. We brought these back to you, that one can't be woken, and this one is dead."

"She's not dead. He drained her and took her power. He thinks that by taking the power of his family and those that are psychic, he can get stronger and summon the first of his kind by being worthy."

"How do you know this?"

"Because I've been dreaming about him for months and I didn't realize it. Sean wasn't human when he was born. He was like Miranda, half and half, but more. The beast inside of him was nurtured since birth by its father. His father wanted to create a race that would be able to dominate the vampire world. Witches and pagans are connected to the universe in some way and draw on that power and, after a while, it stays with them. I don't know, maybe he's like Julien and can suck energy; I'm not sure. But he's got Mae, and he'll keep killing until he has enough power to fulfill his father's dream."

"And you know this for sure how?"

I turned to Xavier. "Through a little divine help. The best place to look for him will be places where there'll be a lot of psychic energy gathered. Whatever he is going to do, trying to call upon a demon or something else will have to be at a node."

"You mean like the Tearoom?"

My eyes widened. I realized what Edmund had said about a fire. I nodded. "Xavier, stay here with Miranda and Bridgette.



Zhen, take Drago and Sherna over to the Tearoom and keep watch."

"And where are you going, oh fearless leader?" Drago snapped.

"To get a little Divine advice."

Zhen nodded and then smiled. She took her children and left the house. I carried Bridgette up to my room, laid her on the bed and placed my hand over her heart, willing a little of my power into her. Her soul was still intact. Sean was not like Julien, who sucked out souls. He was something else. I just didn't know what kind of vampire he was. I ripped into my wrist and placed it over Bridgette's lips. Blood worked into her mouth, but only a little went down her throat. I tilted her head back more and willed more of my power into her, feeling the connection between us growing, but there was still no response.

"Veronica!" I yelled. With a cold chill, she was there.

*Brenna, what happened to Bridgette?*

"She's dying. I can't help her. I think only you can."

*But what can I do? I'm already dead.*

"She'll answer to you. Something in her will recognize who you are even though you're no longer a vampire, but part of you is in her. You have to feed her. At least, until she is well enough. And I have to go. I need Azrael."

*How do you know this will work?*

"I don't, love, but you have to try if you don't want her to join you."

Veronica sat on the bed next to Bridgette. I felt the added weight of her becoming a semi-solid form. *I'll do what I can.*

"Thank you."

I looked at the two of them and only prayed my idea would work. If there was still a bond between Master and child, then I had a feeling it would extend even beyond death. It had with me, and even though she created me, I'd never felt like Veronica's child. I was always something more, and I was just beginning to realize it.

I closed my eyes and sat against the wall, praying to find Azrael. My mind settled on him. The coldness that was part of me found our link and called me to him. I felt myself floating. I concentrated on the coldness in me, willed it to surround me in a large bubble. Every little atom touched my skin, making me aware of how space was becoming fluid. Before I knew it, the bubble had engulfed me, and then I was in a vacuum. I was in some kind of formless void, but now I was here for real. It wasn't just my astral body that went through the bubble; it was my entire body.

It was colder than I ever imagined. The pressure of space built all around me, crushing me. I opened my mouth to scream. I swallowed nothing but thick blackness that choked me and wrapped inside my throat.

I fell to my knees, surprised that it was solid. My hand flew to my throat. I couldn't move or do anything under the enormous pressure of space.

*Azrael*, I screamed mentally. He had to hear me.

Just as everything looked dire, a light appeared in the darkness, but it wasn't Azrael. I opened my eyes and tried to look into it, but it was stronger than the sun, brighter than any light I had ever seen. Inside of it, I thought I saw the outline of a figure. The pressure was gone and I could breathe, with the lightest touch from the being in the center of the light. It even dimmed a little so I could look into it. When I did, I saw a woman with flowing black hair and blue eyes. She wore a white dress that seemed to change colors as she moved. I felt no fear of her, but my heart swelled at the sight.

"Child, why have you come here?" she asked.

Slowly, I stood up and stared at the dense expanse I lingered in.

I came here seeking Azrael. I needed to ask him about a vampire I'm hunting. I thought he might know. It was instinct to come here. I meant no disrespect.

"Azrael is not here. It's a good instinct that you have, but you're not ready to be here in the flesh. The answers you sought from Azrael he wouldn't have known. You seek knowledge of the

demon halfling that has your friend in jeopardy. Of what he wishes to do with his power." She smiled.

I nodded, not sure of what to say. This creature was no angel, but something more. Who created vampires; how did the demon intermix with a human soul?

"It was inevitable that one day you would find your way here, but I assumed it would be later. Especially since you have just discovered your power and the others that will come along with it. The one you seek was my first beloved. The first who Fell from my service. He created the beings you call vampires."

I eyed her suspiciously. *But why would you allow such a thing?*

She laughed. The sound reminded me of a thousand leaves rustling. "Even I do not have full reign over the universe. There are many things and many parts to oversee. I am but one and many, and the angels are my servants, tending to things. Fates weave the tapestry of the cosmos, and sometimes the threads get knotted and angels change heart, learning what humans have—free will and emotion. When that comes into play, even I cannot change the outcome of what will happen."

My eyes grew wide. This creature couldn't be, wasn't. There was no way.

"Yes, child. I am the One."

I fell to my knees, realizing I was staring into the face of God, or the Goddess, or whatever it, he, she, was. What did you do when you faced the Creator of the universe, of time itself, of the Earth and stars, planets, and everything in between? I was in awe and fear at the same time.

"There is no need to bow, Brenna. I am what I am. I can be man or woman, planet or star, flowing river, ray of light, or frightful beast. I am everything and nothing. But for you, I am this. Now you are needed elsewhere. You have found the answers that you need for now. Time is not the same here as you are used to it. Your friends need you. Now go back."

Suddenly, I was falling and was back in my room. Bridgette was on the bed, her heart beating slowly. Veronica was in the room,

but I didn't know where. Her energy was low, and Bridgette's was vibrating higher, which was a good sign. Xavier's heartbeat was in the kitchen and Miranda's was there also. I raced down the steps, letting Bridgette sleep. In the kitchen, I smelled food and heard Miranda and Xavier talking.

When I appeared, they both looked up. Miranda appeared haggard, and her skin was stretched over her bones. Dark circles engulfed her eyes and her red hair was stringy. The blood in her was doing more harm than good, ripping her apart from the inside, and I wondered if it was breaking Mira apart as well. I wasn't sure how it was for insane vampires.

"Miranda, how are you? When did you wake up?"

"Sometime last night. Xavier fed Mira and stopped her from going into a frenzy."

"I'm glad you're all right. I was getting worried."

"I'm not all right. Mira is almost completely insane. Sean forced blood into me and called Mira out. He said we were kin. He told me about what he was going to do once I had finished turning and that we would fulfill our father's dream. Did you know he's like me, or he was? He was half and half when he was born. Did you know his father was Julien? God, Brenna, he wants to create some super race or some shit and call upon the Master of all vampires, some demon called Mastema. While he drinks, he takes power, the way Julien took souls. He says with enough power he can call upon the First One and become more than what he is."

"Xavier, did you know Julien had any children, or that there were any others like Miranda?"

The werewolf shook his head. "I did what I was told and when Julien was gone, I would look for Marie's descendents. I never found them. Sometimes Julien would be gone for months. I never asked. If I did, then I might not have found Miranda. I had no idea he was creating more and then taking the children with the demon passing through the bloodline. I never asked questions."

"Look, it's fine. Did you learn anything else?"

Miranda just shook her head. Xavier put down some pasta in front of her, which she pushed away.

"You should eat. It will help you. When this is all over, I'll finish what Julien started if you still want. I think at this point it's the best thing for both of you."

Xavier looked nervously over at Miranda and then at me. He didn't want to lose her to becoming a full vampire or to the insanity of the vampiric nature. Miranda was descended from the both of them, and the beast claimed to be the one that had sprouted in Marie and traveled down through bloodlines, waiting for its Master to find and reawaken it once again, which had almost happened.

"I think it's the only way I can be sane."

"Miranda, you can't," Xavier said.

"Xavier, it isn't your decision. You haven't had to live like this for the past year. I hate it. It might be better off. Besides, she promised she wouldn't get rid of me, that we would share. Running the shop might become harder, but we can work it out. I know I'll have some sun immunity and honestly, I don't know what will happen. Brenna, I, we want you to finish it. I don't want to end up like Sean or Julien."

"Miranda, I'll say this. I'm not like other vampires. My blood could do more damage. I wouldn't want to lose the both of you. Mira might not believe me, but I do care for you plural. I wouldn't have invited you into my home if I didn't. Granted, I slipped a little into the abyss myself, but still. You just have to know the risks beforehand."

Miranda closed her eyes. Her face went lax. When she opened them, it was obvious that it wasn't her anymore, but Mira, because her eyes were darker and her fangs more pronounced. The interesting thing was she was sane. No smell permeated the air. "I understand that. It's a risk we're willing to take. Part of us wants to be with Sean because he has the same blood as us, but he's insane, and even I know that he must be destroyed. I do not wish to lose my head. I'll wait until you kill him and you can finish the transformation."

I was more shocked by the sincerity in her eyes and her voice than anything else. "Good. I am glad to hear that. Have you heard from Zhen or Drago?"

Xavier shook his head. There was an itching on the back of my brain and then a flash of bright flames and a building going up in smoke. It was a warning from my guides.

"What is it?" Xavier asked.

"Stay here with Miranda."

Both of them stood. "If there is trouble, we want to help," Miranda interjected.

I caressed her cheek and smiled, looking deeply into her eyes and letting my mind touch the outskirts of her personalities. Mira was holding on by a thread. It was too risky for her to be around other vampires. She had to stay sane, at least until I took care of Sean.

"I know you do, love, but it's too dangerous this time. Xavier needs to stay here with you in case Sean returns. I'll be back."

"Brenna. You don't know what he's capable of. The things in his mind. Don't let him get a hold of you."

I kissed her lips gently. "I won't. Remember, I'm not your typical garden-variety vampire either. I'm something else."

Xavier smiled and nodded. He would stay with her.

If I don't make it back. Take her to The Black Rose. Wait for Zhen. She will know what to do. If something else goes wrong, call on Azrael. Bridgette can help you when she wakes up. Will you do that for me?

Xavier nodded. On an afterthought, he pulled me into his embrace and kissed me. I was shocked, but I didn't have time to rationalize that. I had other things to worry about than a lovesick puppy. If I made it through the flames, then I would deal with him later.

I broke the gesture, bolted out the back door, and ran up Beacon Street heading toward the Tearoom. I stopped on Winter Street, looking at the exterior of the building. It wasn't engulfed in flames, so I wondered if the premonition was something that my

guides were having a laugh over. I walked in and up the steps because the elevator was still broken. When I got to the third floor, I got the whiff of smoke.

Opening the door, I walked in the side door of the Tearoom, through the Fire Room, cloaked in case there was something going on. Once I did, I was met with Sherna's head on the floor with half of her face missing and her body lying in the doorway of the main room. The couch had been pushed aside, thrown into the store. All the tables and the host station had been smashed and stacked on top of one another. A large pole had been erected in the center of the room with wood stacked around it. Mae was tied to it, barely alive with puncture wounds on both sides of her neck, but otherwise, she seemed unhurt.

Eight vampires encircled the pyre; all were chanting in a low monotone. If I listened to them long enough, I might get sucked in. Sean emerged from the back dressed in a red robe, wearing the same kind of mask I saw in my dream. He came to the edge of the circle, and one of the two followers behind him stood beside the pyre and threw off her robe. I was surprised to see Zhen. Her eyes were blank. She was paler than normal, and I saw the gouges on her throat. I was shocked to see my age-old friend kneeling before the pyre waiting obediently for Sean's next move. I swallowed, thinking over the situation. There were ten vampires and one of me. Surveying the situation, I felt the cold furnace in me spark to life. I had done this before with Julien's clan. I just had to be careful. So I waited.

"Great Lord, Dark One who made us, hear my cry. Come to us with this great sacrifice. Hear my pleas for your wisdom. Take this offering from one whose blood has been mixed with the High Beings. Take this Blessed Cow and come to your children. Give me the power to be complete and wipe the taint of humanity from my soul." Sean dropped his robe, and his follower behind him handed him a silver dagger.

The hood dropped back on the vampire behind Sean, and to my shock, I saw Drago with a twisted smile on his face. Sean slid a

clean line across Zhen's throat and his black tongue caressed the bloodline. The scent was dark and rich. The chanting intensified and the heat built inside of me. This could not happen. I would not lose my best friend to an asshole who thought he could conjure the Devil with a little blood sacrifice. If I let loose my rage and anger, then the blast would hit Zhen and Mae, consuming them and melting them to ash. There had to be another way.

I glanced around, but there was nothing, and Xavier was still back with Miranda at the house. But as I listened, below Sean's rant I heard the tapping of the cobbler's hammer.

*Hey, I called mentally. Hey!*

The rapping stopped and the cobbler peeked his head from outside the hole that had been his workshop. *What do you want? I have shoes to finish.*

*I need your help. Get out here.*

*What can I do?*

*Think about it hard enough and you can move things.*

The Tearoom was a magnet for psychic energy, and many ghosts had come and gone. Some were former psychics and former owners, including Edmund. Others were spirits drawn here because of all the psychic energy. The Tearoom was something like Stonehenge without the stones. It was a place of power that the building housing the Tearoom had been built over which was one reason Sean had chosen it and why all the shit that happened here did.

*All of you, if you still love this place and want it to see another day, then help me.*

I felt Edmund smile and saw his transparent shape. He picked up a fallen crystal and hurled it at the nearest vampire, which happened to be Drago, who was handing the dagger to Sean. The crystal hit him dead in the forehead, causing him to drop the knife.

"Idiot!" Sean screamed.

It was yanked across the floor when he bent down to pick it up. The chanting was broken, and the vampires were wondering what was happening now that crystals, tarot cards, and everything the



ghosts could find were being thrown at them. The undead couldn't see the ghosts. They only saw the floating objects. The spirits couldn't keep it up long because they weren't used to expending so much energy, so I pushed through the circle and grabbed Zhen while Sean and Drago were busy swatting at incense cones and tea lights buzzing around their heads.

Still cloaked, I checked Zhen's face. She growled at me, but there was no recognition in my friend's eyes. She tried swatting at me, and her five-thousand-year-old strength was getting the better of me. She battered against the shields in my mind. One of her taloned nails caught my cheek. The aroma of blood bloomed around us, and in mid-swipe, recognition returned to her eyes. Everything about her froze. Her lip was caught on one of her fangs and her eyes burned red. Her face thinned out, the skin stretched over the bones. Then, Zhen blinked and took in the scene of the other vampires now getting back in place as the apparitions were losing their energy.

*You're on your own now, sweetie,* Edmund whispered, and then dissipated, the scent of cloves wafting behind him when he vanished.

*Thanks.*

Zhen and I got to our feet. The other vampires circled around us. Sean smiled a shit-eating grin with his fangs cutting into his lower lip.

"Well, it looks like we get two for the price of one. This will certainly bring the Dark Master now. He will grant me the power of cleansing my kind of their humanity, and we can be his true servants. Not this mixture of meat and perfection."

"Sean, I don't know where you get your fucked ideas, but you know that isn't going to happen. Do you really think your Dark Lord will hear you and make you into his all-powerful servant? A little pipsqueak like you. An insane vampire that, by all rights, should have been put down when you clawed out from your mother's womb. I don't think so!"

"Oh, our Master will hear us and grant us true Freedom. He who created us and first Fell is the Master of all. One day soon, his servants will rain terror on this Earth," Drago chimed in.

"Do you really think I'll let that happen? How could you, Drago? I gave you life!" Zhen stared at her child.

"You gave me a semblance of what I could be. I'm not even accepted by my own kind. At least he accepted me, tainted as I was. You were so easy to fall for it. You have forgotten what it is to be among your own kind. You have lost touch with the outside world. Poor Mistress, your death will mean great things to our people, and we can be free of the human filth that remains in our souls."

"I don't think so." Zhen changed quicker than I realized, becoming the demon vampire that shared her body. Her shoulders extended and large bat wings appeared from her blades. A long rat tail grew from the small of her back. Her knees buckled and cracked from the pressure of her change. Coarse, brown fur spouted all over her body. Her chin elongated, and her nose pushed forward, making room for the maw of sharp teeth. Her toes and fingers became black, bone-hard talons.

Zhen was a mixture of the gargoyles and the demonic forms we became. I had never seen her in full transformation, and I backed away. She glanced at me for a second and gave me a smile to remember, and then she pounced on her child, sending him into the already destroyed debris of the store behind her. Sean just looked at me and smiled. The other two wrestled and his children looked on, too afraid to get into the fray. The blood-scent pouring from the fight made them salivate.

"Her blood was sweet, but yours will be even better. You think I'm nothing, but you have no idea what I truly am. My father trained me well. When this is all over and I have your power, I'll take my bride and we'll have an eternity to help my father create the perfect race."

I just smiled sweetly, thinking plastic for a moment. "You know, Sean, that's a funny thing. Miranda was never yours to begin with. You see, Julien already tried to claim her. So you're a little

late on that, and your beloved father...well, you see, your daddy won't ever be able to congratulate you for what you're trying to accomplish."

"What are you talking about? How do you know his name?" The look of confusion was great.

"Well, that's a good question." I stepped forward and he stepped back. "Because, you see, I was the one who crushed his soul and sent it to Hell."

Sean's grin lessened. "That's not possible. I'd know if he were dead. You couldn't; you're a lying bitch. Our kind can't take souls. Only one High Being can. And he has rejected his heritage."

I smiled, letting myself fully change. My hands turned to talons, my shirt ripped when my feathered wings emerged. My shoes split when my toe talons came out, and my face lengthened, making room for my double set of canines. This was the extent of my demonic transformation, of what the demonic blood had done to me. I was mostly human-looking, but my eyes told that I was a breed apart from other vampires.

Sean saw this, and a momentary wave of fear raced through him. It was sweet and I licked my lips. I was getting hungry. A triumphant howl emerged from Zhen as she gorged on Drago. His ribcage was splayed open and his neck was at an odd angle. Sean's coven couldn't wait any longer. The aroma of blood consumed them, and their true natures devoured them. They jumped into the remains and, for a few moments, would be satisfied with that, but I had to get Mae out.

Sean looked on me with human features, except he had a black tongue and thinning lips with sharp teeth. Talons clicked together. When he met my eyes, his power hit mine with a force I hadn't expected. He was stronger than Julien, but in a different way. Julien had entranced me, getting me hot sexually before he started the onslaught of my soul.

But Sean's mind was a vacuum filled with images of horror and violence, nothing like I had seen before. The onslaught was unbearable. Darkness, hatred, fear, and agony ate at my soul. It was

worse than the cries of the dead. My wings folded around me, trying to erase the assault from my mind. I put up every block I could think of, but I fell to my knees screaming. Sean parted my wings and took my face in his hands, and his tongue caressed my neck.

For a moment, the void of nothingness threatened to take over my mind, to leave me dumbfounded. My bout with Julien over a year ago played over in my mind, but this time, Xavier wasn't here to help me, and I couldn't find the power of cold that raged within me. Sean's fangs slipped into my throat and he began to pull on my power and my blood.

Darkness and madness engulfed me. There were no stars, no nothing. It was a place that was even worse than the torture I had experienced when Azrael had left me to die in the sun. All my worst nightmares were playing in front of my eyes once again. Veronica was crumbling to ash over and over again in my hands. Devon was fucking me and claiming me for his own. I saw myself having a demonic half, amid carcasses, gorging on human blood, covered in it like Miranda had been just the other night. Azrael stood over me, denouncing me, and I would never glimpse his beauty again, just the skull exterior. All of these nightmares threatened to imprint upon my very soul and, for a second, I was ready to collapse and let myself grow cold under his touch.

Then, I remembered what I was.

I had survived my punishment with Michael. I had the wounds to prove it. My trial by fire had made me stronger, and a miracle had helped thrust my evolution into the being I was becoming. My true self had pushed the vampiric beast back when Devon tried to claim me for himself. This asshole's father had tried as well. I had even survived the sun with help from the Divine, I was sure. My body should have turned to ash, but it hadn't, and I remembered something taking me from the flames. It hadn't been Azrael.

I smiled when I heard the other vampires chanting, feeling their Master taking in my power. As that happened, something else was building. A vortex of power was gathering in the Tearoom.

Somewhere deep inside the rift, I felt intense heat and a being that used to be Divine. But whatever was about to come through would never have the chance. The cold in me raced over my soul. I embraced everything. I was causing the heated furnace inside me to flare to life. It overtook me, starting from the top of my head and settling over my heart. It felt like I was engulfed by the sun itself, but the heat didn't melt my flesh. It blasted out through my heart chakra and, instantly, Sean caught on fire and threw me off of him.

He went up and landed on the pyre. Seeing their master burning, the other vampires screamed, not wanting the same to happen to them, so they burst out the windows and the back balcony. Sean burned to ash. Zhen all but melted back to human form and wrapped herself with a discarded robe, backing away from the flames.

Suddenly, the sprinklers came to life, leaving nothing of Sean. Zhen untied Mae, who was starting to come around. My friend smiled. She led Mae to an intact chair in the Fire Room. I stared up at Edmund's picture and swore he winked at me. The sounds of fire engines were soon to follow. I heard sirens in the distance. Someone in the building had heard the ruckus and smelled the smoke.

I nodded at Zhen who was on her way out. An animal presence moved into the Tearoom, and I bristled, thinking it was one of Sean's children come back to get revenge, but when I turned, Xavier was standing in the doorway surveying the damage. It was going to be a bitch to clean up. I could only imagine the cost, but oh well. Money wasn't the issue.

Miranda followed. Xavier came over to me. Miranda saw the pyre, and then her eyes settled on the remains of Drago's body. I heard her draw in a breath. She clenched her fists and licked her lips. She forced herself to walk back into the lobby so she wouldn't be tempted. Her control was slipping.

"What happened?" Xavier asked, helping me up.

"That's exactly what I want to know," Mae chimed in. She looked a little pale and there were bruises on her wrists, but I didn't sense any vampire taint in her. She was good to go.

"I'll tell you about it later. Xavier, can you take Mae home?"

"No, I'm staying with you." He was really concerned. I smiled sadly and kissed him lightly on the lips. The look of surprise from him made it worth it.

"Brenna, this isn't the right time, but there's something I've wanted to talk to you about."

I read his heart. He still hadn't budged on what he'd felt before I left. He was relieved I was not a bunch of ashes or turned into some walking zombie. I was surprised to see the depth of his feelings for me and realized that was one reason he had been so hurt after I shut him out. "Xavier, I can't give you what you want. Please, take Mae and Miranda home before the cops get here, and we'll talk about it later. I promise." I touched the side of his cheek to let him know I was serious about chatting latter.

He nodded and led the others out through the balcony. I heard footsteps running up the stairs.

I spent the few hours explaining to the cops what had happened. They suggested it was the same guy who was killing in Salem. I told them I had come here to do some paperwork and found the sprinklers going off. The cops suggested I get an alarm system. I thanked them, and even though they didn't believe me, I used my powers to make them believe that neither my staff nor I had any idea what had happened. It took a lot of convincing and I was using only a little influence. I didn't want them to end up as slaves. I still hadn't forgotten about that little loose end.

Finally, they let me go and, still soaking wet, I walked down Tremont Street heading toward the Theatre District and the college I used to attend. I needed the normalness of life around me, or maybe I needed the normalness of something else. I needed to be reminded that there was still good in the world and that most of humanity knew nothing about the supernatural. I was tired from being drained from Sean, but not as bad as I had been with Julien.

At the Emerson Majestic Theater, something inside drew me near. I forced the side stage door open with my shoulder and went up to the third floor balcony. I hadn't been in here since I had graduated, which seemed ages ago, and now the whole place had been completely renovated back to the way it had been in the early twenties.

The ceiling had a large painting of cherubs and Greek gods. Gold leaf had been replaced on the pillars. Green carpet lined the aisles, and the seats had been replaced with red velvet. The stage curtain had been left open so I could see the show if there had been one. In the row next to me, there were ghosts sitting in the chairs in the front row. They turned around and looked at me with blank stares. All in slow motion, they put a single finger to their lips for me to shush and then turned back toward the stage. I looked down at the theater and wondered what play the spirits were watching. They had been caught in a fire that had raged through the place and they never left their seats.

Students would come up here at times and, even though all the seats were supposed to be in an upright position, the same three were always down. Lights flickered in the place and props were moved, or so the story went. But I'd never experienced it firsthand.

For me, the energy was quiet. It was as dead as they were, and that was the one thing that I needed to make me feel safe after what I had been through. So I closed my eyes and felt the connection between us. He was far off somewhere in the cosmos gathering souls along with the rest of his angelic helpers. I yearned to be held in his arms once again, to know I was safe and away from the bogeymen of the world, even though I might be one.

It was selfish to call him away from his duties, but sometimes the heart was the most selfish thing of all. For now, I dared whatever punishment might be rained down on me from Michael or any other angel because I needed him. It was beyond a physical need or even a spiritual one. I yearned for him because he and I were part of one another.

"Azrael," I whispered.

The thread between us vibrated and caught his attention. Opening my eyes, I knew he would come, so for now, I waited. After a few minutes, the atmosphere became heavy and then popped. A rift appeared, and a cloaked figure stepped through. His hand slid the hood off, the skull exterior melted and I took in his beauty.

"Hello," I whispered.

He smiled. The tension between us was remarkable. We kept our distance, still not knowing exactly how to do this, how it could be done, or if it should be done. I didn't know if our relationship was forbidden or not. It seemed that the Creator had accepted it. So I took the first step and touched my fingers to his cheek. It was smooth. His gaze melted as he looked down at me, but he still fought everything he had buried.

"Why did you summon me?"

"I missed you," I confessed. "And I needed to know I was alive. The things I saw in Sean's mind. It was my nightmare come true." I stared into his eyes and kissed him lightly on the lips. His eyes closed, and when they opened, they were swirling pools. I wanted to bury myself into his very being, but he was cold. He put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me away.

"Brenna, even though I desire this, I can't. It cannot be," he said after I pulled away.

"Azrael, I know why you're turning me away."

"I am not turning you away. You only think you know, but you do not. How could you know?" He leaned over the railing and stared at the deserted stage.

I pulled him from the metal banister. He switched his focus to the specters watching the nonexistent show. His power rose. He thought about taking them, thought about bringing them peace after they had been sitting there for over a century. He took a step toward the spirits, but I grabbed his wrist and he stopped. I kissed his open palm, letting him caress my cheek with his fingers. I traced my tongue over his inner wrist, smelling the blood. It drew to my hunger. He remembered what it had been like before when I



drank from him. My eyes were dark with hunger, and I showed him my fangs. I searched his face, but he didn't pull away.

At first, I nipped at the skin, and he flinched. Then, I bit down into the small veins to taste him and quench my thirst with it. He drew me to him, twining his fingers through my hair, and then he rested his chin on top of my head, enjoying the sensation as much as he would allow himself.

I drank until the hollow in me was sated; I took in the universe, knowing that his blood wasn't going to change me. The last time, it had rekindled everything that I had forgotten and now, the only thing it could do was bind us closer together.

When I let his wrist go, I peered into his eyes, which reflected that his desire for me was stronger than ever. I leaned in to kiss him and he crushed me, pressing into me, tasting the blood on my lips. After a moment of his desperate need, he shoved me away.

He turned and he was breathing heavily again, fighting what he was. I stepped closer and ran my hands over his back and through his wings, which felt like gossamer. I kept my head there. He leaned over one of the seats, mashing the velvet underneath his strong hands, trying to push back his hunger and his passion for me.

"Azrael, I know what you are. Zhen told me that you created her. I'm not afraid of what you push away, the burning hunger, the thirst that can drive you insane. Give in to what you feel and stop holding it back. If you deny what you are, then you miss out on life. I know because that's what I did. I turned off everything that I was and started becoming just like the things I hated. I loved killing. I wanted to twist humanity around my little finger. You were right to not help me. But I learned to be me, to exist, and to be alive again. It's the reason I realized I love you."

"Brenna, you do not know what you ask. You do not know what I turned away from, why I left Sharika the way I did. After I ascended, I still had my hunger and gave in to it. I remember it clearly. It was night and there was chaos all around. People were running and screaming, but the demon in me enjoyed it. I smiled to

myself. This was what I had needed, what would get me through. I looked down at the ground and saw the appendages of those that I had killed. It felt good. I was on my tenth victim. This was the perfect marriage. Bringing death to those that I chose, to love the power, to have the cosmos at my fingertips, and to have my hunger burning in me as well. The more I took, the more I wanted, the more I desired. It was insatiable. I was insatiable.

"My wings flapped around me and no one saw me coming. But they all felt my chill while I passed through the village, slicing my teeth into the innocent throats that awaited me. Their blood was warm and tangy. I drank it all in, wanting all of it without a second thought.

"I walked out of a hut and saw one of them coming at me. I grabbed the meat around his neck. The expression and fear was an aphrodisiac. It was wonderful, the power that flowed in my veins. My hand plunged into his chest, to grab his soul, but instead, I got his heart. I pulled it out and watched it beating, knowing that this man was not slotted to die. He was not one that I was supposed to take. It dawned on me as I glanced down at my hand and saw the blood dripping, being wasted in the sand. This was not my job, not what the One had bid me to do. I could never take blood, never let out my feelings, never let out my rage; it only meant I was one of them, and I wasn't. I was something else, something above them. You know what that kind of power can do to you. It can corrupt you if you're not careful. I'm not a vampire any longer, but you brought it all back and I almost Fell.

"That was why Michael attacked you, because you brought back the one thing that he had learned to hate. The spawns of Mastema, the half breeds that infected humanity. He wanted to kill you because he didn't see you worthy of the gift you had been given."

"Azrael, I don't care what Michael thinks of me. If I am like you, then he cannot touch me. But he is not the reason I called you. Do you trust me?"

He turned and looked at me quizzically. "Yes," he breathed.

I let my fingers harden to bone and dragged one across my wrist. Blood welled up and both of our eyes were on the wound. "Drink, my love. Forget about Michael. I know the power that you speak of because I feel it too, building inside of me, making me into something I don't quite understand. But if I deny my origins again, I won't come back from the brink and I'll be lost. You helped me see that. Now sate your hunger and quell what you've hidden for eons; remember what you truly are. It doesn't make you a demon or even a horrible being in the eyes of the Goddess. It is the reason why She chose you, because you could overcome the beast and be what you were meant to be."

His eyes widened, and he stared at my wrist. Tentatively, he reached for it. "You don't know what you're asking me to do."

I stepped forward. He retreated. "I know what you are, what you deny, because we are one in the same."

His tongue tasted my blood, and he knew I spoke the truth. Then, he changed.

His eyes became an abyss I had never seen before. He grabbed my shoulders and clamped down on them with a force I had never felt in him. But I was not afraid. I had seen worse. The skin on his face danced, and his fingers hardened into talons and sunk into my shoulders. Horns poked through his forehead, and I saw his wings unfurl and his mouth become a maw of sharpened teeth. His tongue was long, black and thin like that of all vampires. His lips thinned too.

"You have no idea what I've held back all these eons. No idea of the hunger and the power. The bloodlust burns insatiably in me. It'll burn through you more than Michael and his power. You have no idea what will be unleashed. Do you trust me now?" He gathered me up in his arms and pressed his lips against mine, snaking his tongue into my mouth, but careful not to draw blood. He held me, crushing me so I couldn't breathe, but I wasn't afraid. Finally, he pulled away, and I brushed my hair to one side and craned my neck so the vein was prominent.

I took one of his hands and placed it over my heart so he could feel it beating. I stared right into his eyes. "Drink."

Before I drew a breath, he scooped me up and descended. He tore into my throat. His lips worked on my neck, swiftly sucking in my blood. The hand over my heart clawed into my skin, trying to get inside. One of the ways to kill a vampire was to rip out its heart. I kept quiet and didn't wince when his claws broke through my ribcage and embraced my heart. He held it while it beat, giving in to the passion of the bloodlust.

Even as his caress killed me, I felt no fear because I would die in the arms of the one I loved. His talons began to squash the organ as he started drawing it out. I grew cold. The power in me that was part of his world overtook me, filling my being and gathering in my throat. From there, I ran on instinct.

"Azrael," I whispered.

He stopped digging into my throat. Blood and flesh clung to his teeth from his feeding. He looked on me as if he didn't know me.

"Kiss me."

He smiled and enfolded my heart even more. I caught his chin and held him back. My breath caught in my throat. I pulled his lips down to mine slowly, and he fought against me at first, but then he understood that I wasn't fighting him; I just wanted to feel his lips against mine.

My hand draped around his neck. His talons pierced the thing that kept me alive. In that instant, my power flooded into his. My thoughts instinctively tangled around him, getting lost in his vast mind that spanned the universe. I saw all the stars, planets, meteors. I lost myself in his soul. My power washed over him, but I wasn't afraid. I'd had worse brushes with death. And, for now, as my heart stopped, I closed my eyes forever in his arms.

## Chapter Thirty-One

*My name is Azrael.*

Her blood raced through my system, sating my hunger. I lost myself to it and to the passion of her heartbeat against my fingertips. Her pulse was wonderful against my tongue. Her life splashed down my throat. There was no fear, just her desire for me to give in to what I had denied for so long.

But when her lips touched mine and the vast power of the universe flooded into me, I knew that I had gone too far. My talons had crushed her heart, mortally wounding her. Her soul fluttered against mine. She wasn't afraid to die because she trusted me, because she believed I wouldn't hurt her, that I couldn't hurt her. But she didn't know the extent of what I had suppressed.

I opened my eyes and held her. She looked peaceful with her head thrown back. I cradled her to my chest so she could feel my heart beating, all because she had given me her life. For the first time in eons, tears fell from my cheeks and onto her face. I realized her mind was still wrapped around mine, her essence tied to her body. She wasn't dead, because I was Death, and I wouldn't claim her soul. No seraphim hovered on the brink to collect her either, because they knew not to disturb me.

I wouldn't bring her into the beyond when she had given up everything because she trusted me. All because I had failed her, but I had warned her. I was stronger than she, older and wiser, but she had been right. It had been wrong to deny what I was for so long. I had forgotten the pure ecstasy blood brings, but hers meant more because she had given it freely. For that, I would love her always, even though I would never release my guard and never set my eyes on her again. It was the only thing I could do to save her life. She deserved one that could love her forever and not break her heart.

I was Death. I had the power to give back life or take it. So I placed my hand over her wound and poured my energy into her,

rebuilding her heart and ribcage. There would be scars for her, as it was a fatal injury among vampires. But she was so much more than that and not yet my equal.

Slowly, her mind found its way back to herself and I missed the closeness of her touch, but I would forever cherish it. I would take her memory into eternity. I closed my eyes, stepping into an in-between dimension, and then appeared at her house.

I set her on the couch the way I had done a year ago when she lingered between life and death, and kissed her lightly on the lips. She stirred and moaned. A stray piece of hair blemished the perfection of her face, and I moved it aside. My eyes were caught on her, but I sensed another in the room, the wolf that shared the house with her. He cared for her and would make certain that nothing would happen to my beloved.

“Let one who can love you embrace you. Forgive me my sins for now and eternity. Goodbye, my love.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

*My name is Brenna.*

As Azrael left, the connection between us fell away. There was no way that I could find him. From now on, one of his minions would take the souls of my victims. He had done this out of guilt and love because he had hurt me. But that wasn't the case at all. I had known what he was on the inside.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and sat up. His last message whispered in my brain. I noticed Xavier staring at me and sensed the love in his heart the wolf had for me. But I could never return what he felt.

"Are you all right?" Xavier asked, stepping into the room.

Grief washed over me. Xavier took me into his arms and held me, trying to comfort my broken and tender heart. He let me cry. I thought my heart could never be healed. Xavier smelled of musk and pine. I sniveled on his shoulder. The werewolf stroked my hair, and I felt him kiss my neck. Azrael's comment raced in my mind. The angel knew that I loved him, but was allowing me to be with another.

Xavier was warm, and I found myself drawn to him. I gazed up and wiped my eyes, realizing my soul was lonely, bone weary. I hesitated for a moment and returned his kiss. The wolf was surprised and, after he got over the initial shock, he scooped me up and carried me into his bedroom. I had never been up there, even though he had lived with me for over a year now.

It was decorated with pictures of trees, snow-filled landscapes, and a mural painted on the wall of wolves looking up at a full moon. It was dark and faintly smelled of pine needles. He placed me on the bed and undressed. His chest had patches of graying hair here and there. His body was flawless. I kissed his chest, admiring the hardness of his muscles and the beauty of his form. He tasted salty, smelled almost human. His eyes were evergreen,

evidencing the wolf mixing with his nature. Warm blood ran underneath his soft flesh. Slowly, he stripped me, admiring my body. His hands were calloused and not soft as Azrael's, but I didn't mind. His mouth was warm, and I needed him. Needed him to hold me.

His tongue slipped between my breasts. His hands lightly touched my nipples. They hardened. Deft fingers touched the five starlike punctures that now marred my once perfect complexion, given to me by the man that I loved because he had taken my life. They were still tender, but the sensations of his tongue brought me over the edge. His fingers traced over my stomach and touched my clit. One thumb found the hard node. He began to work it in a circle.

I clung to him even more. I felt my fingers hardening slightly, and my fangs came down a little. The urge to bite overwhelmed me. His neck was enticing, but I held myself back and only kissed him lightly, planting the kisses along his jugular while my hand slipped to his dick. It was hard, firm, and hot as he moaned against my chest.

Hot hands slid over every vertebra, sending shivers through my skin. I bit my tongue, taking my own blood, yearning to take his. I moaned when his tongue replaced his thumb and he grabbed my ass. I bucked against him and threw my head back. My fingers slid over his shoulders, cutting small threads in his flesh. He glanced at me when the pain registered. He had four canines extended. The smell of forest and musk was stronger; the wolf was there.

"Why do you hold back?" he growled. I wasn't sure who was asking.

He came back up and kissed me. His teeth pressed against my tongue. He pushed me back on the bed and straddled me. He bulked up a little bit. His back arched. I heard popping, and he landed with his hands on the sides of my head, his face inches from mine.

"Are you afraid of me?"



"No."

"Then why hold back your nature? That is what you do. Treat my kind like dogs. Keep us on leashes. Why don't you want me as a pet to fuck? My human side might love you, but that doesn't mean I should trust you."

The wolf was talking, and I was surprised it had a personality. I thought his kind were more animal than human. His finger slid inside my pussy, and I could feel the claws of his nails instead of his regular fingernails. He had me trapped. One finger became two. His thumb kept me bucking against him.

"You're not my pet. I'm sorry if I ever treated you like that. I value your friendship. You care for Miranda. God, please. If you want to torture me, you've figured it out. Please—"

The wolf smiled. Maybe this was Xavier's way of testing me to see if I was being true or not. He didn't want to get hurt. I understood that. I shut my eyes. His manipulations were making me come. I willed my nature back, returning to a normal human appearance. I rose up, wrapped my hands around his neck, pulled him into me and kissed him, never closing my eyes as shock overtook his features.

"Just as you are. That's all. Equals. I swear."

He said nothing else, but replaced his fingers with his dick and made me cry out. "Xavier. Please."

My legs wrapped around his back, his face only inches from mine. His eyes were still pine green. I threw my head back, and my fangs grew without me willing them to; they just did because I was turned on. My blood-hunger consumed me from Xavier pumping into me. My fists balled in his sheets, cutting down through to the mattress below, catching on the springs. I bit my tongue when orgasms hit me and rocked my brain.

"Brenna," Xavier whispered.

My legs wrapped around him tighter. I wanted him driving deep inside of me until he was hitting the very end of my womb. God, I wanted his blood.

"Bite me. Do it now."

I didn't have to be told twice, and I struck at the top of his shoulder. My fangs slipped in and I tasted the scent of the wild, of running underneath the moon and singing to the stars. It was primal, nothing like Azrael's blood, which was cold. This was hot and filled with spice.

My talons raked across his back, and his claws went across mine. He bit into my shoulder and held on while we rocked together, two different species that weren't supposed to blend, but we had. And it was good.

We both let go, and his hot blood stopped scorching my throat. We lay on the bed side by side, his arms wrapped around me. I watched the breeze play with one of his curtains. The warmth of his body close to mine was something I hadn't had since Veronica had lain with me. I missed that closeness, but even with the thought of her, her presence flared to life in my mind.

She was recuperating from restoring Bridgette. There was no judgment as I telegraphed what I had done with Xavier. She understood my need to be with someone. Of course, I wanted the werewolf's place to be taken by an angel, but even he had given me permission to be with another. I didn't know if I was ready for what had just happened between Xavier and me. His whole heart had been in it, and now as he nipped my shoulder; I sensed that his wolfen counterpart accepted me as well because he knew I wasn't just using him.

"I've wanted this for a long time," Xavier whispered in my ear. His hands cupped my tits. Our legs were entwined. I wrapped my hands round his, trying to pull him closer to me. "Even the wolf accepted you. I wasn't sure he would with how you treated us before."

"I know," I whispered. I turned over and faced him and saw the love for me in his eyes, but I couldn't return that. "Xavier—" How could I tell him everything I was thinking? He trusted me, and that was what I had wanted in the end, to mend all the rifts I had caused during the past year. Now I had, and I didn't want to rip another chasm between us.

“Brenna, it’s okay. I know you don’t feel the same way. I know how you feel about him. But I can hope, can’t I? It can be a casual thing, and I know you need someone. If you deny yourself the luxury of being with another, then you will fall into the abyss. I don’t want to let you go down that road again.”

I leaned in and kissed him. “That wouldn’t be fair to you, so I can’t do that. Not anymore. When I was human, it didn’t seem to matter who I fucked. Every few nights there was someone else because I didn’t want anyone to discover the secret that I was not the illusionary vampire I appeared to be. Now I don’t know what to do. I know he gave me permission, but I need time. This was very nice. I just need some space to sort it all out. Give me that for a little while, and I promise I won’t be a bitch this time. Please understand that.”

He nodded and gave me a half-hearted smile. There was so much more that he wanted to say, but he knew that it was better not to say anything at all.

I ran my fingers through his hair and kissed him quickly, then got out from under the sheets and picked up my clothes. I didn’t know what would happen between us; I had my lover’s permission to be in the arms of another. But that wasn’t what I desired. I knew what I wanted, but I could never have it again.

*If only, if only.* The most used words in the human language. And man, was I using them a lot lately.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

*My name is Brenna.*

Two weeks passed and repairs began on the Tearoom. We put in a new floor, redid all the shelves, bought some new merchandise, and repainted the mural of Saturn. Heck, I even bought new chairs and swore never to have them again upholstered with a cow pattern. I sighed. So much to do with all the time in the world.

All the psychics pitched in to help, but we would be closed for another month. I scheduled phone readings for anyone that wanted them and even gave them my house number, and when the heavy construction work was done, we could do readings in the two other rooms. This place had seen a lot over the years, and it seemed to be seeing more with me owning it.

Tonight, I had promised Miranda and Mira that I would finish their transformation. I had asked Zhen for help, and she volunteered to supply dinner. I could only imagine what that meant, and of course, Xavier wanted to be there too.

He was another problem. The night we had spent together was wonderful and now, every time he looked at me, the desire in his eyes was evident. His mind was full of it. There was much he wanted to explore with me because he had never made love to a vampire before. I didn't complain. He was concerned about Miranda and had voiced it, but at this point, it was best for Miranda as much as I hated the whole idea. Never did I think I'd be creating a vampire child. Granted, Miranda was never human to begin with, and I wasn't sure how my blood would affect the two beings sharing her human body.

I headed home.

It was still early in the night. The scent of snow lingered in the air, but it was only early fall and it could have been all the smog. The stars were silent in the night, and the walk home proved to be

enjoyable. I got back into the life of the city, feeling the heartbeat of it. The trains moved under my feet. Zhen kept her word and brought dinner, and she would take care of the bodies.

The ancient vampire waited for me on the steps. She was helping me because I didn't know how much blood Miranda needed. The half vampire sat patiently. Xavier and Mira, it seemed, had come to a truce so there were no more insults.

I walked in and gave her a huge hug. "You ready?"

She nodded.

Zhen immediately wove herself lightly around my thoughts without giving me warning. I gave her a dirty look, and she beamed at me. I motioned Miranda over and met her eyes. My fingers traced the lines of her cheek, and I brought her lips to mine. I kissed her lightly, gently probing her mouth with my tongue and was startled to be met with her baby fangs. I pulled away. Mira sighed. She was going to get some of what she wanted. But I was surprised when they'd agreed to live together.

My lips worked over the tender flesh of her throat. I was learning more about the vampire race every day. Who knew that there were mass murderers among them that could gain power through life force and blood and that wanted to call on the first demon that created them? I guess there were fucked up ones even among their own kind.

Miranda clasped her hands around my neck when I pressed my fangs to her skin. She jumped. I waited a moment for her to calm down, and then I plunged and began to drink, taking in the warmth of her blood. It was different than human because it was heavier, laden with the vampire blood from Julien from a year ago and from centuries ago, as Mira was that old, and the taint that was Sean. His blood was fainter.

I caught images of Mira being trapped in Miranda and discovering Julien was still alive. She hated me a smidge because I had killed him, but over these many months, she had learned to respect me because she had seen what others of her race could do.

Miranda's blood was enticing, and Zhen monitored me as Miranda's heart slowed.

Zhen tugged on my thoughts, signaling me when it was time to stop. I looked up at the ancient vampire in a semi-daze and almost forgot where I was. The abandonment of feeding almost had me, and I had to be careful. So I bit into my wrist and held it over Miranda's mouth. It was Mira who latched on. She drank swallow after swallow the way I had done with Azrael when he'd brought me back from Michael's infection.

The wounds around my heart ached when my mind lingered on him. It would be so easy to let the young vampire take my blood and have her hands slip into my flesh and take my heart. But that wouldn't get me anywhere. There was only one way to get to Azrael, and death was not one of them. My heartbeat grew sketchy until Zhen pulled on my mind again, bringing me back to reality. I pulled the newborn creature away from my wrist and looked to see what had been born.

Mira looked up at me through gray eyes, but I sensed Miranda in there as well. Both were equal. I just hoped that my blood had wiped out the damage done by Sean. I didn't want either of them to turn into a raging lunatic. It would hurt worse to kill Miranda because she was my friend. But I would if it came down to that. This time, I knew how to take her soul and bring her peace of mind that way.

As I settled back into reality, I realized I felt their heartbeat in the back of my mind. We all knew I wasn't their true Master, but I could teach them, and that seemed to be enough for the both of them.

"I'm hungry," they whispered, but it was Miranda who spoke.

I wondered what it was like for them, sharing the same body, living together, but Zhen did it. Viktor had done it. His memories were still part of me, so in that way, he wasn't dead. Which reminded me.

"Zhen, about Nathan?"

"What about him?" She glanced at me and then back at Miranda, who was feasting on one of the mortals who sat quietly in the corner under Zhen's power.

"When are you going to give him his freedom? He's ready."

"He can have it whenever he wishes. He just has to ask for it. I'm not a slave driver. When they ask for their freedom, I give it to them. I did with Drago and look where it got me."

"Drago was a different story. I could have told you he was an asshole from the beginning. Nathan's genuine, and I doubt he could hurt a cow. He thinks you'll destroy him if he puts his fangs in the wrong human. Why not tell him you release him?"

Zhen sighed. "Brenna, if I do that, then he'll get nowhere in life. He'll remain a whelp. There is more than domination in our society. When he's ready, he'll come to me, but before then, he stays as he is. Why? Do you want him to play with? He's a good fuck."

I saw Xavier glance over at me. "No, I don't want to sleep with him. I'm just saying."

"Well, for now, shut up and eat. You'll need the strength, even if you're not exactly one of us, as you claim to be. Miss high and mighty. Now what's going on with you and the wolf?"

I glared at her before looking at the remaining human that she had been holding in thrall. I noticed that it was my wannabe slave.

*Where in the hell did you find him?*

*What? I thought that you might want him. You know, get him out of your life for good. Besides, he's been hanging around the club looking for you, and he's really starting to annoy the piss out of me. Finish him off, and we can call it even.*

Zhen released her hold on him and he came to life. A sudden smile appeared on his face when he realized that I was there. Before I could do anything, he pressed his lips into mine and ground his hips against my leg. His tongue worked in between my lips, and I drew him into my arms. He was warm and smelled good. My hands found his ass and I squeezed. My brain thought of wonderful ways to torture him, fuck him, tie him to the bed,

cutting little slices from him just to hear him moan and experience the pleasure of the pain mixed with his agony. He was such a good little pet.

“Please, Mistress. I’ve been so bad. Please let me please you; let me fuck you,” he whispered. His lips found my neck, and he nipped while his hands started undoing my jeans. His fingers found my clit and he began to work me. I stifled a moan, and I heard a faint growl emanating from Xavier. The werewolf had been silent through the whole exchange, observing.

Zhen watched with amusement. Miranda was too busy digging into the other body. At the moment I glanced over, I noticed an angel bending over and taking the soul of her dinner. The being sensed my presence and nodded at me.

*Hello, sister,* the angel chimed. Its voice was monotone, but it seemed more girlish than male. I swallowed my voice, amazed that it had acknowledged me. *Azrael sends his greetings and says that we can heal all wounds, not just those of the flesh.* Then, it was gone, just like all angels.

His words sunk in. My junkie was caressing my breasts and trying his best to please me. Azrael was telling me that I could heal all the damage I had done even with this tasty morsel. I pulled myself together and pushed my junkie away, placing my hand on his chest. He gave me a dumb dog look.

I moved my mind into his, finding the place that I had twisted in his mind to only obey me. My angelic power engulfed me, freezing me to the core. I pictured his mind healing; silver and gold were merging around his thoughts, and they were whole once again. As I did, I leaned and broke the skin, taking my fill of him to seal the connection.

While I drank, my palm sunk into his chest and, instead of touching his heart, I touched his soul. The jolt of it made me pull away. I couldn’t finish him. Not because I didn’t want to, but rather because the whole scene reminded me too much of Azrael and what he had said. I had the power to take souls and bring terror to those that I wished. It was too much.



I backed away and ran out of the door, taking in large gulps of cool air. I hardly noticed Zhen ushering out my would-be slave. Xavier hugged Miranda now that everything had come full circle for them. I turned away, wondering how my love was doing. But the only answer I got was a ghostly caress from another love that I had already lost. She sent a sense of longing that she, too, wanted me to be happy.

Veronica approved of Xavier, but I didn't push the fact. She was still recovering from feeding Bridgette, who was out hunting and dealing with the loss of her own children. My sister took it hard and nearly creamed me because I had killed Sean, but she knew it was for the best. Now, part of the attic had become her home.

The night stretched endlessly. I touched the mortal mind that I had healed, and there was no memory of his obsession with me. Zhen felt the brush and sent her own tether of comfort. I smiled back and then turned my back on the ancient vampire. It was good that I didn't ruin his life in the mix of it all. If I could at least know that I had healed him; that made me happy.

The bushes rustled in the wind. Somewhere close by, someone was making popcorn, judging by the buttery and burnt aroma on the breeze. I bet they were nestled on a couch with a small fire going, watching a movie. Envy sliced through me. I would never have that. Not with a demon that had found her wings or an angel that knew the hunger of the damned. Tears threatened to overtake me, but I already knew they would get me nowhere.

After a moment of drowning in self pity, hands enclosed my waist, pulling me into a warm body. The wolf kissed my neck and I melted into him. Veronica faded out and Xavier's body heat tried to warm my chilled flesh. I searched the stars one last time, wondering where angels went when their hearts were breaking.

## Epilogue

*My name is Brenna.*

Six months after the disaster at the Tearoom, Miranda was doing well. Mira had been good to her word, and they both shared the same body. They were calmer than they had been, and sometimes she mentioned hearing the stars singing and the universe pressing down around her. It was interesting to see that my blood had some effect on her. Her immunity to the sun was high, as well as her mental strength. Mira was no longer insane, and that was wonderful. Both of them had been healed with their transformation.

Xavier and I were working things out, mostly keeping our distance. Still, there were times I sought him out in the cold night and we made love. He didn't press me for more, and that was good. Honestly, I couldn't have handled it. My heart still belonged to someone else. Even now, as I looked up at the distant stars, nothing would answer me. I missed my angelic Death.

"Veronica," I whispered.

She was there. *You rang.*

"How is he?"

Her touch was light on my cheek as she wiped away my tears. *He's well.*

I smiled, picturing his face. "That's good. I miss him so much."

*Call to him, Brenna. No one can resist you. I never could.*

"But—"

*Just try.*

I stared up at the twinkling jewels, feeling their cold expanse in my mind; even the moon seemed barren. I gathered everything I had, my love and loss, all of what I was, digging into my soul, and then sent it out, expecting the same response that I had gotten these past months.

"Azrael."

The blast left me breathless. And I waited, but there was nothing. Nothing was what I expected, reflecting the blank rune I had drawn months ago that predicted the same thing before I had gone off to find Veronica, before I realized I loved him. It reminded me that was what awaited my heart. So I sank down to the ground and brought my knees up to my chest.

The wind caught my hair and blew it into my face. I listened to the splashing river and got lost in the night. It tried to give me what little comfort it could. I must have drifted for a while, and then I stood up, realizing that he wasn't coming; he would never appear again. I would have to accept that. That was my lot. Even if I entered his domain, he wouldn't greet me there, either.

I closed my eyes and wrapped my wings around myself, getting ready to fly back home, when I heard something behind me.

"Going so soon?"

I turned and saw something I hadn't thought possible. Maybe it was my eyes playing tricks on me, but I took a chance and threw myself into his arms. He was no illusion. His wings wrapped around me while he held me. His palm settled over my chest, feeling the wounds he had inflicted months ago.

"I did not think you wished my company after what I did to you," he whispered.

I gazed up into his eyes and brought his lips down to mine. But he pulled away before I could even taste him. He sensed the sadness in my heart. He wasn't going to stay, and this was probably going to be the last time I would see him.

"Azrael, I don't blame you for what happened. I let it happen as much as you did. The feel of your lips on my throat and the caress of your hand around my heart, it was wonderful, part of what you are, a part that I wanted to see. It was my fault for making you lose control. I can't stand it if you go away again. Please don't go away again."

I nestled into his arms. His fingers moved the hair from my neck, and then his lips traced along my throat. I moaned. He

started to dig into my skin, biting, nipping, and then his fangs trailed along my jugular, his desire rising.

He pushed me away, but I would not let him get away that easily. I took his face in my hands, but he fought me. Using my strength, I pulled him back. His eyes were dilated with hunger. I saw the fear also; he thought he might hurt me again.

"You won't hurt me."

"That is what you said before and look what happened. I cannot risk it. That is why I stayed away, so this wouldn't happen. I don't want your soul to slip from my grasp."

"I trust you." I ran my hand over his tight T-shirt, feeling the hardness of his chest, and then over his neck, feeling the vein there, and then I did what he had done, and kissed the side of his throat slowly, relishing the flavor of him, smoky and clean. My lips were hot against his cooled skin. My canines extended. But I pulled away and stared into his eyes. "Only if you allow me."

He pressed his lips against mine, hungering for me. I worked down his throat and then plunged my fangs in and drank, savoring the taste of everything that he was. But I only supped for a few moments and then felt his fangs pierce my throat. He fed slower than before, not with hunger, just with need.

I withdrew and nestled my head against his chest and listened to his slow, even heartbeat. It was good to hear, and I sighed, huddled against his warmth, taking in his scent of jasmine and frankincense. This was what I had been craving for months, the ecstasy of his lips pulling the blood from me. Of having his wings to protect me from the monsters of the world. Of just having his love forever.

Finally, he stopped and lifted my head. I had been lulled half to sleep by the rhythm of his heart. The blood loss didn't affect me because my blood was weighed down with his. He smiled and kissed me lightly. It was good to taste my blood on his lips. That was the way it should be.

"I have to go," he whispered.

I nodded, hearing the cries of those trapped on all different levels against my skin, in my mind and ears. There were hundreds of thousands waiting to be released from their torment; he had spent a lot of time with me.

"You hear them, don't you?"

I nodded, realizing that he must have noticed the change.

He smiled. "Thank you."

I shook my head and put my fingers to his lips, silencing him. Nothing had to be said.

"I am what I am, Brenna. Heaven does not permit me to have love. Michael watches me closely, and there are factions gathering. I cannot be here at times when you truly need me. That is why there is the other. I have no ill will if you prefer the wolf over me. I desperately wish to be with you, but—"

"I know," I answered. I saw everything I yearned for in his eyes, the promise of nights to come, of endless time I would spend in his arms, and that was enough for now. Just to know that he wanted it too healed my heart.

His sharp nails brushed against my cheek and caught a stray tear. He smiled sadly at me. His eyes were filled with falling stars, and the sense of loss I got from him was overwhelming, but there was also unfathomed love that he had for me. His dark hair caught in the breeze. The palm of his hand was soft against my skin. His lips met mine again and with one long kiss, he was gone and the night was empty once more.

"I love you," I whispered to the darkness that had contained him, and in return, I felt the lightest touch of wings on my face, a returned caress in the long night.

## About the Author

Crymsyn Hart is a bestselling author of Erotic Romance. Her worlds are filled with luscious vampires, gorgeous gods, quirky witches, and everything else that goes bump in the night. Crymsyn worked as a psychic for many years in Boston while attending Emerson College. She graduated with a BFA in Writing, Literature, & Publishing. When she gets bored, she sneaks away to local cemeteries and coffee shops to find peace and quiet. Crymsyn shares her life with a small zoo, two playful puppies and her hubby Mark. If you come after dark, you're more than likely to find her snuggled up with a gory horror movie, or a bloody vampire movie. Crymsyn has a collection of Living Dead Dolls and five bookshelves overflowing with books. Of course there's always room for more.

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