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Dedication

For Lisa Alexander-Griffin

Table of Contents

Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Chapter Twelve Chapter Thirteen Chapter Fourteen Chapter Fifteen About the Author

Chapter One

the chain attached to the metal bed post reaches to the other three corners of the room. It's heavy, and the wide metal band around my wrist chafes from its weight. I long stretches of time waiting...waiting. With no windows and the one locked door, I have the seclusion I love—need.

Naked, I stretch out on the double bed, fingers gripping the duvet, and grit my teeth to stave off the desire to feed. Though I only fed two nights ago, my body begs for more, for the man who keeps me locked down here and allows me out into the darkness to assuage my craving. Pain rips through my gut, and I curl into a ball, the chain links clinking against one another as they pool on the floor. I shiver and think of why I am here. Someone is out there. Someone who threatens my existence. He has searched for me over the years, leaving subtle messages that only I can interpret, and I've kept running, refusing to face him. Face what I have done. Hugging myself, eyes closed, I wait

for the tenderness to subside and focus on images of Lawrence.

He's so different from me in appearance. The summer weather has gifted him with deep crow's feet around his eyes, but they add to his charm, giving him the look that he's lived a little, seen a bit of life. His wide neck holds the vein I crave yet don't touch, and the hollow beneath his Adam's apple is perfect for swirling my tongue into. Resting together in bed, we appear polar opposites. My white-blond hair to his near-black. His bronzed skin to my snow-white. My turquoise-tinted eyes to his brown. His well-toned physique to my wiry frame. But it works, this attraction between us, both of us finding something in the other that stirs the loins and grips the heart.

What is he doing now? I have no sense of time, purposely averting my gaze from the wall clock, as it heightens my longing for him. I don't know when he will come down those basement steps and unlock the door. Anticipation for a feed and our bodies joining gives me something to look forward to. Since being in this room I've discovered it's all I want after years of wandering...searching. And I'm safe here.

I met Lawrence in a club, his body catching my attention straight away, but when he turned my way, his eyes lured me in, arresting

me. Arresting. Lawrence does a lot of that. Funny how we got along so well once he'd approached me and introduced himself, like we'd known one another for years. And the easy way we began seeing each other regularly just happened—no forcing it from either of us. Love gripped us quickly, and I knew then that I'd have to tell him why I couldn't meet him in Starbucks during his lunch break, why I couldn't meet him at eight a.m. for a jog in the park before he started his work day.

He took it surprisingly well, although at first his eyes clouded and a frown made his forehead ugly. I sat on his couch, crosslegged, hands in the diamond space between my legs. I stared at the opposite wall, afraid to look at him further, worried that my admission would change things. He took my hand, rubbed the back with this thumb, and rested his head on my shoulder. The sigh he gave, God, I remember thinking he would tell me to go to hell, but he didn't. We sat in silence, me fretting, him digesting the news, until fingers of sunlight reached for me through the chink in the curtains.

Lawrence lifted his head, and I turned mine to look at him, to read my fate. Worry suffused his face—his dark eyebrows knitted, light lines beside his mouth stark against that tanned

skin—and I knew I would be safe with him. That he wouldn't let me go.

"The sun," he said, jerking his head toward the window. "Do you...?"

I cupped his cheek, my legs cramping from being in the same position for so long, and smiled. "I should stay away from it, yes, but in here it isn't so bad. If I go outside, it hurts my eyes, burns my skin. I lose energy if I'm out there too long." I shrugged.

"What will you do now? How will I get you home?" He'd glanced at the window as if the streaks of light would sear him too. "You could stay here."

I've never been home since.

I asked for this room—the basement—and mentioned the chain, the locked door, and the reasons for them. He understood immediately. Of course he did, knowing I wanted to be the one he mastered in the bedroom, knowing I only wanted him.

"How... Do you really have to drink blood?" he'd asked. "Because I'll give it, you know."

He looked almost shy at that moment, maybe embarrassed by his roundabout admission that he needed me as much as I needed him. Love? I know so.

I nodded. "But I only feed from animals. If I have to take from a human, I've found a way to make them forget what I've done, and I

leave something behind so they come to no harm. So they don't turn."

He gripped my hand, squeezed it. "Would it, uh, would it work for me, too, if I let you, you know...?"

"I wouldn't want to risk it."

If love could literally show on a face, it did on his. I'd describe it as the lines on his brow softening, the skin smooth, and the corners of his eyes lifting as he smiled. His grip on my hand tightened, and he said "Thank you" as though I'd given him the moon and the stars. I didn't know it at the time, but none of his other lovers had treated him with respect and care. No one had given a shit about his feelings and what he wanted.

Much later, as we lay in bed, he told me of his past and admitted his desire for dominance hid the fact that if he had control he couldn't get hurt. *I'd* hurt for him then, promised I'd be what he needed, and his protestations that I didn't have to fell on deaf ears.

"I want to," I said, admitting without voicing it that I required someone like him, someone to care for me and tell me what to do. Years of living a solitary life does that to a body, and having only yourself to rely on is a lonely existence.

In turn, I told him about myself. How I'd lived for more years than I cared to admit. How I'd adapted to fit in.

"I was going to say," he said, playing with my hair, "that you seem modern. Your speech; your mannerisms are like mine."

I laughed, really laughed, and explained how I picked up the speech patterns, the 'words of the day' so that I remained undetected. How I moved from town to town every decade or so to prevent people wondering why the hell I didn't grow old.

"Cole, when will you be moving on again?"

He'd tried to sound nonchalant but failed, gave himself away with the sharp intake of breath before he'd asked the question, by the tight hold on my hair, his quick release of it when I winced.

"I can manage a few more years here," I'd said, running my hand down his chest.

"And then you will leave me." A statement not a question.

"And then you will come with me...if you want to."

His kiss told me that he wanted to, God how he wanted to, and we moved on to talking of our future, our routine. He would go to work during the day—sometimes during the night if a call came in—and I'd go out in the darkness to feed once he released me. I'd sup from

animals, only choosing humans as a last resort. He proved his love for me, harbouring me, aiding me to live.

At first, my staying in the basement, chained and unable to get out, was a lifestyle choice. I pass the time until he arrives home, wondering if he'll come to me straight away or make me wait. His footsteps above heightens my desire, and he makes sure he doesn't form a pattern. I don't know when he'll come down and visit me. Never know if one night he won't visit at all. Those times, hunger rages through me—hunger for blood and hunger for him—and when he finally appears, I don't know whether to beg him to let me feed or beg him to touch me.

These days, I stay in this room for my safety. Now, Lawrence only allows me to feed when he is present and can bring me back home immediately after.

Someone like me is out there, roaming the streets at night.

Someone who doesn't know when to stop feeding.

Someone who has found out where I am.

Chapter Two

nce again night brought a new death. The body had been discarded on scrubland bordering the river, the lower extremities at odd angles, as though she'd been positioned that way. As though the killer was trying to make a point. What point, Detective Lawrence wasn't quite sure, but as the investigation progressed, he'd figure it out. He panned his flashlight up her body. Her arms rested beside her torso, straight, palms down. Nothing unusual about that, but her legs... He swallowed and closed his eyes for a few seconds, took in a deep breath to quell the nausea threatening to engulf him. Eyes open again, he stared at her legs, their position normal from hip to knees, peeking out of her short black suit skirt. But from the knee down... The killer had broken her bones so the right looked like a J, the left an L. Two puncture wounds marred her neck, the blood that had dribbled from them congealed, a deep claret colour. Right now, her blonde hair matted with blackened blood, bone and grey matter entwined in her tresses, Lawrence

shook his head at the senselessness of her death.

What the fuck do these people get out of doing this? What the hell goes through their minds?

He puffed out a breath and watched the white cloud dissipate into the night sky. Pin-prick stars littered the black expanse, and a chill sped down his spine at the thought of the woman's soul hovering above him, at her non-comprehension that she had actually died. He shoved one hand in his coat pocket and gave the body his attention once more, lighting her up with his flashlight beam.

Long, dried, spiky grass fanned around her like a visible aura. She stared sightlessly at the sky, thick sewing needles protruding from her pupils, and her lips...shit, her lips were drawn back in an agonised grimace, teeth bared like a dog about to bite. Had the killer broken her legs while she lived?

Christ, I hope not. I fucking hope not.

Grass rustling overrode the low murmur of uniformed officers behind him, and Lawrence turned on the asphalt path separating the two expanses of scrubland to see who approached. He nodded at his work partner, Rudy Collins, who ambled toward him, red baseball cap on his curly, strawberry-blond hair, black coat collar up concealing his ears. His russet-

coloured beard needed tidying, but who could blame the man for not paying attention to his appearance when for the third night in a row they'd been called out to find something...like this.

"Sorry I'm late, buddy," Rudy said. "Got the call when, uh, when I was just finishing something." He winked.

Lawrence held up his hand. "Too much information, man. You ready for this?" He jerked his head toward the three-foot-high circle of grass concealing the body.

"Christ Almighty, what a dumb question. No, I'm not ready, never will be, but hey, it's my job." He shrugged. "Where's the body?"

Lawrence turned toward it. "Here. She's been placed in the long grass, possibly so she wasn't found this quickly, but you gotta love people walking their dogs. Some guy was taking his Jack Russell out about an hour ago and the dog found her. Lucky the guy pulled the dog away before it did any further damage to the body. I sent the poor bastard home, said we'd send someone round to question him. He was white as a fucking sheet and looked about ready to puke."

Rudy stepped to Lawrence's side and looked down. "Awrgh, shit. Shit."

Lawrence inhaled deeply. "I know. Same guy doing it."

"Damn right it's the same guy. Those damn fucking needles in the eyes again, legs bent like that. Jesus." Rudy closed his eyes and raised his face to the sky. His jaw muscles spasmed, and his nostrils flared as air breezed through them. He opened his eyes and stared at the body again. "What the fuck is wrong with these people?"

"I asked myself the same thing." Lawrence scrubbed his chin and inhaled the scent of this rural setting—grass, the stagnant river water, damp earth. "I had a thought earlier. Those legs being positioned like the previous two bodies. They look like a J and an L. Reckon it's worth running those initials through the database?"

Rudy nodded. "Wouldn't hurt to cover all bases. Might throw something up." He shook his head. "It's those needles that are bugging me. What the hell do they mean?"

Lawrence shrugged. "No idea, but they might not mean anything. Might just be something the killer does, just because."

"Fucking sicko, pretending to be a damn vampire." Rudy laughed. "Like they even exist."

Lawrence winced. Cole had been convinced the killer was a vampire, one who hated what he'd become. One who killed those he fed from so they didn't turn like he had. Someone from

Cole's past. Rudy's sicko term hurt, but he'd keep the reason why to himself. No one needed to know he had a vampire at home, one he loved and who wasn't a sicko.

He sighed. "It's gonna be a lengthy night. It won't be long before the forensic techs arrive, and once the body's released, I'd bet the chief'll want this one autopsied before morning. Shit, Sally's got her work cut out for her at the moment."

Rudy turned from the body and observed the ground, scuffing his boot over the grass. "Her choice to be an ME. No one forced her—just like no one forced us to do what we do, though at times like this I wish I'd stayed on the fucking streets in uniform." He waved his arm. "When you arrived, was the grass trampled this much where he'd dragged her here or where they'd walked?"

"No. He'd obviously come along the path here, and the weird thing is, he must have thrown her from the path to where she is now. No trampled grass around her at all if you discount what the dog walker and I have made. The guy who found her said the grass from this path to her body stood straight up like it does everywhere else along here."

"Shit." Rudy peered toward the river, its ebony flow fast, moonbeams highlighting the ripples. "The body's positioned too far from the

river's edge to have been dumped via boat." He glanced at Lawrence. "And no one can drop a body from the air without being seen. Not positioning her legs the way he has as well." He frowned and fondled his beard. "This doesn't make sense."

"No." Lawrence looked at his watch, thinking of Cole waiting for him as long as he had. "These things never do."

* * * *

Sally Armstrong stood with her scissors poised midair. "Are you guys ready?" she asked Lawrence and Rudy.

Lawrence nodded, shuffled his white-bootied feet, and stared at the clothed body on the table awaiting yet another violation. Her legs had been straightened, and her arms rested at her sides, her long fingernails pristine. She hadn't fought her killer, then. Though not usual practise for detectives to attend an autopsy, the chief had asked them to stand in on the ones from this case.

Sally cut the black suit sleeves from cuff to collar and removed the garment. A cream blouse followed, as did a bra, the skirt, hosiery, and panties. Her shoes had been missing at the scene, and the woman now lay naked beneath the bright lighting, her worries

over invasion of privacy long gone. Rudy cleared his throat and linked his hands behind his back, feet planted a foot apart. A mask covered his mouth and nose—he still couldn't come to grips with the stench.

Sally's assistant, Bart Goodwin, placed the clothes on a table out of the way, clicked on a small voice recorder, and returned to the table. The ME inspected the outer body, taking samples of hair and skin scrapings, and once done, Bart cleaned the body.

Sally then made the Y incision, giving commentary as she did so. She selected a pair of cutters from her tray, snipped the ribs, and reached inside the opened cavity to remove the chest organs, handing them to Bart, who put them in separate bowls on the table behind him ready for weighing.

"Normal, healthy female as far as I can see," Sally said, pulling out yards of intestine. "I'd say she led a pretty healthy life—I'll check the stomach contents in a little while."

With the torso empty, Sally examined the arms and legs. At the neck, she leaned closer. "Puncture wounds like the other victims. Seems we have ourselves someone who sees himself as a vampire." She looked at Lawrence. "I read about that craze in a magazine, you know." She picked up a magnifying glass and peered through it. "Swift

bite. No tears around the entrance wound. The victim either complied with the bite or was unconscious. Slight bruising. Blood had started congealing before death." She searched through the hair, the grey matter and bone indicative of head trauma. Her fingertips lightly smoothed over the scalp, stopping at a point just above the left ear. She parted the hair. "Head trauma above left ear. Appears to have been made with a convex, dense instrument, possibly metal tubing. Heavy. Maybe four inches wide."

She nodded to Bart, who measured the wound. He jotted the figures on a form attached to a clipboard.

Sally removed the needles from the eyes. "Thick sewing needles inserted into the pupils. Pushed in so they were half submerged."

She popped them inside a small baggy that Bart held open. He sealed it, laid it on the table behind him, and picked up a circular saw. He glanced at Sally and, at her nod began the task of removing the skull top. The sound always churned Lawrence's stomach, and he clamped his mouth shut and swallowed. Sally peeled back the forehead skin and removed the brain, handing it to Bart.

Lawrence turned away and walked out into the corridor, breathing deeply.

Rudy followed, pulling off his mask. "Damn near makes me sick."

"Know what you mean." Lawrence rubbed his eyes then removed his booties. "No need for us to go back in there. Sally's all but finished, and we can safely say it's the same killer. Besides, I want my bed. A few hours sleep and we'll be back at the station."

Rudy yawned. "Yeah."

They left the morgue and headed for their cars, dawn's light pushing away the darkness.

"See you about two?" Rudy asked.

"Yeah. We'll have a meeting."

Rudy ambled off, arm raised in goodbye, mumbling, "Damn fucking sicko."

Chapter Three Cole

A awrence didn't come home at his usual time. I haven't glanced at the clock, and though my sense of time is skewed, I know he's been gone longer than usual.

Darkness shrouds me, and I lean to my right and fumble for the lamp switch. I click it and blink at the brightness until my eyes adjust. Thirsty for no liquid other than blood, I rub my cramping stomach and stare at the ceiling. The house creaks, telling me night has arrived, the wooden rafters shrinking in the lowering temperature. The water heater in the far left corner burbles—it's after midnight, then. I sigh and listen to the clock ticking, the soft swoosh as the furnace in the kitchen above bursts to life. I rest my hands beneath my head, and the chain tinkles. My wrist burns from the manacle, the chain's weight making it dig into my skin. I pull a section of chain up onto the bed, the relief on my wrist instant.

Perhaps Lawrence has paperwork to do. I imagine him at his desk, a stark strip light

overhead illuminating the papers he works on, the glare hurting his gritty eyes. He left me early last night, didn't visit before he went to work this morning, and the house has been silent ever since. My need for him is greater than the desire to feed now. I close my eyes and wish him here, wish he'd come down those steps and unlock the door. I've been unsettled since this new investigation started, because I've seen carnage like he's described before, in another place, another time. No one would believe him if he said a real vampire had committed those crimes, and I don't blame them.

Before I was turned, I'd heard the myths about my kind, had scoffed at the idea vampires existed. Though Mother's tales had entranced me when I was small, as I grew they sounded like nothing but fairy tales made up to entertain.

Mother, ah, how I'd loved her soft, lilting voice, her gentle hugs. It's been so long since I last saw her that I can hardly remember her features, though some things remain in my mind. Her long dark hair, usually hanging in a braid down her back, her slender fingers, the sweet scent of a lavender perfume she made herself. She said I'd been born with a caul and that I was destined for great things, but Father

eyed me oddly, always wary of me, keeping his distance throughout my childhood.

"That caul ye keeps in that there slip of linen will bring badness, you mark my words," he'd said one night as we sat around the fire, Mother spinning her yarns of myth and folklore. His wide bulk filled the comfy chair, and his dark curly hair rested on his shoulders, sorely in need of a cut. "That boy," he nodded at me without looking my way, cheeks ruddy from the fire, "be destined for other, terrible things. I still say it was him who killed the baby. Not two days old in her crib and she died in her sleep. Reckon he did it. Reckon he put his grubby little hand over my daughter's face and smothered the life out of her. Jealous, that's what he was. Jealous of a tiny being like that."

He shook his head, and tears stung my eyes. I'd adored my baby sister. Took it hard when Mother ran around the house screaming that her precious baby had died. Took it hard when that tiny baby was put in the hard ground, her scent no longer in my nose like it was when I snuggled her close and loved her more than anything in the world. Her arrival completed our family, but her death had ensured Father hated me.

Mother, darning socks, darned faster, her red cheeks not from the blaze beside her. She

tapped her foot in agitation, and it set her rocker into motion. "Tsk. That's just senseless talk. He didn't do no such thing. Was an act of God, so it was. Our boy will be someone worth being when he grows, you'll see."

She smiled down at me, her eyes full of love, full of apologies for what Father had said, but I didn't blame her—she hadn't spoken those hurtful words or refused to look at me while they were uttered.

I sat on the rag rug at Mother's feet, maybe six years old at the time, and chose to believe her. Why would I want to believe the words of a man who viewed me as someone to be afraid of? Someone who tolerated me while acting as though I'd sprout the devil's horns or dive upon him while he slept, sucking the life from him? Someone who thought I'd killed my sister?

"And what of the frequent illnesses of late, eh, Helena?" Father queried, his finger pointing toward the ceiling. "Seems every day there's a new body upset with ailments, bites on their wrists, their necks. Reckon these myths you tell us have some truth. We need to watch the boy there." He nodded at me again, eyes averted. "Cos there's them folks that have been ill after being bitten by God knows what."

Mother looked up, her needle held midair, and stared at him. "And haven't those poorly

people got better with a pinch of salt in a linen pouch hanging about their necks, William?"

Father grumbled, his words indecipherable.

"That's what I thought," Mother said. "So if the boy be bitten, we know what to do."

Yet the night I was bitten I had grown into a man who no longer lived with my parents, and I knew, knew the truth of those myths as blood was sucked from me and I slipped into unconsciousness. Before blackness claimed me, I thought: Why didn't I heed Mother's warnings about staring into the eyes of those who walk during the night?

I woke in my bed, neck stiff and sore-not just at the fang's entry site, but at the base of my skull too. Had I fallen and struck my head, jarred my neck? Body weak, I was unable to leave my bed on foot. Getting out proved an ordeal that first morning after, and I rolled onto the wooden floorboards, crawling on hands and knees across the room. Back then, my home consisted of one room in a large house: a bedroom/living room/kitchen. I lived converted basement and couldn't remember how I'd arrived home, or whether the man who had turned me took me there. Pain wracked my bones, my muscles, and my head pounded, my tongue so dry that glass upon glass of water did nothing to slake my thirst

No one called round—not the landlord, my boss from my job at the forge, or my parents, which didn't surprise me, for I'd left on bad terms, Father turning me out and telling Mother she mustn't speak to me again. For days I suffered alone, forgetting the salt-andlinen pouch might stop the turn. Day three saw me too weak to use the chamber pot, and I lay in piss and shit, a stinking, disgusting mess. As the days wore on, I got worse not better, until around a week had passed. I woke one morning right as rain, energised and feeling more alive than I had before I'd been bitten. Power pulsed through me, pushing me to seek something I had yet to fathom, and I soaked in the tin tub before dressing and leaving my room for the foyer, swinging the main front door wide.

Ah, how that sun burned. Hotter than the forge, hotter than the orange glow of a horseshoe in the making, and I stumbled backward, landing on my ass in the doorway, eyes watering. I blinked, seeing only white light, and scrabbled blindly for the door, slamming it closed. I sat leaning against it, and snippets of that night came back to me: the man's approach; his coal-black eyes; that stare holding me captive; his lazy smile.

We stood outside the forge, me having locked up for the night, him appearing from nowhere, his footsteps too quiet to hear.

"Come," he'd said, bony hand extended toward me, blond, shoulder-length hair jostling in the light summer breeze.

I walked forward, our gazes locked, my head filled with my mother's words: Yea'll know a vampire by his eyes, son.

My body overrode my screaming mind, and I took his hand, allowed him to lead me down the side of the forge and into an alley behind, his white shirt bright in the darkness. He pushed me against a stone wall, and I held my breath, anticipating my first kiss, giddy with excitement that this man knew, *knew* that I preferred men. Butterflies took flight in my stomach, and I lifted my face to him, the man so much taller than I, and he brushed his lips along my jaw to my ear.

I closed my eyes, heart hammering, arms useless at my sides as though pinned there by unseen hands. The man's breath tickled my earlobe, my neck, and my legs grew leaden, my feet too heavy to shift. I longed to raise my arms and touch him, run my fingertips over his shirted chest, but a strong force prevented it. Was this what love felt like? Did it make your body heavy, your mind cloudy?

He bit me then, yet I felt no pain from his fangs, no pain as he sucked my blood. Mother's words returned, her vampire tales swirling through my mind, and I understood I would become one of them, one of the feared, the hated, the immortal.

Once sated, he stood back, hands on my shoulders propping me up, and regarded me with hooded eyes. "I have given you eternal life, boy. If it becomes too much of a burden, you had better hope another vampire lurks nearby. Only they can end your suffering. Only they can end your immortality."

I stood from my position against the door and opened my eyes, rushed to my room, the light dim compared to outside. I hung heavy blankets at the window and lit a lamp, sighed...and smiled at finding the first untruth of those myths. I could breathe. I stood still and listened to my pulse thud through my veins and smiled again at my heart thumping. But the eyes...my mother hadn't been wrong about those. Nor the salt in the linen pouch.

I smile now at the recollection. Would that salt have saved me? I'll never know.

How it had frightened me back then, discovering a world where sounds and sights were sharper. And the first time I moved quickly, with such speed it brought on disorientation, amazed me. But a hunger

unlike any other dictated me, ruled my waking moments, and I gave in out of the necessity to make the gnawing pains throughout my body go away.

The first feed felt wrong yet so right. I chose my childhood friend, Aran, who had spent many an evening listening to Mother's tales with me. We'd watch her darn and listen to her magical words, clutching one another and squealing with morbid delight. If she spouted frightening stories, Aran would run home afterward, glancing about him in case a demon or vampire sidled out of the darkness, and wave at me once he reached his house down the street, letting me know he was safe.

My human side fought against the drinking of blood—it wasn't right, wasn't moral—but this new side, this side of me that I had become pushed all thoughts of correct behaviour away.

The night of my first feed, Aran walked with his head down, arms swinging beside him. On that muggy summer evening, he strode through the knee-high grass of the verge beside the ale house. His medium frame moved with ease, the man obviously at one with himself, and I watched him from behind a stand of trees across the way. The ale house stood on the outskirts of a village housing no more than three thousand, and Aran drank

there nightly, him with no wife and children to support, no one to spend his time with or his wages on. In his early twenties at the time, he appealed to me with his wide shoulders and tapered waist, dark-brown hair resting on his shoulders, the curl of it just asking for my fingers to touch. I think I fell in love with him as we grew up, but his penchant for kissing girls and lifting their skirts made it clear he wasn't the same as me.

I strolled across the track between us, and he looked up at my approach, nodded and smiled.

"Evening," I said, falling into step beside him, my stomach griping at his closeness, at the imminent meal. Anticipation rushed through me. Would I get it right? Was it something that came naturally? Would my eyes hold him captive like my turner's held mine?

"Evening. Not been working at the forge, have you," he said, glancing at me then lowering his head again.

"No." I didn't know what else to say.

"Went down there two days past. Your boss is mighty upset with you."

"He is?"

"Yes, said you sent some man there to tell him you be ill." He jerked his head back to the ale house. "He's been grumbling about it in

there all night. Reckons you left him with so much work he's behind. Wouldn't let him see you out and about if I were you."

Nothing mattered except the feed.

"Oh aye?" I said.

Aran laughed, and I looked ahead. We approached the lane leading to the village proper and crossed the main track. Hedges stood one side, trees the other, creating an eerie setting for what I was about to do. Excitement weakened my knees, and the pain in my stomach grew so sharp I had to force myself not to grab him and rip into his neck. I didn't like that feeling, and fighting the urge took a lot of energy and concentration.

We reached the lane's end, and it was time for him to go one way, me the other.

"Well," he said. "I be off then."

He moved to walk away, and I grasped his arm, turned him back around to face me. Stared at him. For what seemed a long while.

"What?" he asked.

"l..."

Anger at being so damn hungry and my eyes not working like my turner's filled me from my toes to my hair follicles, and I bunched my fists, struggling so hard not to pin him down and bite. He cocked his head, and his eyes glassed over, his mouth slack. I led him back into the lane, pulling him into the

tree border, and rested him against an oak trunk. Pliant, he remained there, arms by his sides, blinking, blinking...

My new, heightened senses took over, and I bit into his neck, sucking down the warmth he yielded. My belly's pain eased as it filled. Euphoria swept through me, and I floated in a sea of it, the waters warm, taking me where I needed to be. Aran's legs gave way, yanking me out of my funk, and I withdrew my fangs and stepped back. He slumped to the ground, eyes wide, lips bared over his perfect white teeth, spittle dribbling down his chin.

Panic slammed into me, stealing my breath and weakening my knees. The balmy air started drying the blood around my mouth, the skin growing tight, and I cuffed my lips. Another few steps back saw me on the lane path, and I stared at Aran, his form seemingly lifeless. A wide gash marred his left cheek where a jagged twig had slashed his skin on his way down to the ground, and blood seeped from it onto a gnarled tree root.

Glancing left and right, I couldn't move my legs to flee. My mind screamed *murderer!* and I willed myself to run, get the hell away. A horse and carriage trundled past on the main track, going in the direction of the ale house, and the thought of someone seeing me standing in that lane spurred me into running.

I left the alley and arrived home in a blur, the journey taking no more than a few seconds. Nauseated, I staggered to my door and slid the key in the lock, leaning on the doorjamb to regain my equilibrium. It didn't return, and I stumbled into my room, slamming the door behind me.

For the rest of that night I sat awake, waiting, convinced the lawmen would pound on my door and take me away. Every sound gave me the jitters, and in the hope that sleep would claim me, I crawled into bed and closed my eyes.

And remembered the salt in linen.

Chapter Four

Lawrence sat in his car and leaned his head back. Rudy meant well, but shit, his comment still stung. Shaking his head, he exhaled through pursed lips and sifted through the new information: three deaths, all with those broken legs, all with the needles, and all with bites to the neck. The more he thought about it, the more he believed Cole. Someone was out there, unable to stop himself killing after his feeds. How long had this person been a vampire? Days? A couple of weeks? And who had turned him? Certainly not Cole, who fed from animals rather than risk turning another human.

Unease slipped through him, and the same question that bugged him from time to time sauntered into his mind: Had Cole fed from a human without telling him? No, he wouldn't believe that. Their relationship was honest and open, and Cole would have said. Wouldn't he?

He slammed the heel of his hand on the steering wheel and winced, rubbing his palm with his other thumb. The need for control prodded him, and he gunned the engine and drove out of the morgue car park. He may not

have any command over the killer, but he damn well had command at home. Cole waited for him, and too many hours had passed since he'd seen him last.

On the highway, the city spread out to his right, a vast expanse of cream-coloured dots in the near-morning light, and red taillights on one or two cars winked in the distance ahead. He laughed, low and throaty. Who the hell would choose to be out at this time of the morning? His turn-off was a few metres away, and he indicated, veering across the lanes ready to exit.

An image of the dead woman entered his mind, and he blinked, shook his head to get rid of it. It wouldn't go. All he kept seeing was her broken legs. The position meant something, but what the fuck it was he couldn't fathom. Frustrated, he ground his teeth and left the highway, taking the road toward home. Rudy would be thinking the same things, and tomorrow they'd thrash out what they'd learned, working to find the elusive puzzle piece that would bring it all together.

"No damn evidence left behind so far either," he murmured, biting his lower lip.

Mired in his thoughts, he drove on automatic pilot, wondering how the body had been placed without disturbing the surrounding grass. Even if the guy—and he was sure it was

a guy—owned a helicopter, there was *no way* he could drop the body and position the legs while manning the chopper. Besides, someone would have seen it, wondered what it was doing hovering so low. Like Rudy had said, it just didn't make sense.

Frustrated, he drove on, feeling helpless like he had in the past, when his lovers had treated him like shit and he'd stayed with them despite their cruel words and conduct. Any attention was better than none. And he'd mistaken their attentions for a twisted form of affection. something sorely lacking in his life. As with this investigation, he'd seen no way out of those relationships, the dead ends meeting him at every turn. No answers presented themselves, and he'd allowed his lovers to use him until they grew bored. He hadn't had the guts to end it, didn't want to face their anger if he did. He'd been emotionally weak, thrusting himself at other men, older men, in the hopes they'd take care of him. Love him.

"That's what a master does, isn't it?" he'd asked Lee, the lover before Cole. "Love their submissives."

Lee had sat up in bed and laughed, reached to the night stand and grabbed his glass, tossing whiskey down his throat. Low lamplight brightened the salt-white streaks in his black hair and made the wrinkles beside his eyes

more prominent. "A master does what he fucking likes, Lawrence, remember that." He thumped the glass down and glared at him, chest rising and falling in anger. "Do you know, I'm weary of you. Weary of your immaturity, your whining, your questions. Your neediness." He sighed and waved one hand. "Get out."

Lawrence had quickly sat up, stunned. "What?" His heart thrummed hard, and once again he felt the ache of being cast aside, alone.

"I said get out. Don't want to see you anymore." Lee turned away, arms over his bare chest, knees drawn up, creating a tent out of the duvet.

Lawrence had dressed, tears flowing freely, sobs barking from his mouth. Lee didn't speak nor turn his way, and as Lawrence stood by the door, car keys in hand, he said, "You're saying I can't come back?"

Lee's sigh gusted out and, eyes still averted, he snapped, "See? This is what I'm talking about. You're needy. You don't get the message, and being a cop, I'd have thought you'd recognise certain signs." He harrumphed. "I've been going off you for a while anyway." He looked toward the door then, hard gaze meeting Lawrence's. "Didn't you notice my cock wasn't as hard tonight?"

Devastated, Lawrence left the bedroom, barrelled down the stairs and out of the house. In his car, he revved the engine and sped out of the drive, intent on ramming into a tree or racing off of a bridge. Emotions roiled through him—despair, loneliness, of not being good enough—and he broke the highway speed limit, his destination the cliff overlooking the bay. Once there, he stopped a few metres from the edge and shut off the engine.

Staring out at the water calmed Moonlight cast a wide strip of illumination over the peaks and swells, and he sifted through his past. His childhood had been spent with a surly aunt who made it clear at every opportunity he wasn't welcome in her house. She'd taken him in out of a sense of duty when his parents had died in the fire that had ripped through their home. Lawrence had been on a school camping trip and would never forget sitting on a bench in the dining hall, children either side and him, and watching the campsite opposite owner approach a teacher. His nine-year-old heart had picked up speed as the teacher approached him with tears in her eyes and led him out to an office.

He'd sat, as instructed, on an orange, hard plastic chair in front of a wide cherry wood desk, and the teacher—blonde, blue-eyed, around forty...he couldn't remember her

name—hunkered down beside him and told him his fate. Blood seemed to drain from his body and pool in his legs, his feet, and he'd jumped up from the chair, heart ticking quicker than the seconds on the wall clock, arms thrashing the air, his hair, his face.

The screech he had loosed frightened him, for a moment eclipsing the fear pervading his mind, and he'd crumpled to the floor, his cheek against the itchy cheap carpet, fists and feet flailing.

Her hand stroking his back hadn't soothed him, her crooning hadn't eased his pain as she pulled him onto her lap and cradled him like a baby, and there his neediness took root and grew like an unruly weed.

Lawrence sighed and cursed himself for allowing the trip down memory lane. It didn't matter now, and those relationships hadn't all been a waste of time. He'd learned valuable lessons from those men, and when his relationship with Lee broke up, he'd vowed never to be submissive again. Abstaining from sex, he'd visited clubs as a way to spend the lonely evenings, and he'd spied Cole before Cole spied him.

He smiled at the memory, at how easily they had formed a bond. Though adopting the role of master, Lawrence remained unsure

deep inside, his confidence only coming once it became clear Cole wasn't like the others.

He loved him, plain and simple, and, putting a little more pressure on the gas pedal, he sped for home.

Chapter Five Cole

the front door creaks and closes, and the security chain tinkles as it's put in place. My heart hammers wildly. Lawrence is home. I imagine I can smell him already, that spicy, hint-of-the-outdoors scent overlaying natural aroma. I sit up on the bed and face the door, the need to see him urgent. I want to know all about his day and night, what's been going on. I want to feel him against me, his body heat and arms bringing comfort. I want to leave the house, go out into the night, my lover beside me, and feed. So many needs slamming into me all at once leaves me giddy, and my stomach gripes again, in longing for him and my meal.

Hurried footsteps and sounds overhead tell me the story of what he's doing: putting his jacket in the cupboard, removing his boots and letting them clonk to the floor, his belt hitting the first-floor bathroom tiles, the metallic scrape of the buckle. Water hits the shower tray, a constant, even patter as Lawrence

waits for the right temperature. Then the patters change, sluices of fluid slapping the tray, the screen, his body under the stream, water funnelling off his elbows while he washes his hair.

I get off the bed and walk to my own shower in the corner to the left of the door. If I'm quick, I can wash and be back on the bed for when he comes down the stairs. For when I greet him with a smile and longing in my eyes. Switching on the water, I mirror Lawrence's actions—wait for the water to heat and step inside. Warmth covers me—the heat of the water and the heat of desire—and I soap my burgeoning cock, my aching bollocks.

God, I need him.

Out of the shower now, I towel myself dry and brush my teeth. I've lain too long in bed, drifting in and out of sleep, and my tongue had grown furry. I sit on the bed and adopt my former position, listening for more sounds. Water drips from the showerhead in the basement; the water boiler gurgles, makes sounds like a kettle as it heats; and Lawrence's footsteps...they're coming down the basement steps.

My stomach flips over, and adrenaline pulses through me. What mood will he be in? Will he want to rest beside me and talk? Will

he be tired and fall asleep, his head against my chest? Will he...?

The key turns in the lock, and the door swings inward. Light from the stairwell renders him a silhouette, a black, naked shape that I long to run to. A shape that makes me whole. He steps inside, closing the door, and its soft click heightens my senses. His dark, damp hair—styled with hasty fingers, I guess—stands up in all directions, giving him a vulnerable look that I want to kiss away, touch away, changing him from needy to powerful. His eyes sparkle with dominance, though, and I smile, knowing what is to come.

He walks toward me, cock stirring to life, muscle-defined arms by his sides. Stopping in front of me, he twines his fingers in my hair and pulls my face to his cock. I look up at him then reach for his waist, my fingertips smoothing down his lower back to his ass cleft. His cock twitches, hardens further, its tip pointing at me, begging for my tongue. I lean forward and take the whole of him, revel in the smooth skin against my tongue, the roof of my mouth. Down, up, down the shaft, I pull hard on the upstroke, my lips tight around him. His grip on my hair tightens, and he looses a strangled groan.

"Missed you," he whispers.

I want to stand, want to press myself against him, have his arms about me, his hands on my back, but...permission hasn't been granted. I mouth-fuck his cock, hands roaming his ass cheeks, fingertips skimming up his cleft and back down. Love for him surges inside me, builds from my toes, reaching my chest where it spreads out, infusing my limbs. I transfer that love to my rhythm and knead his ass, a whimper dying in my throat. His hips jerk forward, and he caresses my scalp, fingers sensual, light touches that ignite my loins. My cock throbs, and my asshole puckers, the need to come threatening.

"Ah...Cole," he whispers, his voice hoarse, the sound giving permission for butterflies to take flight in my belly. "Love you so much..."

His hands trace my nape, moving over my shoulders to my chin, and he puts pressure there, lifting my face so the suction on his cock disappears. I release him, look up, our gazes meeting, my mouth feeling hollow. He cups my cheeks and kneels before me, rests his forehead against mine. His minty breath fans my face, and he closes his eyes, crushing my cheek to his chest. Lawrence's heartbeat pounds in my ear, a quick throb I could drown in, a sound I wish I could hear always when he is away. I embrace him, and him me, our hands smoothing one another's backs, a pause

to reflect, him telling me in his unique way that today has been difficult, that he is glad to be home. With me.

He raises my chin again, presses his lips to mine, and all the hours of waiting and thinking disappear, swirling away as though he has never been gone. Our tongues and hands explore, breaths quickening, tiny whimpers catching in my throat, tears stinging my eyes. This all-encompassing love we share amazes me, and I want to climb inside him, be with him forever, become one with him, our souls merging.

Lawrence breaks the kiss—I'm left wanting, needing-then he gently presses me to the bed. The chain tinkles, and this time I welcome the manacle burning my wrist, its presence evidence of our ranking. I lie along the length of the bed, and he stands, stares down at me, his gaze taking in my wiry frame, my sinewy legs. He breathes deeply and exhales with eyes closed then opens them, fixing his stare on my face. Millions of invisible words clutter the air between us, words we can't express—the words we need are stronger, more heartfelt that any in existence. My throat swells, and I want to tell him...tell him he is my life, that I am nothing without him, but I remain silent. Silent until he commands that I speak. Pliant

until he commands that I move. At his mercy for the rest of his life.

He straddles me, knees either side of my waist, and those hands of his meet my chest, warm palms skating over my flesh. He lowers, and his cock rests against mine, his ass settling on my upper thighs. I will my hips not to rise, tell myself to remain passive despite the urge to push my cock to his and show him my need. A smile tweaks his lips as he caresses my chest, his fingertips skimming my hardened nipples, their touch sending desire down to my cock. Our gazes lock, and I keep my arms by my sides, hands itching to run up and down his thighs, the muscles bunched from his position. He begins a slow gyration, circling his pelvis, his bollocks whispering against mine. God, my cock aches, and the vein pulses, pre-cum pearling on the tip and dripping.

Lawrence stops then, his whole body still for two heartbeats before he rises and stands beside the bed. The air lands on my skin where his body had touched. I shiver from the loss of contact and anticipation of what is to come.

"Turn over," he says, his command low yet one I can't ignore.

I switch position and rest my cheek on the pillow, my cock pressed into the mattress, legs apart. He stoops and, reaching beneath the

bed, pulls out the cat-o-nine-tails. His hand grips the end, the fingertips of his other playing with the soft leather strands. Excitement pools in my groin, nudging my cock harder, and another shiver flickers up and down my spine. He stands with feet apart, still fondling the leather, and the smell of those individual wisps wafts over me. I swallow, hold back a smile, and lay my palms either side of my head.

The device arcs through the air, and I lose sight of it just before it bites my ass. The sting—Christ, how it stings—burgeons, and tingles shimmy down the back of my thighs. I scrunch my toes and await the next strike. It comes swiftly—hard—and I bite my lower lip, raise my ass to show him I want more. He gives and I take, over and over until the pain of each lash turns to pleasure. My ass numbs, the skin itching from the heat, and those tendrils strike in quick succession, too many times to count. I grip the pillow, the fibres a soft ball, and raise my ass some more, shifting so I kneel. Cold air snakes inside my ass cleft a second before the lash skims my puckered hole, and I stifle a gasp. Eyes closed, I drown in the sensations his strikes bring, wanting him to hit me harder, faster, until I cry out from the pleasure-pain of it all.

As always, he reads my mind, the pair of us so in tune words are unnecessary. The pain borders on unbearable, yet I open my eyes and move my head a little to see him better. I want to watch his face as he brings that implement down. I want to see his cock bob and take in the tightening of his stomach muscles as his body works through the movements. His stuttered breaths fill the air, puffing out of him in a whoosh each time the leather meets my ass, and his whispered "Ah, fuck!" nearly has me coming.

He flings the cat-o-nine-tails down, the handle clattering on the tiled floor, and climbs on the bed. Knees beside my calves, he massages my ass, and the pain, God, that pain rips through me, the sweat from his palms almost unbearable on my wrecked skin. His cock tip nudges my cleft, and I resist the need to push back, to have it pressing against my hole. His hands leave me, only to crack back down, one on each ass globe. The cry I had kept in my throat escapes, and I grip the pillow tighter. Again his palms meet my tender ass, and his fingers knead, thumbs tracing up and down my crack.

His dominance surpasses anything he has performed before. Christ, how I love it. The pain. The submission. Him.

Chapter Six

Cole's skin—so hot—burned Lawrence's palms. He circled his lover's hole with one thumb and reached up to the wall shelf beside the bed. His fingers searched out the tube and, clasping it, he unscrewed the lid. Squeezing a drizzle of lube mid-cleft, he massaged the fluid up and down the valley with one thumb while squirting a blob on his cock. One hand tending to his lover, the other smoothed the lube over his shaft, its coldness dissipating as he fondled. He throbbed, the need for release urgent, and pumped himself fast and hard, almost coming.

Cole's position and submission teased him, goaded him to take what he wanted without another thought, giving his lover what he so obviously needed. But no, he would test himself, see how long it took before desire ran so rampant he couldn't stand it any longer. He took his hand off his cock and placed it on the small of Cole's back.

He pushed his thumb inside that beautiful hole, the channel tight and unforgiving. Slowly, he moved it in and out, applying pressure on the down stroke. Cole's soft breaths told of him

coming close, pants that matched Lawrence's, yet he played some more. Knuckles white, his lover's grip on the pillow tightened. Fuck, how he wanted to plunge inside him, to ride him hard and fast, fingers digging into that waist, the skin so white, so pure. Control slipping, he removed his thumb and nestled his cock between Cole's ass cheeks. The lube aided his movements, and he rode the valley, the wetness so desirable, so damn erotic. He lost himself in the sensations, skin on skin, the friction of Cole's ass cheeks against his cock tip as he drew it down and up, the air cold when he reached the top. Sweat on his palm had his hand slipping from the base of Cole's spine to his hot ass, and he pressed down. His lover released a pained groan, and Lawrence rubbed his hand up Cole's spine, returning to the reddened ass cheek and back to the sweatsoaked skin again and again.

A hoarse grunt left him, joined Cole's, and Lawrence gripped his cock and positioned it at the hole, rubbing his tip in circular movements. His vampire breathed heavily, eyes shut, and released the pillow, fingers star-shaped. The chain jangled, the sound prompting a strong rush of desire to shoot through Lawrence. He pushed against Cole, and the primed sheath opened, sucked his cock-head inside. Pressure from the tight ring grew, and to stave off

coming, he slapped his hands against Cole's ass cheeks—hard. Pressing his fingers into the flesh, he raised his hands and slapped again, again, again. Cole's ass jutted backward, taking the whole of Lawrence inside. Unable to hold back, he withdrew and thrust, withdrew and thrust, palms striking his man's ass with each jerk.

"Touch yourself," he commanded, excitement building, swarming through him until he thought he'd lose his breath.

Cole snaked one hand down, and Lawrence leaned to the side to watch him clasp his engorged cock, to see how he pleasured himself. Lawrence upped the speed of his thrusts, and Cole's hand worked slowly, as though he wanted to make the moment last. Too far gone to wait now, Lawrence slapped Cole's outer thighs and clutched them, fucking his ass with forceful strokes. His lover's hand moved faster, and Lawrence looked from there to Cole's face, scrunched up in the effort not to come until told.

"Are you close?" he asked. "Are you so close you want to come over the sheets?"

Cole nodded, a pained whimper leaving his parted lips.

"Am I driving you mad? Is me fucking your ass driving you mad?"

Again, he whimpered, nodded, and his arm jerked then slowed. "Ah, so close, but don't stop. Don't...fucking...stop!"

Lawrence's orgasm began as a spreading flurry of tingles at his cock's root. His bollocks tautened, and he shunted in and out of Cole.

"Come, Cole. Come for me."

Cole's rhythm built, and he pushed back a little more, his ass cheeks meeting with Lawrence's sweat-soaked hips. Hands on Cole's shoulders, he fucked him harder, breaths jerking out of him, his cock throbbing.

"Come!" he ground out. "Pump your cock while I...fuck...you!"

Lawrence's cock swelled further a second before cum shot out of him. He pressed against Cole, who pushed back, arm moving so fast now. A shout left his lover, an almost primal scream, and another hard shot of cum sped out of Lawrence, coated his cock as his thrusts slowed. He leaned forward and moved his hand beneath Cole, caught the stream of cum as it left him and rubbed the hot sweetness over Cole's chest. The vampire bucked, cried out as another shot left him, and Lawrence slowed to a stop.

Breaths short, bollocks aching, he lowered his chest to Cole's back and smoothed his hands down the other's sides. Cole's arm movements became less hasty as he milked

the last from his cock. Still now, both panting, both basking in the afterglow, Lawrence kissed Cole's shoulder and swirled his tongue between the blades. The salty taste pleased him, showed him just how much Cole had worked to remain passive, and love sped through him so quickly it thieved his breath.

They lowered to the bed, and Lawrence pulled out of Cole, slipping down beside him. Cole turned his head to face him and shifted to Не pressed his body his side. eyes showing trust Lawrence. his adoration. A lump formed in Lawrence's throat, and he slung his leg over Cole's waist to bring them closer together. Both cupped the other's faces and stared, foreheads and nose tips touching, breaths still unsteady. The smell of sex puffed up between them, and Lawrence breathed it in, wishing he could commit that smell to memory and bring it out when away from his lover. The aroma made him feel safe. wanted, loved, and he clutched Cole to him, the need to cry immense.

"I missed you too," Cole said. "Always miss you. Always will."

Lawrence closed his eyes. What will he do when I'm gone? When my life has ended and he has to continue on without me? Who will look after him? Love him? His control slipped,

and he gave in to the emotions ploughing through him, let the tears fall.

"What's wrong?" Cole asked, pulling his head back a little, brow furrowed.

Lawrence swallowed. "Would you...would you want me around for always?" he asked, cursing himself for his needy tone, for his need, period.

Cole brushed his lips against his, kept them there for long seconds, then, "Of course I would, but we've talked about this. We know I'll be here when you're gone, and I won't have anyone else, I can promise you that. When you're gone, I...I can't imagine anyone else taking your place. I—"

"I want you to turn me."

"What?"

Lawrence's heart raced, and he swallowed again. "You heard me."

"But—"

Lawrence put his finger to Cole's lips. "When this investigation is over, I want you to turn me. No questions, no trying to stop me." He paused, tears welling in his eyes, love spiking inside him so quickly it pained his chest. "I can't grow old and leave you."

Chapter Seven

H is words stun me into silence. What can I say to that? If I were him, I would have asked the same thing, but to know he feels for me as I feel for him... God, how it's shocked me that he's prepared to live forever, has faith in us to the degree that once he's turned we'll last, live with and love one another for all time. Surely he'll grow weary of me and regret his decision. Can I allow him to take that chance? Or should I do as he asked, grant him the chance to stay by my side, ageless.

I take a deep breath and release it through my nose, the air cooling the space between our faces. "But if it goes wrong—if we go wrong you must understand that you chose it, you wanted it. I don't want anything flung back at me ten, twenty years down the line. I don't want—"

"Understand that I know what I've asked for. I've thought about it for some time, and I can't be without you. Right now, with the feelings I have, I can't see that ever changing.

And if it does...well, I'll have to deal with it, won't I?"

The thud of my pulse is so loud I wonder if he can hear it. "You say that as though it's me who will end it—us. That you don't realise just how much I love you." I stroke his back, my fingertips light on his skin, and wish we could remain like this, cocooned, safe.

His soft laugh...the breath of it tickles my chin, my neck. "So if we both feel this way, what is there to discuss?"

I sigh, rub my nose against his. "I just worry that something will go wrong. I can't bear the thought of you roaming the earth for eternity, wishing you'd not asked me to grant you immortality. Wishing you'd never met me."

He crushes me closer to him. "I won't. I won't. Please..."

I move my head back, stare at my soul-keeper, the man who stole my heart that night in the club, the one who holds it in his fist and has the ability to squeeze out every ounce of love it holds leaving me weak and empty. The one who, with every action and thought with me in mind, can make more love grow until it threatens to swamp me. Yes, I can spend eternity with him.

"When the investigation is over, we'll talk again." I run my thumb along his jaw line. "Properly, about all the pros and cons. About

jobs with nightshifts." I laugh. "And if you still feel the same—"

"I will."

Tears well in my eyes and slide down my face. A lump so big it hurts fills my throat, and I kiss him, show him with my lips and tongue how much I love him, how much I need him. He returns it, confirming that we are of one mind.

"I've always wished," he says, "for a love like this and knew that if I was lucky enough to find it that I would die young, have that love snatched from me before it had fully bloomed. But this way, with you, it can never happen. I'll never get tired of you. Never want anyone else—"

A sob hitches in his throat, and he holds me so tightly, so *hard* that I understand him perfectly.

We rest this way for a long time, until the air chills my skin and hunger attacks my gut. My body stiffens, and I suck in a breath.

"You're hungry," he says, rearing back then sitting up.

I'm torn between rising and pulling him back down to me, ignoring the hunger, but its voice is loud, insistent, and I sit up. He trails his fingertips down my arm, takes my hand in his, and lifts it to his lips. The soft pressure of his kiss says so much: that he serves me as I

serve him; that although he acts the master, we are equal; that we have something between us that will stand the test of time—lots of time.

He lets my hand fall and kneels, climbs off the bed. He holds his hand out, palm up, and I take it, stand beside him. He guides me to the door, the chain snaking behind us, and reaches to open a small cupboard beside the jamb. He brings out a key and frees my wrist of the manacle. Yes, I can remove it at any time, but I don't. I don't want to. I take the fetter off and drop it to the floor, flex my hand, the sting on my wrist harsh.

Lawrence opens the door, and I follow him upstairs, eye his naked rump and the muscles working in his calves. At the top, we head for the bathroom, taking a quick shower together. He soaps me, his hands cleaning every part of me, and I return the favour. Once out of the shower and dried, I follow him upstairs to his bedroom, that place that is undeniably his. Burgundy walls match the bed throw window drapes. A cream carpet covers the floor, a black sheepskin rug beside the bed. I sit on a wing chair in the corner and pull on socks and jeans, then slip my feet into biker boots. Lawrence hands me a grey fitted Tshirt, and I put it on. The elasticised material clings to my slight torso, and I stand, shrug

into a soft, brown leather jacket, zipping it up to my chin. Lawrence dresses in much the same outfit and, all ready to go, I follow him downstairs and out the front door.

Stars dot the sky, and the moon hangs low and heavy, cloud streaks stretching across it like a fluffy moustache. I inhale the fresh air, my senses on full alert. Our house stands on the city's outskirts, and we begin our journey on foot, taking a path opposite that winds through the suburbs and leads to the city's heart. Trees line the path—more like a country lane—and we have total seclusion unless someone else is out this late. I still have no idea of the time, but the air is so still, the night-time sounds so few and far between, that I guess it to be around two a.m.

After five minutes of walking in silence, Lawrence glances back then ahead again and veers to the right and off the path. I follow, trampling over the grass verge and through a gap in the tree trunks. We are on land owned by a farmer and stick close to the tree line as we walk on. Maybe five minutes more, and a fence stands in the near distance, sheep on the other side. Their black shapes litter the field, and they hear our approach. Some lone ewes trot closer to a cluster in the middle, but braver ones remain where they are.

Saliva pools under my tongue, and stomach clenches. Fangs sprout through my gums, their emergence guick and painless, and I walk a little faster. At the fence, Lawrence stares around us, checking the vicinity. He faces me and nods, touches my cheek briefly before turning his back to the field and facing the way we came. I climb over the fence, my hunger sharper, and land on the other side. With soft footsteps, I approach a grazing sheep that stands alone, its rear end facing me. The night is so quiet I hear the sheep's teeth snatching the grass from the ground and grinding it. The animal senses me and stops chewing, holds itself still. Slowly, it raises its head and turns to look back at me, eyes wide, moonlight highlighting grass poking from the side of its mouth.

I lunge forward and straddle the animal's back, wrestling it to the ground. It struggles beneath me, but my need for sustenance is stronger than the sheep's need for survival. I lay one arm over the beast's face, pinning its head to the grass, lower my face to its exposed neck, and bite. I drink, loving the liquid warmth, the wet wool against my tongue. My nerve endings tingle, and energy pulses through me. The sheep bucks its body, kicks out, its hooves sharp, and tries to lift its head, but my hold is too great, infused as I am with

power. Something happens when I feed and remains with me for hours afterward: an all-consuming force that gives me strength beyond that of a mortal human. My body shape can shift into something I can't explain, almost invisible, and I can race to destinations miles away within seconds. As I travel, I see the landscape as a blur, as though I'm in a speeding train.

Full now, I release my hold on the sheep and stand looking down at it. Moonlight shines on its still form, its woolly coat cream, blood bright red against it. I pull a handkerchief from my pocket and wipe my mouth, my chin, and turn toward the fence. Lawrence still stands there, his back to me, head moving from side to side as he keeps lookout. He hates to watch me feed, and I wonder: How will he take to feeding himself? How will he stand giving up his career? After all, he can hardly go out in the daylight once he's turned. I shift to his side in seconds, and he jumps, startled at my sudden presence.

"I hate it when you do that," he whispers, shoulders hunched, hands in coat pockets. "How do you do that anyway?" He stares at me, his brow furrowed.

"I don't know. I just think it and it happens."

He cocks his head. "Do you float or what?"

I smile at his non-comprehension and the fact that one day, maybe soon, maybe months from now, depending on how long his current investigation lasts, he will be able to experience shifting. "It's sort of like flying. In a way. Kinda."

His eyes widen. "You mean your feet actually leave the ground?"

"Yes."

"And you could carry something?"

"Yes."

I streak back to the sheep, lift it, and return to Lawrence's side.

He blinks, takes a step back, and looks at me. "Shit. Shit!"

"What?" I ask. "Oh, the sheep? You don't like the sheep. Sorry, I—"

"No. No, it's not that." He holds his hand up to silence me and closes his eyes.

I place the sheep down and stand upright, open my mouth to speak, but Lawrence stops me by opening his eyes and staring at me, daring me to break his train of thought.

"Rudy isn't going to believe me," he murmurs.

"What? Believe what?"

"He was able to place the body without disturbing the grass. He—"

"What are you talking about?" I can almost see his mind ticking over.

"Can you, you know, do that shifting thing again now?" he asks.

I nod.

"Take us home, and I'll tell you what's going on."

Chapter Eight

Cole stood behind Lawrence, wrapping arms about his waist, linking his fingers together. He lifted him, and Lawrence's world tilted. They sped forward, the scenery passing by in a blur. Air smacked Lawrence's face, dried out his eyes, and he stifled the urge to cry out in alarm. Landing outside their front door, Cole placed Lawrence down but didn't let him go. Stomach churning, Lawrence shook his head and rested his shoulder on the wall beside the front door to steady himself.

Jesus Christ!

Nauseated, he inhaled a deep breath and closed his eyes to stop his head spinning. He exhaled and opened his eyes again, turning in Cole's arms to rest a cheek against his chest.

"If that wasn't so weird, so unreal, it would have been amazing," he said, his voice muffled against Cole's jacket.

Cole's quiet laughter shook his chest. "You'll get used to it." He paused. "You'll have to when you're turned."

"What if I don't want to move fast like that?" Lawrence lifted his head and looked at his lover. "Or don't I have a choice?"

"After a while, your body picks up your thoughts before you even realise you thought anything. You're zipped off to wherever you need to go and only notice you're there when you arrive."

"Uh, I think feeling like you've been yanked through a tornado might be a good indication too."

Cole laughed again. "Yeah, there is that. Come on." He jerked his head at the door.

Lawrence fumbled for his keys, his hands trembling, fingers clumsy inside his jacket pocket. He brought them out and struggled to insert the key in the lock. Cole took over and opened the door. Stepping inside, with the world shut out, Lawrence pulled off his boots and waited for Cole to do the same. He padded to the kitchen and flicked the kettle on, needing the solace only a cup of tea could provide. Cole sat at the table and took off his jacket, hanging it on the back of his chair.

"So," Lawrence said, popping teabags in two cups and spooning in sugar, "I understand now how the killer managed to place his most recent body."

Cole held up his hand. "Um, back up a bit. Tell me the latest first."

Lawrence leaned against the countertop, arms folded across his middle. He recounted the last couple of hours before he'd returned

home, turning to pour water in their cups once the kettle had boiled and adding milk. He handed a cup to Cole and asked, "So it's entirely possible this guy could have put that woman in the grass without disturbing it, right?"

Cole nodded. "It's definitely possible. With the speed we can move and the distances we can cover after feeding...yes, he could take her from where he'd killed her and put her where she was found." He frowned, ran his pointer finger beneath his mouth. "I take it she was dead when he placed her?"

"Yes. And she had the needles in her eyes, the bite mark." Lawrence took a seat at the table and sipped his tea. "If you're sure you know who this is..."

Cole stared at the tabletop, frown lines deep. He fiddled with the page corners of a folded newspaper. "Like I told you, this is a vampire angry that he's been turned. It could be recent, but I have a feeling it's Aran, the guy I told you about. He's been searching for me all this time. It's like he wants to draw me out. The needles—he sat with me and listened to Mother's tales while she darned. The bite—well, that's an obvious one. But the body positioning...shit, that has me stumped."

"Me too. It's got to be significant; otherwise, why is he doing it? For fun? Because he can?"

Cole pushed the newspaper across the table and rose, moving to a kitchen drawer. He took out a pen. "Draw it for me. The body." He sat down again and handed Lawrence the pen.

On the top edge of the newspaper, Lawrence began to draw a circle and a straight line. "Well, the torso and arms look normal, like this. The victims have been laid so their bodies are straight and their arms are against the body's sides. It's the legs that confuse me." He swooped the pen nib, creating a J and an L. See?"

He turned the paper around. Cole pulled it closer to him and studied the image.



His eyes narrowed, and he moved the newspaper, looking at the stickman from all angles. He winced. "Christ, I hope he broke their legs after death."

Lawrence sighed. "That's exactly what I thought. If he didn't..."

The words hung in the air between them, and Lawrence studied the newspaper, his mind fighting to come up with some idea of what the position meant. Now he'd drawn it, it looked different somehow, easier to digest instead of the previous images he'd had of broken bodies, the life literally sucked out of them.

Abruptly, Cole sat upright, his eyes widening before he opened out the newspaper. He flicked through the pages, scanning over them before moving on to the next.

"What?" Lawrence asked. "Have you thought of something?" His heart sped up, and adrenaline raced through him. "Cole, tell me!"

Cole continued to scan. "Hold on. I might have it all wrong. Let me just..." He stared down at a page, his finger pressed to the paper beneath a symbol in a column of twelve. Swivelling the newspaper around, he again placed his finger beneath the image. He looked up at Lawrence, squinted as though thinking. "March, April. March, April."

"What is it?" Lawrence said, gripping Cole's arm.

Cole pointed at the symbol. "It's him. Definitely him. His birthday was March 27th. See this?" He jabbed his finger at the symbol. "It looks like those legs but upside down, right?"

Lawrence looked.



And nodded. It was a long shot—a very long shot—one he couldn't prove unless they caught the killer and he admitted his birth date. But would he be bold enough to admit the *year*? He'd come off as a crazy. Some freak that really believed himself a vampire. Lawrence would know the guy told the truth, but the other officers? Shit, it didn't bear thinking about.

Cole jumped up and paced the kitchen, glanced at Lawrence. "Yeah, yeah. I know what you're thinking. Far fetched. Nuts. Coincidental. But it's all we have right now. It's the only thing, along with the needles, the bite, that points to him." He palmed his face and released a ragged sigh, stopped pacing. "Fucking hell. I knew he'd come, knew he'd find me, but I thought...I thought it would be years from now. He usually leaves it years before his killing sprees." He sighed again through pursed lips and placed one hand on his hip, the other shading his brow. "I'm going to have to go out there and find him."

Lawrence stood so fast his chair toppled backwards. He laid his palms on the tabletop and leaned forward. "What? No! You can't do that. Not only is it damn dangerous, but it could fuck up the whole investigation if it isn't him. Have you thought about that? That it might not be him?"

Cole stared at him, his face whiter than usual, the only colour two bright pink spots on his cheeks. With watery eyes, his shoulders slumped, he rested his ass against the countertop and hugged himself. Lawrence resisted the urge to go to him, to caress his worries away.

"I'm going to ask you something. Something that wasn't in the news reports. Something you might not want to answer. But if you do, it may prove my point." Cole pinched his chin between thumb and forefinger.

Lawrence pushed off the table and clamped his arms across his chest. "If it's anything to do with information I can't divulge, forget it."

Cole quirked an eyebrow. "Even if it means solving the case?"

Lawrence huffed out a breath in frustration. "Fuck!" He closed his eyes briefly. "Go on. Ask."

"What were the victims called?"

Chapter Nine

11 ith sleep nowhere in sight, the morning after I'd bitten Aran I scrambled out of bed search of a scrap of linen. Did anything made of that material? Panic set inside me as I tossed clothing and bedding aside, my eyes keen to find what I sought.

Linen, linen...must find some linen.

snatched up my satchel and rubbed it between my fingers. Was it made of linen? The weave looked the same, but it didn't feel right, was too thick. Willing to take the chance, I found some scissors and cut a square patch, rushing to the sideboard to pour salt in the centre. Once done, I created a small securing the bunched top with twine enough that it would loop around Aran's neck.

I hurriedly dressed and pulled back the window blanket. Full sunlight had yet to emerge. Only dawn's groggy awakening tinted the horizon. If I donned my cloak, covered my head, would the faint daylight hurt me too much? Would I make it to the lane and back

before the true day roared to life? I had to risk it. Turning Aran and leaving him to a fate the same as mine rested heavy on my soul. I couldn't allow him to change.

With my cloak on, head covered, the hood's edges partially shielding my face, I shoved the linen bag in my pocket and stepped outside. A swathe of night still lingered above, but dawn was growing older, and it wouldn't be long before she dominated the skies, that big ball of light in full view. Feeling like the beast my father said I was, I scuttled along the path that would lead me to the lane. A rabbit darted out of the hedgerow and, my reflexes sharp and quick, I snatched it up and sank my fangs into its neck, draining it. Power infused me, and I willed myself to the tree where I had left Aran.

He wasn't there. Disorientated, I gazed around at the trees. Did I stand by the right one? I looked down. Blood splatters dotted a pale tree root that jutted from the ground. Oh yes, I'd found the tree all right. I glanced above. The dark sky had turned a lighter shade in the few minutes I had been out, and I concentrated hard to make myself shift to Aran's house.

I came to a stop and staggered against his front door, my palms flat on the scarred wood to hold myself still. Equilibrium shot, I swallowed down bile and focussed on gathering

my wits. After blowing out a breath, I rounded the little house and made my way to the rear, my intent to knock on Aran's bedroom window on the ground floor. Once there, I cupped my hands to the glass and peered inside. He lay curled in the foetal position on the floor beside his bed, and memories of my own turning flashed through my mind.

I'm too late. Too late!

Despite that knowledge, I had to try and right the wrong. I tapped on the window. Aran stirred and shifted onto his other side, arms clutching his midsection. I hurt for him, knew he'd struggle to move if he tried. I tapped again, a little louder, and he lifted his head. Stared at me with eyes so full of hatred I reeled backwards. Emotional pain wracked my body. I'd changed my one and only friend into something he didn't want to be, someone who would forever traverse the earth with no respite.

Unless I killed him.

I stepped closer to the window. His head thunked to the floor again, and he lifted his arms only to drop them back down. Maybe I could stop the change. If I could just get inside and put the pouch around his neck... I rapped on the window once more, mindful that Aran's mother or father may yank open the back door at any moment and find me there. What would

they think of me out at such an hour when I should have been working at the forge?

With what I can only imagine was anger, Aran hoisted himself up from the floor onto his hands and knees. He shuffled toward the bed below the window, his movements sluggish and heavy, and slumped his arms and head on the mattress. Long moments passed before he crawled up onto the bed and rested for what seemed like an age. The sky had brightened further, the morning losing the chill of night.

Quickly! Open the window!

As though hearing my thoughts, he brought his torso upright and turned to face me. The four-inch-long gash on his face lay open, his teeth partially visible through the half-inchwide slit. Dried blood had crusted around the edges. It would take a long time to heal. His hands smacked against the glass and trailed down the pane. Head hanging, his chin to chest, he blindly fumbled with the window. It creaked open a crack, and I grabbed the frame and opened that window wider. Aran raised his head. Bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes glared at me, the crimson so vivid against his pale skin. Blue-tinged lips formed a wry smile then downturned. His hair hung limp, lifeless locks streaking his cheeks, and I felt so sorry, so sorry for what I had done.

Do I look like that?

I dug my hand in my pocket and brought out the linen bag. "Here," I said, thrusting it into his hand. "Put it around your neck. It will... Mother says it will stop it. Make you better."

That wry grin reappeared, and Aran's harsh burst of laughter frightened me. I stepped back, myriad thoughts cluttering my mind. I've hurt my friend. I caused this, made him look like that, gave him a pain in his body so great he wishes he was dead. Gave him eternal life—one he probably doesn't want.

His laughter stopped. His arms dangled loose at his sides, and he rested on his haunches. "You...you...ruined me."

Tears stung my eyes, and I babbled in panic. "Put the pouch around your neck. Come on, put it on. It will save you. Do it, Aran, please. I-I'm so sorry. This is new to me too, and I-I didn't know what I was doing. It overtook me, I—"

"I will get you for this." He fell sideways, the twine necklace of the linen pouch clutched in his hand, and closed his eyes, too tired to move.

And, God, I knew how he felt.

I stood for a long time at that window until fingers of sunlight poked my back, urging me home. I shifted there in seconds and took to my own bed, mirroring Aran's position as though I could go through the turn with him,

as though by my doing so it would make everything all right.

I remained in my bed for five days, only leaving it to relieve myself and quench my thirst with water. It didn't do much good. The liquid I craved was outside in the forests and hedgerows, in the fields and barns belonging to old farmer Lowell. My fangs had emerged and retracted so often as I lay starving that my gums ached.

Eventually, I waited until well past midnight and ventured outside. The air still tainted with the previous day's warmth, I trudged, my body weak, to the lane. Moving into the tree area, I hunkered down beside a pine and waited. Maybe half an hour passed before a squirrel scampered down a trunk beside me. I held still and prayed my reflexes would be fast enough. The animal cocked its head and turned to look at me. The minute our gazes met, I flashed out my arm and gripped its furry body. struggled, tried to bite my hand, but I swiftly brought it up to my mouth and sunk my teeth into it. It yielded only a little blood, not enough to even take the edge off my hunger, and had me prowling deeper into the woods in search of another critter. My patience paid off each time I rested in wait, and I snagged another three squirrels and a badger—and my, he proved a feisty beast.

Not quite full but full enough, I headed back toward the lane, intending to shift home from there. I walked with my head down, boots scuffing the hard-packed ground. A low snicker caught me off guard, and I snapped my head up. Aran stood on the alley path, his legs apart, his hands clenched into fists.

"Out feeding, I see," he said, eyes alight with fury, head nodding as though indicating traces of blood marred my face.

I halted beside a tree, my legs unsteady from the shock of seeing him. "Aye. And you?" "The same."

I cuffed my chin, self-conscious under his steely scrutiny. "I-I'm sorry, Aran. Truly sorry."

"So you said before, but it changes nothing. Doesn't erase the hatred inside me for what you've done. Doesn't make everything *better*. Just like your mother's remedy didn't make me better."

His stare grew more intense and reminded me of the man who had turned me. How had Aran learned the tricks so quickly, when I had struggled to shift, struggled to make my eyes mesmerise him? Perhaps the turning took people different ways. Perhaps... I shoved the musings away, senses primed, for Aran looked mean and nasty, like he wanted a fight.

Sadness swamped me, scoffed all my energy, and I leaned against the tree.

"What do you want me to do? To say?" I asked, hoping to calm him, to stop whatever it was he had in mind, for surely, with eyes ablaze like that, with his stance the way it was, he had something terrible in store.

"There's nothing you can do, is there? Nothing you can say. It's done, and I'm stuck like...like this, as are you." He knitted his brow and took one step forward. "What do the myths say? That we are here for eternity. That a wooden stake can kill us. That we are doomed to roam the nights in search of food." He laughed, a spiteful, frightening sound. "And while we do this, how are we supposed to live? How are we supposed to earn money?"

I didn't know, didn't have any answers, so I shrugged. Rent was due on my room by next week, and I hadn't returned to the forge. I couldn't—it wasn't in operation during the night. Suddenly, a glimpse of the years, the centuries stretched before me, and the realisation that I needed to find a solution to the lack of living expenses smacked me in the gut. Sickened with terror, I rested my head against the tree and closed my eyes.

"Ah," Aran said. "You hadn't thought that far ahead, had you?"

I shook my head and opened my eyes to find him standing a few inches from me.

"Too caught up with your turning. With mine." His hand whipped up, and he slapped my face, snapping my head back. "But you must consider what we should do next, my friend."

I blinked. "We?"

Laughter barked out of him again. "You don't expect me to do this alone, do you? Not after what you've done."

I gawped at his pale face, his black hair so dark against it. "I-I hadn't—"

"No," he said. "You hadn't thought. Again."

"I don't know what to do. Where to go."

"We will sort this out together. We will find night work away from this place." He held out his arm as if to encompass the whole town. "We will survive the best way we know how." He leaned closer, his breath hot on my lips. "Come with me now."

Something about him had changed. He wasn't the Aran I had known all my life. He wasn't the easy going, decent person I had fallen in love with. He wasn't...Aran. The turn had changed him more than it had me. I had still remained Cole, all aspects of me exactly as they were before, but him!

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I won't go with you. You're different. You're not the

same." I stepped to the side and moved to walk past him.

His hand shot out and gripped my upper arm. "Going somewhere, friend?"

I shrugged him off, and his hand dropped to his side. His murderous gaze bored into me, his irises a dreadful black, the whites so bright. His skin appeared hardened like leather left to dry for too long, the scar wretched, and a sense of him being bad assaulted me. Bad and twisted and raw with unleashed anger.

"I'm leaving," I said. "Without you. I'll move on by myself." I walked to the path, ears tuned for his footsteps, the whoosh of air should he shift.

He didn't follow. Didn't shift.

"Wherever you go," he said, "I'll find you."

I swallowed, worry gnawing my guts. On the path, I turned to face him.

"Just you remember this," he said, finger pointing at me. "I am Aran Shanks, born on March 27th. I listened to tales as your mother darned. You are Cole Russell, born on February 25th, a former friend who made me what I am today and who will pay for what he has done. You are Cole Russell, with a father, a mother, and a dead baby sister. You remember my words. Never forget them, and one day, one day they will tell you I have found you."

I shifted in pure fear, reaching home with his words firmly planted in my mind, their roots digging into my skull and twisting until they burrowed deep enough never to be pulled free. I shoved a change of clothing into my ruined satchel, left my home, and began a long journey, one that would take me through many years, many changes, and many glances over my shoulder.

Chapter Ten

"f o tell me," Cole said. "What are the victims called?"

"The first was William Johns."

"My father's first two names."

Lawrence digested the information then said, "The second was called Helen Ellis. Your mother's name was Helen?"

Cole nodded.

"And the last—"

"Was Elizabeth."

Lawrence blinked and sat at the table. "Shit. So it *is* him, then."

Cole nodded, his voice hoarse from relating his tale. "He's done this before, many years ago, but I fled the city. Didn't hang around long enough to let him find me. Once those names appeared in the newspapers... I wasn't strong enough to face him. To kill him."

"What? Please tell me I didn't hear you right." Lawrence rested his elbows on the table, held his head in his hands. The implications of what Cole had said flitted through his mind. How would they conceal the body? He gave a sardonic chuckle. *Unless the body turns to dust*. "Listen," he looked up,

watched as Cole sat opposite him, "you can't just go out there and kill him. Questions would have to be answered. I'd be going against my duty as a police officer to help you do this." He sipped his tea—cold—and winced. Rising, he turned and flicked on the kettle.

"But once he's killed, once the killings stop, the investigation goes cold." Cole paused. "And once it's cold, you wanted turning."

He left his words hanging, and Lawrence busied himself making them both fresh tea. Cole's right, but can I do this? Can I help him kill another human being? He stifled another burst of laughter. Human being. Christ, this Aran guy is hardly that. He opened his mouth to argue but closed it again.

"So what's stopping you?" Cole asked. "You'd no longer be working for the police force. Your conscience may bug you for a while, but if me killing him stops innocent people being killed..."

Lawrence poured boiled water into the cups and squeezed the teabags against the sides. "But you only had three family members. There's no one left to kill." He spooned in sugar and stirred as he added milk.

"There's me."

Lawrence's hand stilled, and his heart thumped so painfully he clutched the countertop edge and closed his eyes. "No, that

man wouldn't kill you, surely? He'd have to find you first. We could leave. Move away so he can't find you." He turned and, without looking at Cole, put the cups on the table.

"So, despite you mentioning your duty as a police officer, you'd leave here knowing he will follow, knowing he will kill three others? And then what? We move on again, and he kills again? Can you live with that? I'm warning you, it eats away inside when you know he'll strike again and again."

Lawrence stared at the tabletop, at the gouges in the pine from years of cutlery being placed down upon it. Cole's gaze heated his head, but he wouldn't look up. Couldn't.

Cole sighed, the air fluttering the newspaper. "Are you going to answer me?"
Silence.

"I guess not. Okay, let me put it another way. If I don't kill him, he won't stop until he kills me. Can you live with *that*?"

Silence.

Damn. I want to speak, want to say so much, but if I do, if I voice my feelings it makes me no better than all the other criminals out there.

Lawrence looked up. Cole's face, so white, bore evidence of his distress, of the questions undoubtedly rampaging around his mind. The sight of his creased brow and downturned

mouth prodded at Lawrence's heart. If it meant losing Cole, if it meant living a life without his lover in it...

"How will you do it?" Lawrence asked. "How will you even find him?" He sipped his tea, tendrils of fear creeping from the edges of his mind into the centre.

"Take me to the site of his first killing."

"Oh, come on! You know I can't do that. Crime scene tape will still be up. The place will still be under observation. He only dumped that body there last week, for God's sake!"

Cole nodded. "That's exactly why I need to go."

Lawrence sighed and jumped up, moving to the sink and gripping the edge. "You'll be seen. Someone will spot you. Shit, they might even take you for the killer. They return to their crimes scenes sometimes, and if you show up... Jesus!" He stared out the window, seeing nothing but his own reflection, his usually tanned skin whiter. Cold coddled him, and he shivered, repeated, "You'll be seen."

"I won't," Cole said. "Not if I shift."

"Why do you even need to go there? What good will it do?" Lawrence glared past his reflection at Cole, who doodled on the newspaper, his mouth a tight line. Was he angry? Was he wondering why Lawrence was so against him going out there? He bit the

bullet. "It's not the moral angle that's bothering me."

Cole's head lifted, and their gazes met in the glass. "What?"

"I said, it's—"

"I heard what you said. What is it, then?"

God, I love you. Want to keep you safe. Here. Locked up so no one can take you away from me. I can't stand...can't fucking stand the thought of you gone.

Tears stung his eyes, and a sob wrenched from his throat, surprising him. He watched Cole stand and move toward him, waited for those strong arms to encircle him, make everything right again. His lover's embrace erased the blurred edges, but the blunt lines of their situation remained. Lawrence leaned his head back, turned his face to kiss Cole's jaw, the stubble brittle against his lips.

"What is it?" Cole asked.

"I don't want to lose you. If you go out there and he finds you..."

"Then I'll deal with it."

"But you said yourself he was different when he turned. What if he's grown stronger over the years, more so than he was back then? What if...?"

Cole clutched him tighter. "What ifs aren't good. They take up too much mind space, gnaw at you, tear you up. Just trust me. I

doubt very much he'll appear at the scene the same time as me. I just need to go there, get a feel for him, you understand?"

Lawrence looked at Cole's window reflection. They stood silent for a few minutes until Lawrence's body sagged from fatigue.

"You're beat," Cole said and guided him upstairs. "You need sleep. How many hours have you been awake now?"

Lawrence shrugged and walked through his bedroom doorway, legs so weary he could hardly take another step.

"Right. So get into bed. Rest."

Lawrence stripped down to his boxers and pulled back the quilt. "Will you stay?" He climbed inside, the sheets cool against his skin. Patting the bed beside him, he said, "Don't go down to your room. Please...stay."

Cole smiled at him then climbed on the bed, holding out his arm to hold Lawrence close. "You know the rules. You sleep up here, I sleep down there."

"But-"

"The separation is what makes us stronger, you know that." Cole played with Lawrence's hair, stroked his face. "I'll stay until you fall asleep, all right?" He kissed the top of his head.

"All right." Lawrence closed his eyes, sleep's grip snagging him before he was ready to go.

He wanted to lay here for a while, savour being in his lover's arms. Bottle the feeling their nearness produced. Just in case...in case...

Chapter Eleven Cole

I ease my arm from beneath Lawrence's head, slowly crawl off the bed, and stand looking down at him. He'd look peaceful if it wasn't for the slight pucker of his eyebrows. His eyes dart beneath the lids, and I wonder what he's dreaming about. Catching Aran? Fighting me off as I move to bite his neck, him realising it wasn't what he wanted after all? Him chasing me while I do what I'm about to do?

Should I ...?

leave the room and pad downstairs, putting on my jacket and boots. I scoop the keys from the kitchen table and head for the front door. Outside, the sky mirrors that of the early morning so many years ago when I went to find Aran. And I'm doing it again.

I close my eyes and envisage the scenes from the news. Scenes of where the first body was found, a bird's eye view from a news crew's helicopter. A clearing in a forest, the

grass dried and yellow from this summer's heat, trees surrounding the site in a circle.

Much like the wooded area beside the alley where I'd turned him.

I search my mind to remember any other clues. Skyscrapers in the distance. The football stadium to the right. Farmland to the left. The newscaster said William Johns' body had been dumped in Gable's Wood. I know of it, know how to get there by car, but finding the exact location when shifting might prove difficult. I have to try...need to find him before he finds me.

I concentrate and feel the familiar lift as I levitate a second before shifting. My speed picks up, my body hurtling at an alarming rate, faster than any shift I've done before. Within seconds I come to a stop, my feet landing on asphalt. I shake my head and swallow, take a few seconds to establish where I am. Looks like the main road beside Gable's Wood, farmland to the left, the woods to my right. Not a bad shift. I close my eyes again and picture the clearing, the forensic tent, the crime scene tape. Bracing myself for a quick shift, I move again, my feet touching down on soft ground. Eyes open, I turn in a circle to assess my surroundings. Thick clusters of trees and dew-damp mulch on the ground. I cock my head and walk forward where the space

between tree trunks widens. An owl hoots, and I smile at another of Mother's myths.

If an owl hoots, badness be on the way, son.

I suppress a shiver and cast the ominous thought aside, striding with purpose. Ahead, waning moonlight shines brighter than where I am, so I quicken my pace, careful not to step on fallen twigs. Like Lawrence said, there may be a police presence at the scene. After a few minutes' walk, I come close to the clearing. The forensic tent has been taken down, but the crime scene tape goes from tree to tree, bowed in the middle like a ghost sits on it for a swing. It sways in the slight breeze, and I scan the area. No police. I close my eyes and sniff. A faint whiff of Aran reaches me, so faint I almost miss it, but it's him all right. He's been here. I creep forward, out of the tree line, and stoop beneath a swathe of tape. Looking left and right, I walk forward. A curved line has been trodden into the grass, probably by the police as they paced back and forth outside the white tent. I step over it and onto the space the tent had covered. Aran's scent is more prevalent here, and the tangy scent of blood stings my nostrils.

He killed William Johns here.

A shudder rips up my spine, and I spin around, sure someone is standing behind me. I

only see trees. Squinting, I peer into the woods, eyes darting in their sockets for a glimpse of whoever it may have been. Nothing. I feel foolish, out of my comfort zone.

What if Aran shifted here? Shifted so fast he'd gone by the time I turned around?

Though freaked, I refuse to shift back home. I rush back into the woods and run, zipping between tree trunks, chasing Aran's scent. He was here. Just now. I smell him, feel him, know he's close. Laughter erupts, ricocheting off the trees, distorting where it originated from. I flit through the woods, chasing the laughter, the scent. He has grown faster than I have. I can't catch him speeding by, can't see anything out of the ordinary, yet he's here, toying with me.

Wearing me out.

I stop, stand beside a tree, and rest my palm against it. "Thought you'd tire me so I couldn't fight, Aran?" My voice comes back at me from all directions. "Come on! Come out. Isn't this what you wanted?"

The laughter burbles again, sinister, Aran yet not. I glance around, see nothing but trees.

"Aran? Show yourself. Let's stop this now."

ARAN? SHOW YOURSELF. LET'S STOP THIS

NOW. ARAN? SHOW YOURSELF. LET'S STOP

THIS NOW. ARAN? SHOW YOURSELF. LET'S STOP THIS NOW...

That echo taunts me, goads me into leaving the tree and pacing forward. As the last word of that echo dies off, Aran's laughter reverberates, a ghostly whisper that gives me the damn creeps.

"Aran?" I call.

Nothing.

"Aran? Come on out."

Nothing.

"Aran?"

"WHAT?" he screams in my face, his eyes bulging, his fangs bared and lethal. His cheek sports a white, raised streak, its surface gnarled like tree bark. Veins throb on his temples, and he looks nothing like he used to. Nothing.

I tamp down a scream and shove him away—he's too close, far too near—and ask, "Is this it? Is this where you tell me how much you hate me? How that hate has grown over the years? How you've killed people to show me you're closing in? *Is it*?" I yell.

IS IT? IS IT? IS IT?

He stares, those bloodshot eyes of his so wide, so big. His jaw spasms, and his lips retract, showing his long fangs. He throws his head back, and once again that eerie laughter

consumes the air, fills my ears until I scream with frustration.

"Stop! Stop this!"

I lunge at him, clutch his wool coat in my fists, and shove him backward. He falls, his body straight as an arrow, and pings upright again just before he would have hit the floor. Christ, he's strong, so honed, so...vampire.

"You've gone soft," he says, running his fingers through his hair. "Or softer than you were, anyway. How did you let that happen? How come I've grown in strength and size, and you've remained so reedy, puny almost?"

I don't know the answer but take a stab anyway. "Probably because you've embraced what you've become to the degree that you've allowed anger to rule you. You feed too often. Am I right?"

He smirks and picks a leaf from his coat. "I do, while you, it seems, feed only when you have to."

"I don't enjoy killing animals." I look at him, really look at him, and try to remember him as the little boy of my childhood, the young man of our early twenties, but can't. All I see is this hulk of a man, held together with stitches of hatred and ire, stitches I could snip if I could only find the right scissors. "The people you've killed. Don't you hate yourself for it? Don't you

imagine them as your family? Think of the devastation you've caused their kin?"

He laughed again. "What, are you talking from experience? Are you telling me how you felt when you killed me?"

"I didn't—"

"You may as well have done. Look at me!" he screeched. "Look at what you made!"

I recoil and curse myself for it. "I didn't mean—"

"I don't care what you didn't mean." He steps forward, finger pointing at me. "I don't care about anything but killing you." He snatches my jacket, brings me close to his chest. His breath fans my nose.

He's fed recently. Human blood. I smell it.

My stomach contracts, and I fight the urge to vomit, the implications of that smell telling me so much. "You've done it again, haven't you?"

"What, fed? Oh, yes, I've fed."

He lets me go with a shove, and my back smacks against a tree trunk.

"Who? Where?"

He dives forward and grips my upper arms. I levitate, struggle against him shifting me elsewhere, but his strength outweighs mine. Air zips past me, and his fingers bite into my arms. I'm no match for him. He's going to win. We stop abruptly, his face close to mine.

"Shh!" he says then sets me down. "Do *not* speak or make a sound."

I'm standing in the field where I fed so recently. Ewes stand in a cluster, all staring in the same direction at the ground. My stomach lurches.

Christ, we're so close to home. He knows. Knows where we live.

Lawrence springs to mind, and I take off across the field, running when I could have shifted, knowing it's because I want to delay the inevitable. The body in the field grows bigger the closer I get. My ankle turns in a divot, and I stumble, right myself, and hobble onward.

Please, please don't let him have killed Lawrence. Don't let—

Aran whips past me and stops beside the body. I continue to run, my lungs bursting, my heart breaking. I bite back a sob and slow to a walk, gaze trained on that heap, brain processing too many what ifs.

What ifs aren't good. They take up too much mind space, gnaw at you, tear you up...

I reach the body, stand at its booted feet, see the broken legs inside blue jeans, the needles poking out of the eyes, the bite on the neck. Moonlight glows on the male face, the short hair, slivers of silver on near-black. Rage

floods my body, and I kneel beside the victim, eyes searching the face.

It isn't him. It isn't him! It's a fucking mannequin!

I glance up at Aran. His eyes sparkle, and his mouth forms a sadistic smile, his teeth a strip of white in a dark shape, moonbeams tinting his right side.

"Did that scare you, Cole?" He laughs, low and cruel. "Really scare you?"

I stand. And lunge.

Chapter Twelve

The ringing of a phone jangled on the edge of Lawrence's consciousness. He struggled to work out if he was dreaming or semi-awake. Mind fuggy, eyes still closed, he groped for the nightstand anyway and took the phone from its cradle. He held it to his ear, the plastic cold, and said, "Yeah?"

"Got another one, buddy," Rudy said.

Lawrence bolted upright, Rudy's words better than any alarm clock. "What? Already?"

"Yeah, man. It's escalating, right? He's getting bolder. Officially a serial killer too."

How the fuck he can joke at a time like this? Lawrence got out of bed and cradled the phone between his shoulder and ear and pulled

on some boxers. "Same position?"

"No, and he's chosen a male again this time. Needles are present. Neck bites too."

"Neck bites?"

"Yeah, you gotta see this one to believe it."

Lawrence's heart lurched. He glanced at the bed. "What's he look like?"

Rudy's laugh jarred on Lawrence's nerves. "Well, he's pasty white—but then he would be now, wouldn't he?—and he looks like he could

have done with a damn good meal. White-blond hair..."

The rest of Rudy's description didn't register. He pressed the END CALL button and flung the phone onto the bed. Heart hammering wildly, he raced across the room, swinging out of the doorway, hand on the jamb. He thudded downstairs, his pulse matching his steps, and scooted to the basement stairwell. At the top, he paused then rushed down, scraping his right heel on the stone steps. To the side of the door, a wooden cupboard was mounted. He wrenched the small door open, grabbed the key, and managed to slide it in the basement door lock without trouble. He turned the handle and flung the door wide, his gaze going straight to the bed.

Cole wasn't there. He took in the two far corners. No Cole. He stared at the floor. The chain snaked from the bed to his right, and he stepped around the door. The glass shower cubicle was steamed up and, unable to believe Cole stood inside, he yanked the door open. Cole, lather and hands atop his head, spun round, eyes wide.

"Hey!" he said, tipping his head back under the spray to rinse his hair.

Lawrence's knees gave way as relief surged through him. He dropped to the floor, head bent, hands covering his face. "I thought...I

thought... Oh, God. Shit! I thought you'd been killed."

"What?"

Lawrence heard Cole's voice as though he stood at the end of a tunnel. He lowered his hands and gazed into space. The water switched off, and a wet screech sounded as Cole stepped out of the stall, his feet in Lawrence's peripheral view. The chain tinkled, and his lover hunched down beside him, towel about his lower half, chest covered in water droplets, hair dripping.

Hand on Lawrence's back, Cole asked, "You thought what?"

Lawrence leaned toward Cole, uncaring that he rested against a damp chest. "Rudy called. Just now. Said there's another body." Jesus Christ, I thought it was you. Thought it was you! "He described it and...and it sounded like you."

Cole's arms encircled him, and he let out the sob that had been building since Rudy's call. He wrapped his arms about the vampire's waist and hugged him tight, tears spilling, bottom lip wobbling. Cole rubbed his back, and the chain jingled again.

"Hey. Hey!" Cole lifted Lawrence's chin with his finger. "It's okay. I'm here, see? I'll never leave you. Never be taken from you, d'you hear me?"

Lawrence nodded, feeling like a child, so vulnerable, so scared, yet so damn relieved. Guilt prodded him. Someone out there had lost a loved one tonight. Someone had been informed that their husband, brother, son, or uncle wasn't coming home. Someone was broken just like he thought he would be.

Though reluctant to leave the safety of his arms, Lawrence gently pushed at Cole's chest. "I have to go. Have to meet Rudy."

Cole's brow marred, and he tilted his head. "You sure you're okay to do that?"

Lawrence nodded. "I have to. It's something I have to do."

* * * *

Early morning sunlight bore down on Lawrence as he traversed the field. Uniformed officers stood in the distance, clusters of five or six, heads bent in deep conversation. Even from this far away he made out Rudy's red cap, his hands shoved into his jacket pockets. His partner stood with legs apart and studied the body on the ground.

He'll be wondering who the hell has done this. Asking himself: Why? How come? What the fuck is wrong with some people?

Lawrence swallowed and upped his pace. The sooner he viewed the body and attended

the autopsy, the sooner he could get to the station and file last night's paperwork and also today's. Their scheduled meeting would have to come later. He neared the scene, and his stomach roiled at what he would see. Yet another corpse, someone's life stolen just to get at Cole.

What a waste.

His footsteps on the sunburned grass had Rudy turning around.

"Hey, man, why d'you cut the call?" he asked, bushy eyebrows meeting above his nose.

Heat warmed Lawrence's face. "Must have been a bad line. Sorry, bud."

He looked down at the body and sucked in a long breath. This man was ancient—and his death wasn't a waste but a blessing. Nearwhite, leathery skin covered his face, wrinkles so deep a matchstick could stand up in them. A scar stood prominent on his cheek, roughlooking ridges and nodules covering its raised surface.

That scar...

Thick needles had been jabbed into his eyes, the irises so black against the whites they didn't seem real. He'd been bitten in several places about the neck, as though the killer had reached a new plateau. Skin lay ripped in ragged strips, the victim's Adam's

apple exposed, a dried-up vein draped across it.

Lawrence swallowed down bile. "Jesus Christ!"

"I know," Rudy said. "Our man's one angry motherfucker."

Snow-white hair splashed with blood lay splayed around the man's head. Lawrence shifted his gaze to the legs. They were set apart, straight, and his arms lay upward, the whole position like the guy was doing a star jump. He thought of the Aries symbol. No, this was nothing like it. He took his notepad from his inside pocket and sketched the body.



"What you doing?" Rudy asked, leaning toward Lawrence and eyeing the pad.

"Just making sure I remember the position." He snapped the pad closed and put it and the pen back in his pocket. "Let's just pray this guy stops."

"Yeah, because I'm damn tired. Don't these whackos realise the hassle they cause? I'm a grumpy bastard without my sleep, and my

missus gets cranky when I'm grumpy, and then we end up fighting over stupid shit." He sighed. "And I'm sick of fighting over stupid shit. Man, I need a less stressful job."

Lawrence stared ahead at the sky slashed with cloud tendrils, at birds swooping, at the sun that would soon burn him and steal his energy when Cole— "Thinking of doing the same thing myself. Moving on, starting afresh somewhere else."

"But you'll stick this out until the end, right? Fucked if I want some new partner pissing me off mid-investigation." Rudy mock-punched Lawrence's arm.

"I'll stick it out."

But it's all over bar the paperwork, bud.

"Come on," Rudy said. "I'll buy you a coffee in town while the good folks in white outfits do their thing. Then it's a visit to Sally, who'll curse this sadistic son of a bitch for bringing her more work, and then, if we have any goddamn time left, we'll hit the station, file all this information, and *then*," he drew in an exaggerated breath, "we can go home."

* * * *

The air inside the coffee house thick with rich aromas, Lawrence took a seat in the corner on a comfortable bucket chair. While Rudy stood

in line at the counter waiting for service, Lawrence took out his notebook and studied his drawing. If he was right, it meant Cole had killed the latest victim. If he was wrong...then they'd have to work out what this new position meant.

He glanced around in search of a newspaper and spotted one on a low wooden table beside two sofas set at right angles to one another. He stood and walked over to the table and swiped the paper, quickly returning to his seat. Glancing at Rudy to make sure he had time to check the astrology section, Lawrence flicked through until he found the right page. He scanned the daily horoscopes and stopped on Pisces. His stomach muscles bunched and, with heart beating so fast his chest ached, he whipped out his notebook to compare the images.



You are Cole Russell, born on February 25th... Shit.

Too many questions bombarded him at once. Did Cole go out after I fell asleep? He must have done. How did he know where to find Aran? More to the fucking point, how the hell did Aran get so near our home? Had he been watching us when Cole fed in that field? Is that what happens when vampires die—they age, their bodies catching up on all the years they've been alive? Is that why his face was so wrinkled, his hair so white?

He blew out a long breath and blinked, shook his head to rid himself of the onslaught of questions. He caught a glimpse of Rudy coming toward him, two large Styrofoam cups in his hands, so he stuffed his notebook away. With no time to close the newspaper, he bent over as though reading his horoscope.

Rudy put the cups on the table, peering at the paper as he sat. "I didn't figure you for the astrological type."

"I read them every day," Lawrence lied. "Who knows, there might be something in them."

Rudy sipped his coffee and gained a new layer to his moustache. He licked it off then said, "S'all a bunch of bullshit, if you ask me. They're so vague you could apply any of it to any aspect of your life and it'll make sense. On the other hand, I've read some of mine that spout such crap it's laughable." He sipped and

licked again. "Come on, read mine. I could do with a laugh."

"What sign are you?" Lawrence looked up at him.

"Cancer. Sock it to me. Tell me I'm gonna win the damn lottery or at least get laid tonight." He winked and chuckled, his shoulders jumping up and down.

"Okay, here goes. Things will draw to an abrupt close, giving you the time you need to devote yourself to matters in the pelvic region." Lawrence kept a straight face.

"Oh right." Rudy eyed the ceiling in thought. "Hmm. Okay, so it *does* apply to my life and what I've been moaning about, but—"

Lawrence's laugh cut him off.

Rudy lowered his head and glared at Lawrence. "Give me that fucking paper!" He spun it round to face him. "You little shit! It says here: The planets are in alignment, and everything you have hoped for will come true." He harrumphed. "What a crock of shit!" He laughed and reached for his coffee. "I'll get you back for that one day, man."

"Yeah, yeah," Lawrence said and reflected on how much he'd miss his partner once he gave up his job and moved away. The sudden realisation that he probably wouldn't see Rudy again after...after he left the force slammed into him.

But I love Cole, and he's what I need. More than the job. More than Rudy's friendship.

He swallowed to get rid of the lump in his throat.

"I will, you know," Rudy said, cuffing Lawrence's ear.

Lawrence nodded, sadness visiting his chest. "Maybe."

Chapter Thirteen Cole

I still have the feel of him on my hands, the stench of his blood in my nose. I huddle on my side beneath the duvet, the shakes taking over my body. With Lawrence out finding the body, discovering what I've done, worry worms its way inside me. What if he can't forgive me? What if, despite loving me, he can't harbour a killer?

I should go, leave this place and start again elsewhere, let Lawrence live as he should have done before I invaded his life. But I can't bring myself to leave the bed. It's like I'm stuck here, body and soul, until he returns. Until I find out how he feels now.

What is he thinking as he looks at Aran? That I'm evil? Wishing he'd never set eyes on me and allowed me into his heart?

I thump the mattress, annoyed with myself yet unrepentant for what I've done. Though I'd lunged first, Aran was bent on wiping me out. I'd acted in self-defence once his fangs came close to ripping into my neck. In the end,

anger at his murderous ways had seeped into me, consuming everything but my need to destroy him. And I'd killed him to save the one I love.

It wasn't until after that I sat upon the ground beside him and mourned the loss of the person he used to be, the fun child, my first crush. Only for a few moments, though. I'd shifted home, entering quietly so as not to wake Lawrence. Him seeing me covered in blood would have been awful, would have cemented what I had done firmly in his mind. No pretending I hadn't done anything. No refusing the truth.

Maybe Lawrence won't ask, won't pick up on the body position, the only way I could show him what I had done so I didn't have to say it out loud. Admittance. If he asks me outright, I'll tell him, but if he doesn't... Can I live with that secret, knowing he knows, both of us refusing to acknowledge it?

I don't know.

I close my eyes, bring the duvet up under my chin.

Aran's voice whispers in my mind. "Do you think you can beat me, Cole? Do you think your anger even comes close to mine after all these years?"

He stares at me from the film reel of my mind, his back to the grass, his body pinned

beneath mine. His eyes bulge, and his lips draw back over long, prominent fangs. His large hands grip my biceps, and my smaller, thinner fingers surround his throat. He laughs, that horrible, horrible sound that will haunt me forever, and I squeeze harder.

"He's next, Cole. That man you covet, that man you share your life with. I want you to suffer the pain of losing everyone you love, and he's the only one left."

His fingers press into my arms, digging beside the bones, but the pain of that is nothing compared to losing Lawrence. He pulls at my arms, his strength greater than mine, and although I squeeze with determination, it isn't enough. He flings me off of him, and I sail through the air, landing on my ass a few feet away.

"How can you think to best me?" he calls. "How can you even think of yourself as a match for my strength, my abilities?"

I shift at him, reach him so quickly I catch him off guard. His eyes widen briefly, but he's faster, he's prepared and raises his hand. It slaps my cheek with such force my head snaps back, and once again I'm feet away from him, ass on the ground.

"We can do this all night, Cole, but you'll tire first."

I shift again, arms out, fingers meeting his neck, my thumbs against his Adam's apple. Ire aids the pressure, and I tighten my hands around his throat, willing him to gasp for breath, for his knees to buckle, for him to collapse. An iron grip pains my upper arms, then I'm flying backward, hip hitting the ground, body rolling.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Cole? Had enough yet?" he yells.

I stand, compose myself, work out what to do next as I stroll toward him. "Please, just stop this," I say, the note of wheedling in my voice cringe worthy. "We can work this out, can't we? Just let me explain!"

He throws his head back, laughter billowing out of him, hands clutching his belly.

I shift, the top of my head barrelling into his gut, and he goes down with a thump, the air gusting out of his mouth loud in the quiet night. I follow with the momentum and straddle his waist. His arms rise, and I dive forward, sink my fangs into his neck, ripping, biting, sucking, blood spilling. Frenzied, I bite several sites, intent on him losing so much blood it weakens him long enough for me to find what I need. There it is, beneath my tongue, the thick vein. I dip my tongue beneath it, clamp my jaw closed, and rip that vein out of his neck.

He convulses, arms jerking by his sides, and I spit the vein out, pinning his arms under my knees. His eyes widen, those black irises so large, so all-seeing that I shudder. His lips form a wide O, teeth bared, fangs disappearing into the gums. Red, so much red gushes from his neck, and his hips buck in the final death throes. His hair whitens as his skin shrivels. Crimson spatters lace his wrinkled cheek, and I cuff it away before it dries, the scar a brilliant white, almost the same shade as his hair.

I remain upon him until he stills and stare down at his face. This isn't the Aran I knew. This isn't the boy who sat beside me on the rag rug, who shared my hopes and fears. Who I loved.

I slide off of him, rest beside him on the grass, and use the moment to grieve for all I have lost. Sobs wrack my body as images of Mother and baby Elizabeth flit through my mind. A touch of sorrow even for Father, a man too scared of myths and legends, his own suspicions, to allow himself to love his son once his daughter passed. I think of Lawrence, my only family now, and shirk off the past, sending it to the recesses of my mind, never to be brought out again.

Standing, I stare down at Aran one last time then stand at his feet. I part my enemy's legs then move to one side to position his arms

above his head. I glance up, spy the mannequin over the way, and shift to its side. The needles come out of its eyes with a sharp tug, and I shift back to Aran and kneel beside him.

Shivers trundle through me, and goose bumps pepper my skin as I perform the ritual he has performed. How did he do this without emotion? I hike in a deep breath and poke the needles into his eyes, half worried he'll come alive again and scream in pain. Job done, I step back to assess him, how he looks. Is it enough to let Lawrence know?

You are Cole Russell, born on February 25th. Yes, it's enough.

I walk away, no turning back, toward the lane beside the field. There, I shift home, right into the kitchen, and shirk my clothing. I pad to the laundry room on silent feet and stuff the jeans, the T-shirt, the leather jacket into the washing machine. Shall I risk turning it on at this time of night? Will the hum-whir-hum wake Lawrence? I pour liquid detergent into the drawer and switch the machine on, hoping he sleeps heavily. I leave the room, closing the door behind me, and traipse down to the basement. I need to get the essence of Aran off me, and the shower tempts me inside.

I shiver again now, the reliving of what I've done wreaking havoc with my emotions. I want

to cry, scream, yell out my frustration. Guilt from my initial crime of turning Aran rages through me, reaches every nerve ending, infuses my muscles, my bones. My conscience won't leave me be, and I can't stand myself. Won't be able to stand myself until Lawrence comes home, until he holds me, tells me he understands and that everything will be all right.

I open my eyes and for once look at the clock, unable to stick to my usually rigid self-restraint. Ten a.m. Is Lawrence at the police station? At the morgue? Walking the streets to work out his feelings regarding me? What's he doing? What?

Thoughts of having to leave him prod at my mind. I see myself packing a small bag, tears streaming down my face, my throat painful with suppressed sobs. Lawrence watches, arms crossed over his chest, his facial expression one of anger. That furrowed brow, those tight lips pressed together, those beautiful eyes regarding me with such disdain kills me inside, and I zip the bag closed, heft the strap over my shoulder.

I stand before him, soak up the hate he feels for me, knowing I'll carry it with me for all time, its weight heavier than any bag. I raise my arm to touch him one last time, to trail my fingers along his jaw line, the stubble

pricking my skin. But he takes a step back, turns his face away, and my hand falls to my side.

I'm tormenting myself, I know that, but if I prepare myself for the worst, when it comes I'll handle it better. I laugh. Who am I kidding? Reality is harsher than any imagining. Leaving him will be like ripping my heart out.

An overwhelming urge to see him now assails me. I throw the duvet to one side and leave the bed. At the door, I take the manacle key and unlock the fetter, telling myself I'm breaking our rules, showing dominance. I should wait here. I should suffer my sins until he walks through that door and delivers my penance.

Undecided, my hand braced to remove the manacle, I close my eyes and think, really think for a moment. Already I've broken our rules. Left the house without his permission. If he's not angry about my killing Aran, surely he's disappointed in me for disobeying him. Do I risk disappointing him again? Is my need to see him, to explain, to know my fate *now* greater than our promises?

God, I just don't know.

I turn and look at my room, the only home I've known for such a long time, the only place that's *felt* like home since the one of my

childhood. And I feel like that little boy now when Elizabeth died. Lost. Confused. Afraid.

I relock the manacle and return to the bed. Beneath the covers, I let the tears fall and await whatever my soul-keeper has in store.

Chapter Fourteen

Awrence stood a foot or so back from Sally. The morgue's unique scent in his nostrils, he braced himself for her findings.

What the hell will she think when she opens that body bag and sees a withered old man, one who looks older than any she's seen before?

Rudy stood beside him, face masked, staring at the metal table on which Aran's remains rested. As usual, his red cap sat on his head, the brim casting a shadow over the top half of his face. What was going through his mind? Lawrence fought back a smile. Probably counting down the hours until he could go home to his wife and fight about stupid shit. His partner looked tired with those dark crescents beneath his eyes, his stance somewhat slumped, giving him a dejected air. He thought of Cole. Did he look like Rudy?

"Right!" Sally said, cutting off his reverie and snapping on latex gloves. "Let's see what our vamp has done this time." Her cheery voice echoed a little, and she smiled grimly, nodding at Bart to unzip the body bag.

He did so, and a waft of rotting meat blasted Lawrence in the face. He winced, breathed through his mouth. Rudy gagged and coughed. The mask didn't offer much of a barrier, then.

"Quite the smelly one, isn't he?" Sally chirped, helping Bart to ease the bag around Aran. Together they hefted the body onto an adjacent table. "Quite a light fellow too, like he's nothing but skin and bones. Now," she peered at the body, "this is altogether different from the others, wouldn't you say?"

Lawrence nodded, and Rudy said, "Killer's changed his pattern. Sick fuck."

Sally gave a curt nod. "Indeed."

Bart switched on the small voice recorder, and Sally went to work. As he watched, Lawrence prayed she wouldn't find something that would signal Aran wasn't...right. The last thing he needed was a probe into areas that would prove other beings existed. He wanted this investigation over and done. He wanted to go home.

"Hmmm." Sally picked up her magnifying glass and held it close to Aran's mouth, the fingers of her other hand holding up the top lip. "Odd. He has sore gums, like he had teeth removed recently."

Shit.

"But then that isn't unusual in the elderly, is it?" she said, placing the glass down and fingering the cheek scar. "This is rather nasty. Must have hurt at the time." She loosed a chuckle. "Sorry. My humour's a bit off."

"No problem," Rudy said. He cleared his throat and glanced at Lawrence, rolled his eyes. He *really* wanted to go home too.

Smiling, Lawrence looked back to Sally, who stared at Aran's eyes.

"Do you know, I've never seen black irises before," she said. "Amazing. Needles present, the same type as before. You might want to look into where these were made, where they can be bought."

Rudy huffed out a breath. "Since when did you become a cop?"

She smiled a small smile. "Just saying. So, onto the neck. Much rage here, I see. It's like the previous, single bites weren't enough. Maybe," she glanced at Rudy, "the killer feels you aren't getting the message yet, hence the state of this throat."

"Maybe," Rudy said, "you ought to get on with your job and let me get on with mine."

Sally laughed. "Something crawled up your ass this morning, Detective?"

"Yeah. Some prick fucking with my beauty sleep." Rudy narrowed his eyes, crossed his

arms over his chest. "Anyway, why are you so damn chirpy? Finally get some?"

Bart hid his chuckle by coughing into his hand.

Her eyes widened, and she said, "The voice recorder is on, Detective. I hardly think I'll be telling you anything about my private life."

"So you did get some. Praise the Lord!" Rudy's eyes crinkled, and he said on a laugh, "Come on, get on with it. I want to get home. Still got paperwork to do yet, and we've got to set up that damn meeting." He groaned. "No rest for the wicked."

Lawrence smiled at their banter, and he and Rudy remained silent throughout the remainder of the examination. Sally didn't appear concerned by the body in any way other than her usual comments about the manner of death. Relief joined the fatigue weighting Lawrence's mind and body, and he lurched to the side, quickly righting himself.

"Time to go, buddy," Rudy said, his hand cupping Lawrence's elbow. "We've seen enough."

* * * *

Over the next few hours, Lawrence shrugged off his tiredness, intent on filing his paperwork and setting up a meeting. Instead of putting it

off, he and Rudy had agreed to gather the team in the conference room and get it over with. With everyone aware of the recent events, the two left the police station.

As they walked across the car park, Rudy said, "Thank fuck that's over. I'm going straight to my bed."

"What, without fighting about stupid shit?" Lawrence asked.

"Well, I'll try not to." Rudy sighed. "I want at least a few hours of sleep in case this nutter kills again tonight. Please, God, let him have a night off. This shit is dragging me down."

At Rudy's car, Lawrence slapped his partner on the back. "You have a good sleep, and I'll...I'll be seeing you." A lump of emotion settled in his throat, and he swallowed.

"Yeah." Rudy frowned. "You'll be seeing me. And don't forget, I'll be waiting for my chance to get you back on that horoscope stunt."

Lawrence laughed and held out his hand.

Frown deeper, Rudy shook it. "You think being all buddy-buddy's gonna make me forget?"

Lawrence's eyes stung. "Nah, I just..." He released his hand. "Like I said, I'll be seeing you." Turning quickly, he headed for his car, letting the tears spill. Under his breath, he said, "Maybe one day."

* * * *

Lawrence stepped inside and closed the front door. Weariness settled over him, and he slung the bunch of keys onto the hall table and kicked off his boots. Jacket off, he hung it on the newel post and turned to face the basement door. He swung it open and descended the stairs, stopping at the bottom and staring at the barrier keeping him from Cole. Would his lover be inside? He bit his lower lip, nervous at what he would find. An empty bed, his lover gone? He knew Cole, knew he'd struggle with his conscience. Knew he'd have worried over Lawrence's reaction.

No, we made promises. He'll be there. Waiting.

Still unsure, he turned the door handle. Locked.

That doesn't mean anything. They keys are there for him to use. He could have locked up before he left.

His stomach clenched, and butterflies wrestled, batting their wings. With heart beating double time, he reached for the key and slid it into the lock, then pushed the door open. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the gloom, for him to register the lump beneath the duvet. He took two steps to the left and sat on the bed's edge. Looked

down at Cole. His lover's eyes flickered open, fear and uncertainty clouding them, and emotion filled Lawrence. A stray lock of Cole's hair had fallen across his cheek, and Lawrence brushed it away.

"Hey you," he said, his voice hoarse. "You got room in that cocoon for me?"

Chapter Fifteen Cole

Me's home, his body covering me, his hands arOmega in my hair, lips on mine. His tongue snakes into my mouth, and I welcome it. He's mine, forgives me, understands, and I clutch him, squeeze him to show the surge of love that embraces my whole being.

A low whimper dies in my throat, and he groans, grinds his cock against mine. God, how I love this man.

"Missed you," he whispers against my ear, and I want to cry, not guite believing he said those words, that he is here and everything is as it should be.

I try and reply, but the words trip up in my throat, and I let them shrivel, crushing my mouth to his instead. He rocks, a slow gyration, one that sends desire spearing up my cock to the tip. I raise my hips, wanting him closer, and run my palms over his back. Muscles ripple under my touch, and I smooth over the plains, the ridges of his shoulder blades, his sweat-soaked skin gliding beneath

mine. The chain tinkles, rubs along his side, and the manacle, God, how the manacle burns my wrist.

Lawrence, my beautiful Lawrence, takes his mouth away and kisses along my jaw to my earlobe. He sucks it into his mouth, tongue flicking against it, then presses his lips to my neck. His tongue laves a path to my collar bone, tingles from his action spreading across my skin. Goose bumps spring up, their emergence sharp and prickly.

He kisses my upper chest, and I arc my back. He obeys my unspoken command and takes one nipple into his mouth, sucking, tongue teasing the tip. He sucks hard, lifts his head a little, and pleasure-pain spikes, travelling to my groin.

"Ah..." I whisper, the sound tortured. "More."

He sucks again, bites, telling me not to be bossy, to remember my place. A smile tweaks my lips, and I let him have his way, let him do whatever he wants. He releases my nipple, licking down my torso, his hands kneading my outer thighs. Settling between my legs on his haunches, he leans forward and takes the whole of me in his mouth, the wet heat heightening my need. Suction grips, and his rhythm, slow and steady, pushes me close to the edge. His tongue swirls around the tip on

the up stroke, flattens against my shaft on the way down, and my bollocks tighten and relax, tighten and relax.

Fuck, I want him to go faster but resist the screaming urge to thrust my hips up. He sucks hard then soft, the changing pattern maddening. My cock throbs, the vein pulsing, its beat bordering on pain.

"Ah, fuck!" I clamp my lips closed, annoyed with myself for letting him know he's getting to me.

And he sucks on, even slower now, his teasing way indicating he is in control. I clench my teeth, willing the tingle of my orgasm away. It's too soon. I want to make it last, hold off for as long as I can. Lawrence pulls up my shaft, releasing my cock, a soft plop sounding as it leaves his mouth. His tongue swirls over the tip, tasting the pre-cum. His "Mmmm" ratchets my desire up another notch, and I can't help but whisper, "Stop! Please!"

He rises, stares down at me, that grin I love so much filling his face. "Turn over."

I scrabble to change my position, eager to receive what he has to give. On my knees, hands gripping the headboard poles, cheek to the bed, I jut out my ass. I want it whipped red raw, want it to sting so bad it hurts, and I hold my breath in anticipation. The mattress doesn't dip with Lawrence reaching beneath

the bed. The cat-o-nine-tails doesn't arc through the air and strike my ass. I wait. And wait, breath whooshing out of me. Sucking in another, I hold it. Lawrence is kneeling behind me, still, his breathing erratic.

His hands caress my ass, roving up to my lower back and down again. Each time he smoothes his hands upward, he spreads my ass globes, the action pulling at my hole. It puckers, and then Lawrence's tongue circles it, licks across it, prods it to open. I grip the poles tighter, deny the whimper on my lips the chance to break free, and suck in a breath. He pants and licks, the warm air filling my crack, cold between each waft. His tongue leaves me, and he pulls himself upright, hands massaging my ass cheeks. A sharp slap on my right buttock startles and pleases me at the same time, and he slaps again, rubbing the site, fingers kneading. He slaps, rubs, slaps, rubs, and the heat on my skin itches as it grows.

My fingers loosen on the bed poles, and I move one hand toward my cock, the need to hand-fuck myself fierce. A harsher slap stops me, and I return my hand to the pole, resisting the need to lower myself to the mattress and writhe against it. Friction, I desperately want friction, the desire too raw, too much to ignore any longer.

Lawrence's hand clasps my cock, and he jerks it hard and fast. "Is this what you want?" He jerks faster. "Does it feel good?"

I nod, my cheek chafing the sheet, a strangled "Ah!" leaving me. I rock with his rhythm, widening my legs, and he slaps my left thigh—again, again, again—fisting me with force.

"I'm going to-"

He stops, lays beside me, pulls me to join him. I lie on my side, thrust my cock forward, and tangle my legs in his, contact paramount in my mind. His hands, God, they touch my chest, my shoulders, and he crushes his lips to mine, kissing with grunts and groans. His hand closest to the bed moves down to my cock, and he grips it again but holds it still, taking his mouth away from my lips.

"Take mine," he says, breath hot, coffeescented. "Fuck it hard."

I hold him, his cock heavy, and tighten my grip. We work together, hands pumping, gazes fixed on each other's faces, fingers and knuckles bumping. I bring my free hand up from between us and slide it beneath his head, grasp his hair in my fist. His free hand slaps my thigh, and I'm undone. Cum spurts, coats our hands, then spurts again. I cry out, and he releases a stuttered groan, slaps again before cum shoots from him, hot and wet on my

belly. I jerk my pelvis toward him, and another rope of cum explodes, an almost painful release. Lawrence presses into me, his hips bucking, and slaps me once more. The last of his seed bursts from him, splatters up to my chest, and at the same time we let go of the other's cock and writhe against one another, spreading our cum, the scent of it sharp and pungent.

I can't get enough of him, know I could get hard again at any minute, but his soft kiss tells me he's spent. My cock twitches with the aftershocks, and our bodies slow their gyrations until we lay still in an embrace, enjoying a perfect kiss.

It ends, and I pull my head back with reluctance and gaze at him.

His lazy smile fuels my fire, and my stomach rolls over.

"You hungry?" he asks, fingers brushing down my cheek.

I nod.

"Then bite me."

About the Author

Sarah writes in many genres. Her love of fantasy and historicals often features in her work, and she leans toward the highly erotic. She lives in England with her adorable husband and children.

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