

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHILOH WALKER

At Micked Read

HUNT ME

A HUNTER'S WORLD SHORT STORY

"I always make room on my keeper shelf for Shiloh Walker's books."

Larissa Ione, NYT Bestselling Author

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHILOH WALKER

HUNT ME

At Wicked Reads

A HUNTER'S WORLD SHORT STORY

"I always make room on my keeper shelf for Shiloh Walker's books."

Larissa Ione, NYT Bestselling Author

Published by Shiloh Walker at Smashwords
Cover Art by Croco Designs
Editorial Work by [d.y.m.k. productions](#)
& [Sara Reinke](#)

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you did not legally obtain a copy of this book, then you should purchase your own copy.

Please note that if you purchased this from an auction site or blog, it's stolen property. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. Your support is what makes it possible for authors to continue to provide the stories you enjoy.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

To learn more about the *Wicked Reads* and The Wicked Writers,
visit:

www.TheWickedWriters.com

* * * * *

Chapter One

“Hello, gorgeous.”

The low, rich purr of her voice was enough to have Drew Quentin shifting in the miserable, busted chair. He also had to fight the urge to smile as he reminded himself he’d decided to end things with Dakota Coulter.

He wanted her, he was halfway in love with her...and she refused to so much as give him her damn phone number.

He could have handled that.

But the cop in him was a little bit disturbed by the fact that Dakota Coulter had a past that was just a little *too* mysterious. Oh, her background check held up—too well, actually. Something about her had his instincts quivering.

She wouldn’t open up for him.

“Drew?”

He closed his eyes. “I’m here, Dakota.”

“Having a rough night, sugar?”

The compassion in her voice all but gutted him. *Damn it.* This would be so much easier if she didn’t care—so much easier if he wasn’t in love with her.

“Yeah, you could say that.” He rubbed his temple. He shouldn’t have answered the damn phone. But shit, it wasn’t like he

could avoid this forever. He looked up and saw Nicole staring at him. Nicole Halloway, the local DA with the pretty blue eyes, sweet smile and dynamite body.

She was there, she was steady. She was the reason he needed to break things off with Dakota. He liked Nic. Cared for her—a lot. There was an attraction there, too, one that could maybe become more. But not if he was obsessed with a woman who wouldn't ever hang around for longer than a night or two.

“I guess you're not up for meeting me after work, huh?” Dakota sighed. “That's cool, sugar. I understand. I'll look you up ___”

“No.” He continued to star at Nic. He had to get this done. “We can meet. I...I've been needing to talk to you anyway, Dakota.”

Now Nic's brows arched up over big blue eyes. So far their 'dates' hadn't been much more than a cup of coffee, a quick lunch. She knew he'd been seeing another woman, knew he wasn't going to get serious until he'd been able to break things off. It was time he did that.

Even if it did feel a little like he was ripping out his own kidney with his teeth. Or even his heart.

Sighing, Dakota ended the call.

Something in Drew's voice had her heart aching.

"We need to talk, huh, lover? Yeah. I've heard that line before." Then she tipped her head back, staring up at the nighttime sky. Granted, she hadn't heard it much in recent years. Not since she'd slid into a crazy little world where vampires, werewolves and other things went bump in the night. Sometime back in the 70's, she thought.

Yeah. She smiled absently, some echo of fondness trying to lift the melancholy settling over her heart. But it wouldn't budge. She'd been kind of happy about coming to Asheville. Now? Not so much.

She was a Hunter without a territory or Master. Her random circuit had her rambling all over the east coast. She often ended up in this area, and she'd been just fine with that. Because this area held a lot of appeal for her, namely in the fine form of one Asheville city detective...Andrew Michael Quentin...Drew.

Drew—the cop who was getting ready to dump her.

She glanced down at her clothes, remembered she'd planned to change before she saw him. "Screw changing."

She was going shopping.

If he was going to dump her, she was going to show him in vivid, glorious detail what he was missing.

Maybe it would make her feel better.

Although she wasn't particularly counting on it.

The splash of murderous red on her nails didn't do much to lift her spirits, but Dakota was pleased with how she looked, at least. The dress might have been a bit overdone, but red looked good on her. It clung to her curves, stopped just a bit short of her knees. And she could still move.

She'd passed on the really cute Jimmy Choos with the ankle straps, settling on a simpler pair of heels. She could run barefoot without falling. Even though falling wasn't likely, running flat out in heels wasn't as easy as people might make it seem in books or movies.

On the job, Dakota was practical, and even if she was taking some time to get dumped, she was still working. The only time she wasn't working was when she crashed in her cabin up in Maine or when she got pulled into Excelsior for one thing or another.

The life of a Hunter.

Sighing, she made one last study of her reflection, pulling the brush through her dark brown hair. It curled around her mostly naked shoulders, the ends coming down to drape around her

breasts. She looked good. She was honest enough to admit that. She looked good...like a woman who wanted a man to *know* it, too.

“Damn it.” She swallowed and turned away from her reflection, determined not to spend the next hour thinking about this. Next hour, minimum, because even though she wasn’t meeting Drew until midnight, she’d be circling around the city. Circling around, watching things. Making sure she wasn’t being watched. There were paranormal creatures aplenty here.

Every damn time she came through, she had to settle trouble. None of it was *bad*. If it had been *bad* in the *major* category, a bigger bad-ass would be here.

Dakota had yet to grow into full bad-ass potential.

But she was good enough to play cop and if things got bad, call in the big guns. Part of playing cop meant being careful.

The life of a Hunter.

A damn lonely life.

“So. You’re breaking things off.” Nic stared at him with a thoughtful frown. “Look, you know, you don’t have to do this. I...I can tell you’ve got feelings for her. And it’s not like we’re ready to move in together or anything. All we’ve got so far is a couple of

casual dates and...”

He caught her around the back of the neck and pulled her close. When this woman started babbling, as adorable as it was, this was the only way to stem the flow of words. She gasped against his mouth and then sighed, moving closer. Her lips parted for him and she slid her hands inside his coat.

“Hmmm.” She hummed under her breath as he lifted his head. “What was that for?”

“To make you be quiet a minute.” Pressing his brow to hers, he stroked his thumb across her damp lower lip. “I know I don’t have to do this. But things with me and her aren’t ever going to change, and I don’t like where they are. I *like* where things are with us. We *can’t* change while she’s in the picture. Those casual dates won’t go any further until things change, right? So we change them.”

I change them, he thought.

She wrinkled her nose at him. “That shouldn’t sound so sweet. But it does.” Nic rested her head against his chest. “Call me when you wake up?”

“Yeah.” He stroked his fingers through her hair, the silken blonde strands glinting in the harsh, fluorescent lighting. “You want me to follow you home?”

“No. I’m good. I’ve got paperwork to finish up. I’ll have somebody walk me out.” She stroked a hand down his cheek. “You need to shave, baby.”

Then she pecked him on the lips and turned around, her heels clicking on the floor. Just before she disappeared around the hall, her phone rang. He could hear her voice drifting down the hall. When she suddenly snapped, “Son of a *bitch!*” it made him grin.

He was still shaking as his head as he turned to grab his stuff. But the grin had faded by the time he hit the door. He had thirty minutes.

Thirty minutes to figure out how in the hell to tell Dakota Coulter good-bye.

How did he tell this woman he loved that he was leaving her because she wouldn’t hang around for longer than a day? Hell, he hadn’t even told her *loved* her.

If she asked why he was ending it, did he tell her he didn’t entirely trust her? And that he’d rather have the sweeter, quieter woman who was *there*...even if he didn’t want her *quite* as much as he wanted Dakota?

Rage vibrated inside her. She hid in the darkness, clinging to the shadows she’d just learned to call, because she had to get

control. Yeah. Dakota was being dumped. For another woman. She could smell the other woman, even above the smoke, the alcohol, the food...and that lovely, male scent that was uniquely Drew's.

Now it was for another woman to enjoy.

Mine.

Everything inside her screamed it. But she pushed it aside. Yeah, she had feelings for the guy. She'd had them for a while, but Drew was human.

Dakota was a vampire. Her heart might still very well be human, but she'd stopped being human forty years ago. Tears pricked her eyes. She blinked them away. Nothing like leaking blood-tinged tears to really freak him out. She waited until she knew her eyes would be normal. Even though she knew they hadn't slid from their sheaths, she checked her fangs with her tongue.

He didn't know. Oh, he knew she had secrets. She could see it in his eyes. She had no doubt that was part of the problem between them. But what could she say? *Honey, I'm a vampire. I'll be around as often as I can, but...*

He was a mortal who wouldn't even believe in her world. She'd always known it would have to end. Now it was time. As she slid from the booth, she released the shadows. She saw the way he stiffened when he saw her, caught off guard. She allowed herself a

small, pleased smile. She'd seen him looking for her, and he was a cop—he'd have looked *well*.

But nobody could hide like a vampire.

She came to a stop in front of him, smiled at him lazily, careful to keep her mouth closed. Now that she was closer, she could smell the other woman more clearly and she wasn't going to risk losing that oh-so-precious control.

"Hey there." He bent down to kiss her, not that he had to bend much with the four-inch heels she wore.

Dakota turned her head to the side so that his lips brushed against her cheek. Her heart shuddered in her chest and she eased backward, avoiding his gaze as she headed toward the bar. "I need a drink," she said over her shoulder. Not that she expected it would do her much good, except maybe the familiarity of it. She'd have to down a vat of it before she could really get tanked.

She slid onto the stool and called out to the bartender. "Hendrix and tonic with a cucumber slice! Make it a double."

"Sure thing, beautiful." His smile flashed white in his dark face. White...with rather sharp teeth. She rolled her eyes. Bo was a shifter. It was one of the reasons she liked this pub. He was a decent sort. If she had to slip out sudden-like, he'd help cover her retreat. As he brought the drink down to her, he focused on her face, his nostrils flaring a bit.

“You’re unhappy, Hunter.” he said, his voice too low for Drew to hear. That didn’t keep him from trying. He slid onto the stool next to her, gaze narrowed on Bo. The shifter ignored him, stroking a finger down Dakota’s cheek. “I don’t like to see a pretty Hunter unhappy.”

“Can’t be helped.” She smiled brightly. Then she reached out and patted his hand. In a voice just as low as his, she said, “Now stop trying to piss him off. This is going to be hard enough, ’kay?”

Bo stared at her, then, with a sigh, he walked off. She took a sip of her drink. Distracted, she glanced around and saw a business card somebody had left on the bar. It had a phone number on it. For some reason, it made her even sadder to see it. Somebody else had struck out tonight.

Taking the business card, she absently started to fold it up, turning it into a neat triangle. She kept fiddling with it until Bo slid a Guinness in front of Drew.

Dropping the business card, she took a healthy drink from her glass and then turned, crossing her legs as she studied Drew’s face. His gaze dropped, quick as a wish, to her legs and then shot right back up to her face. Oh, yes. It was over.

He reached for the business card, unfolding and it smoothing out the creases. “You did that the first time I gave you

my number.”

“Habit. You know that by now.” She shoved her hair back, staring at the familiar lines of his face, memorizing them. Over, it really was over. Damn it, she had to get out of here before she started to cry. “Look, let’s just get it over with, baby. I’d rather not listen to whatever pretty speech you put together.”

The thick fringe of his lashes drooped over his eyes. “What exactly do you do for a living, Dakota, read minds?” he asked, his voice conversational. Or it would have been, if he hadn’t been raising it to be heard over the noise in the bar. One hand, long-fingered and callused in just the right way, closed around his glass.

Dakota sighed. It wasn’t the first time he’d asked, although she knew he wasn’t really asking, this time. “Baby, you know what I do for a living. Security consulting. We’ve had this discussion before.”

“Yeah. And I sell bridges in Arizona.” He took a deep drink from his Guinness. “Do I even need to spell this out or did you already piece it together?”

“Why don’t you just save me the details, Drew?” She tossed back the rest of the drink and slid off her stool, ignoring the concern in his eyes. “I hope she makes you happy, cop.”

Without saying another word, she headed off toward the back of the bar. She heard him behind her. Almost started to turn—

she wouldn't mind one last kiss. Something to give him to remember her by. But something prickled along her spine.

There was a whisper of warning, those instincts that made her what she was. Part of those secrets she'd kept hidden from Drew. As much as she'd love to give Drew that farewell kiss, she knew she couldn't. Once more, duty called. She was needed.

She shot Bo a look. He wasn't a Hunter, but sometimes she suspected that was because he'd chosen not to be.

Their gazes met. With a subtle jerk of his head, he nodded to the backroom. He'd cover her, let her leave in secrecy, in silence.

As she slid away from Drew, he played interception.

One last time. Because she wouldn't be seeing Drew again.

It all but ripped her heart out to think about it.

“What the...?”

Okay, he'd come here to break things off, but he'd wanted to say good-bye, damn it. Was there a fucking reason he couldn't say good-bye?

Oh, hell, no. He was going to at least do that. She might not be what he needed—even if she *was* what he wanted, but he would have good-bye.

“Hey there, buddy...”

The bartender, moving with an eerie silence that was almost as disturbing as Dakota's, stood between them. Drew tensed, his eyes narrowed. "Step back."

"Can't do that, cop." Then he smiled, quick and easy. "Not unless you got a good reason for tearing off into the backroom of my business. You give me a reason, then sure, I'm happy to let you. I'm a law-abiding citizen, you know."

"How about you just let my girlfriend go back there and she's upset?"

The black man reached up, scraped his nails down his cheek in a thoughtful, lazy manner. "Well, you see, the problem there is this...she isn't your girlfriend. Not any more at least. You just broke things up. Got another lady waiting for you, too."

"That's none of your business, is it?" *And how the hell did you know that?*

"Your girlfriend? You?" The man shook his head. "Not a bit. But Dakota, well, she's a friend of mine. She walked away. That means she's done. Let her go. Go on now, man. You got your own path to follow, don't you? Doesn't seem to include her anymore."

His golden eyes glimmered in the dim light and for a minute, Drew would have sworn they glowed. The man's face seemed something...other. But then the moment passed and the bartender

smiled. “You gotta understand, man. I just don’t like the idea of a cop roaming around my place without a reason, but even less...I don’t want you upsetting her any more than she already is.”

“That’s why I’d like to *talk* to her.”

“Talking to her after you ditched her for another woman isn’t going to make her feel better.” Now he stared at Drew as though he was the stupidest man on God’s green earth.

It didn’t help that maybe Drew even felt that way.

It also didn’t help that Drew had the weirdest feeling he was making a huge mistake, walking away from Dakota. But she wasn’t what he needed...

Isn’t she...?

No. What he needed was the pretty, petite blonde who didn’t have a thousand secrets, who answered his phone calls, and who would *be* there. He didn’t want to put a ball and chain on any woman, but he’d sure as hell like to have a woman in his life who was around more often an once a month, once every two months... less.

Sighing, he shifted his gaze past the other man, staring at the closed door that separated him from Dakota. “You need to go check on her then. Make sure she’s okay...hell. I don’t know. I just...”

“I’ve always been there when she needed me. Today’s no

different.”

As the cop finally left, Bo said, “Marin.”

His second, a small, sleek woman, appeared at his side. The top of her head barely reached the middle of his chest. She was one of the meanest bitches he’d ever met in his life—he absolutely adored her.

“Yeah?”

“Watch the bar for me. I think I’m needed somewhere.”

She sighed and pushed her pink-streaked hair back from her face. “Dude, you keep insisting you’re no Hunter.”

Bo smiled. “I’m not...I’m just worried about Dakota. She’s a friend. If she wasn’t, I wouldn’t worry unless it was going to present a problem for us.”

His small pack was just now getting established here. He wouldn’t risk it.

But he wouldn’t be much of a friend if he ignored that tingle on his spine, either. Dakota had problems coming her way. He didn’t know what they were, but if it was something she could handle, he wouldn’t be feeling this way.

“I’ll be back.”

As he slipped through the back door, Marin made a face at

him.

Chapter Two

Somebody was going to die. Dakota tasted it, felt it. Could feel it clogging her throat and she wanted to kick her own ass. It didn't matter that she hadn't felt anything earlier. It didn't matter that she hadn't realized anything bad was going down. What mattered was that she hadn't been doing her job. She had been with Drew.

Now somebody was going to die. She knew she wouldn't get there in time to stop it. She could feel the blood. Taste it. It hung in the air like a cloud.

Idiot. Stupid, selfish idiot. What had she been thinking?

It was thicker now, the stink of death, thicker as she drew closer to the building, and when she started up the fire escape, it was almost enough to choke her. She heard them. Voices, whispering. A grunt. A soft, broken moan. The air is thick with the stink of violent, angry lust.

Calling on the shadows, she wrapped herself in them, hiding. Distantly, she was aware of the fading, faltering pulse. The woman, she was dying. *I'm sorry...*

The window was open. Dakota hesitated. *How do I get in?*

How had feral vamps gotten in? Had the woman invited

them? There was some truth to the rumor vampires could only go where they were invited—a person set up a home, set down roots, it gave him a bit of protection. Their protection started to fade, though, when the owner died. This owner wasn't gone—yet.

Dakota wasn't going to wait until it was too late. Focusing her mind, she reached out. As she did it, she prayed. As the ferals were too far into the blood lust, they wouldn't be aware of anything else. That was bad for the woman, the better for Dakota. She was clinging to life, but only barely.

Hey, sweetheart. Invite me in. I'll get rid of them.

She felt a flicker of surprise from the woman—followed by desperation, determination. This woman wanted to live. Even though her body strength was waning with every drop of blood loss, clung to life. *Help me. Help us...*

Us...? Dakota frowned. Then she took a deep breath, trying to filter out the sense of blood. Death, that faint sense of food and something else... another scent, one she knew, hauntingly familiar and tugged at her senses.

And something—stronger, so strong, it threatened to overpower everything else.

Death. Not a woman about to die, the people who had already died.

She didn't need to wait for this woman to invite her in.

The people who lived here were already dead.

Out of habit, Dakota took a deep breath and gripped the knife she had lifted from Bo's backroom. The Kel-tech was wicked sharp and specially made, with enough silver in the blade to make any vampire very, very sorry.

The first one, stupidly standing with his back to the door, didn't survive for more than a few seconds. She plunged the knife into his back as savage jerk of her wrist, shredded his heart. He was dead before he hit the floor.

She stared at the remaining vampire where he remained crouched over his victim. "Get up." She stared at him and twirled her knife.

His eyes, dazed, all but drowned from the blood lust, stared at her. Dakota took one step toward him. Snarling, she said again, "Get. Up."

He might be lost to the blood lust—barely more than an animal. But even animals had the instinct to live. As he came for her, Dakota braced herself.

Screw it.

Drew tried to tell himself that, tried to tell himself it didn't matter. They had ended it. That's what counted, right? They had

even ended it without an ugly, dramatic scene. To be honest, he'd expected some drama. She just seemed the type.

Maybe he should be happy.

Fuck that. He wasn't happy. Damn it, she'd just walked. How in the *hell* could she just walk? Two years and this was how it ended?

Okay, so yeah, he'd ended it, but...

"Shit."

He couldn't forget that no matter what, Dakota it made him feel like nobody else ever had.

"Shit." He shoved a hand through his hair. "Not supposed to be doing this. Not supposed to be comparing them. Not supposed be thinking about Dakota, not anymore."

His future needed to be with Nicole. He knew that. She was what he needed, and pretty close to what he wanted. At least what he thought he wanted. He should call her. He needed to see her—yeah. Go see her. He always felt better after he saw her, after he talked to her. Once he did, maybe this emptiness inside would go away.

Frowning, he saw the messages on his phone. It was from Nicole. When had she sent it? He tapped the screen to bring up her

message.

Had to go check on a client. If you're free, might be in your neck of the woods in an hour. Don't know about you, but I could use the company.

"My neck of the woods?" He scowled.

A cold chill ran down his spine. He needed to see her. He needed to be there. Right *now*.

"Bastard." His worthless body fell to the ground and although everything inside her screamed to get to the woman, Dakota paused to make sure the heart was completely destroyed. It was.

She checked the other corpse and heaved out a sigh. Both dead. Good. Job done. *Shittily* so, but still done. Moving over to the woman, she crouched at her side and did what she could to stop the sluggish flow of blood.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have been here sooner."

There was no response. She was fading. Taking a deep breath, Dakota blinked back the tears, tried to think. Once more, something about the woman sent tugged at her. Familiar, very familiar. Dakota hadn't met her before—that much she knew. But

she had smelled her before. And there was something else, no, someone else.

“No. Oh, no.”

Her already bruised heart began to shatter. Her voice was thick with tears as she spoke. “Hey, sugar. Listen, we don’t have much time. I can help you—if you want to live, I can help. It can be weird, and may not be a lot of fun, especially at first. But I can help. You have to tell me you want to go. Do you want it?”

It was law. No Hunter was allowed to bring another over unless the person wanted it. No, this woman didn’t entirely understand what Dakota was offering her, but if she wanted to live and if she was willing that was enough. Focusing, she waited.

Hello. Screw *acceptance*—it was a demand.

You help me, damn it. Now...

From the roof, Bo saw the cop coming. Although he wasn’t surprised, he sure as hell was irritated. “Don’t need this mess.”

There was a reason he preferred to leave the Hunters to themselves. They got involved in things they shouldn’t. They tried to save those they shouldn’t. They tried to help every damn body and half of them couldn’t even help themselves.

Like Dakota, for instance. Poor girl, down there doing her best to save the cop's girlfriend. Yeah, Bo knew who was in the apartment building. The woman didn't live here, but her scent was all over the place. She was here, and she was here often. And because she was, he also smelled the cop.

Dakota wasn't to blame for a couple of ferals making a snack out of the pretty lady. She'd done her job, dealt with them. They wouldn't kill another woman, another child.

He was pissed off, and yeah, he did feel guilty some poor human had suffered for it. But that was the way of the world. Monsters preyed on the weak. Dakota would let the guilt eat her up, and because she had a connection to this victim, it would be that much worse.

And here comes the cop. "I do not need this." Leaping off the roof, Bo landed lightly on the fire escape on the floor below.

Sighing, he ignored the sarcastic voice in his head reminding him that he didn't have to be here. Yeah, he did. Dakota was a friend. She had trouble coming her way, trouble with a capital T. He didn't leave friends hanging.

Chapter Three

Hurry, hurry, hurry.

It was a scream in his head, a song in his blood. Drew lived by his instincts. Like the time he had first seen Dakota—sauntering down the street, all sexy curves, feline smile and attitude. Instinct had demanded he follow, just as his instincts had screamed *mine*.

Right now, his instincts screamed *danger*. They screamed *death*.

Everything looked normal as he tore into the Hendersons' apartment building. Nothing looked off. Nothing sounded off. But something was—the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, adrenaline crashed through him and every muscle inside him was loose, ready for action. His phone was silent. He had called Nicole twice on the way over. She always answered, at least when she wasn't working.

He knew this apartment building too well. One of the elevators never worked. The other was slower than smart, and it broke down often. He took the stairs. Five floors up—it only took him minutes, but it felt like years.

Nic...

The Hendersons lived at the very end, the two-bedroom

apartment housing a family of four. Up until past fall, it had been a family of five. The oldest had run away and gotten involved with a criminal type. When she had tried to leave, the bastard that killed her. The family had proof of their daughter's involvement, though, and they had gone to the cops.

Was that why Nicole was here? He didn't know. All he could think was...*Be safe, please be safe.* And because he didn't trust that to be enough, he prayed silently, *please, God, keep her safe.*

If any of those thugs had gotten to her, Drew was going to tear this town apart. He wouldn't rest until every last one of them had been arrested and put behind bars.

He reached the door, hesitating.

He couldn't wait. He knew that. He couldn't wait... and neither could Nicole.

Dakota heard the footsteps. More than that, she knew she wasn't alone. Recognizing his scent, she ignored him. She couldn't lose focus right now.

"Come on, sweetheart. You need to take more." She held her wrist to the woman's mouth and when she fought to turn her head away, Dakota held it in a merciless grip. She hadn't done this

much to lose her now. The problem was that Dakota wasn't overflowing with blood of her own.

A master of the obvious, Bo decided to emerge from the shadows and point that out. "Baby, you know you haven't fed enough to be doing this. You barely have enough blood to walk out of here."

"I'll be fine." Staring at the blonde's face, she thought she saw a bit more response, some animation there. A split second later, she felt the response as the wounded woman started to draw on her wrist.

Behind her, Bo sighed. A second later, the rich tang of shape-shifter blood filled the air and Bo's wrist appeared in the center of her field of vision. "Feed, Dakota. You and me got about three minutes before we have company. And trust me, they aren't bringing us tea and cookies, either."

"What...?" She scowled, but she wasn't looking at him. Staring at the door, she narrowed her eyes.

"Feed. Now. Her cop is on the way and what do you think he's going to do when he sees this mess? I'll deal with the bodies and I'll handle the blood—throw enough chemical shit on it that no lab in the world is going to be able to get anything useful out of it, especially not vampire DNA. But you and her, you have to be gone..."

She didn't wait another second. As the woman fed from her, Dakota seized Bo's wrist with her free hand and closed her mouth around the wound there. It was already healing, but that didn't matter. Her fangs pierced his skin and the rich, ripe taste of his blood flooded her mouth.

It wasn't even a minute before Bo rested his other hand on her scalp. "Enough, baby. We didn't have three minutes. Our time is up—that cop of yours is fast. And damn quiet for a human. He's already on almost on this floor."

In under sixty seconds, Bo had scattered the chemicals needed to break down the vamp DNA. Another ten seconds wasted as he gathered the bodies of the dead vamps. In another fifteen seconds, he was out the window. Dakota gingerly pulled her wrist from the woman's mouth, grimacing as she fought to continue feeding. Already hungry—that was a good sign, Dakota supposed. Showed strength.

As she gathered the woman in her arms, she looked up and as Bo looked back through the window. "Go on. You need to be out of sight more than I do. I don't have anything here to come back to, in the end. Your life is here, though."

He nodded. "I'll keep in touch."

He was gone in another blink.

Dakota started toward the door, cradling the whimpering

woman in her arms. Soon, she'd fall into the deep, dark slumber that would dominate the next few hours. It would give them some time to get safe—and they needed to be safe—

Shit.

She heard the footsteps. And she could smell him.

Don't look, don't look dontlookdontlook!

Lunging through the window, she peered downward. Five stories. She could jump that. The door behind her opened. Foolishly, she glanced backward. Her heart leaped into her throat as she saw Drew. Their gazes locked.

Then he looked down and saw the woman clutched in Dakota's arms.

As he pulled his gun, the shattered pieces of Dakota's heart shriveled. There wasn't anything even left to heal now. "Don't move," he warned.

She shifted to the side, using her body to protect the woman she carried. And then she leaped.

Still unable to believe what he'd seen, Drew took off running for the window. This wasn't happening—

He wasn't going to find Dakota crouched on the fire escape, carrying a bloodied Nicole around like a ragdoll. It wasn't

happening—wasn't, couldn't be. He was seeing things...

The fire escape was empty.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he turned and looked around. Maybe he was seeing things...?

Except the Hendersons' apartment was a bloody mess—very, very bloody. There was a faint, odd smell in the air—something like bleach, but not quite. Remaining by the window, he reached for his phone.

He'd call this in. Then he'd call Nicole again.

He hadn't seen what he thought he'd seen.

He hadn't.

If Dakota had been here, she'd either still be on the fire escape or if she'd been *able* to haul Nicole down the fire escape, he would have either seen her climbing down, or seen them both... no. He couldn't even make himself think of that image.

There was a logical explanation for all of this. There had to be. Nicole was at home, or she was out with a friend, or something... Dakota wouldn't *hurt* anybody. She didn't even know who Nicole was, right?

There was a logical explanation, and he'd find it.

Except there wasn't one. And he couldn't.

Twenty-four hours passed and as those hours ticked by, Drew was aware of too many fucking weird things.

All of the Hendersons were dead. The children had been killed in their sleep, the father's head had been all but ripped off, and the mother had been raped, her throat practically torn open.

Nicole was missing. Her phone, her coat, her keys, all of them had been found at the Hendersons' apartment. Her car was parked outside, just down the block. When he tried to track down Dakota at her 'security firm' he'd been told she'd turned in her resignation early that morning, as well as relinquishing the key to the apartment they had furnished for her. They were terribly sorry but she hadn't left a forwarding address, promising she'd come by to pick up any needed paperwork in a few weeks—was there any way they could take a message? Naturally, they told him, they'd cooperate in any way they could.

Warning sirens were already screaming in his head.

What in the hell is going on?

Eyes gritty, head pounding, Drew pored over the lab reports, trying to understand what he was seeing. It was just a rough preliminary and it was likely about as conclusive as anything he was going to get, too.

The blood that had been found in the living room was messed up. Contaminated with something, the techs had told him.

Something similar to bleach—that made him think of what he’d smelled.

But they couldn’t identify the compound. They also didn’t think they’d be able to process the blood. It was breaking down on them—it’s like sludge, Detective. We can’t even get a blood type—never seen anything like it.

“You know, you can’t work this case.”

Looking up, he met his lieutenant’s eyes. Then he looked back down at the reports. “I’m not working this case. I’m reading these reports. That’s not the same as working this case.”

“Just like you calling and hassling the lab techs isn’t the same. Just like you doing door to door isn’t investigating?” Anna Reid lifted a graying brow as she studied him. Sighing, she settled herself on the seat in front of his desk. “Drew, I know this is hard. But you can’t work this. And you need to take a few days off. Go home. Clear your head.”

“I can’t.” He couldn’t clear his head...every time he even closed his eyes, he’d seen Nicole. Suffering—screaming. Shit, earlier, he’d dozed for maybe twenty minutes and had the most fucked-up nightmare. Dakota had been torturing her. Holding Nicole down on a bed—

“I *can’t*.”

“You don’t have a choice.” She rose from the chair,

lingering for a moment. “Go home. Take a few days. I promise, if there’s anything new, I’ll call you.”

Chapter Four

Go home.

Yeah. She could make him go home, all right.

But the lieutenant couldn't make him stay. After another one of those fucked up dreams hit him, Drew left. Driving around aimlessly. Until he wasn't—until he realized he had a direction. On a road heading north out of North Carolina.

Drew didn't know where he was going, but he knew he had to go somewhere. He stayed off the highway, sticking to the smaller roads. When he came across a small town, he figured he'd stop and get some gas, maybe grab a bite to eat although he wasn't hungry.

But instead of searching for a gas station, he found himself slowing down in front of the small hotel. He wasn't sure why.

It didn't look like much. The units were set up in groups of twos or threes.

The beds would be rock hard, the water pressure would suck, but it would be cheap.

"What in the hell am I doing here?" What he needed to be doing was calling his lieutenant, seeing if there was any progress. Or maybe heading back to town and doing his own investigating. He could stay out of the way. Nobody had to know what he was

doing.

Instead of doing any of that, he turned into the parking lot of the little hotel.

Because he knew he needed to, though, as he parked his car, he grabbed his phone. A quick call to his boss, Anna Reid would only take a couple minutes. And he suspected if he didn't call, it would make her suspicious. He didn't want that.

"Lieutenant." He climbed out of the car and shut the door, leaning against it as he studied the hotel. It looked even more humble up close. "Has there been anything new? Have we found Nicole yet?"

"Sorry, Quentin...there's nothing new. She hasn't been seen or heard from. You know I would call you if I had news."

"Yeah. You know I can't just sit around twiddling my thumbs either, waiting for you to call me. I had to at least check."

"Yeah. I was surprised you hadn't already called. I was getting kind of worried—thinking you were out doing something stupid." She paused. "You don't plan on doing something stupid, do you, Drew?"

He ran his tongue along his teeth. *Something stupid?* Hell. He just might be getting ready to do that. He didn't know. His skin was itching something awful and his instincts were screaming.

"Nah, I want to keep my badge. Keep in touch."

He ended the call and tucked the phone in his pocket. Blowing out a breath, he started toward the office. Although he had no clue what he was going to say once he got in there. *Hello... I'm a cop. I live a few hours away from here and the night before last, I broke up with my sort-of-girlfriend and less than an hour later I saw her hauling my other sort-of-girlfriend's body out of the window of an apartment. They disappeared right in front of me. Nobody has seen them almost forty-eight hours. Now I don't know why I'm here. But I feel like I'm supposed to be. Any idea why?*

Yeah, that would get somebody's attention. Just not the kind he needed.

Okay, so he wouldn't mention the fact that Dakota had disappeared from a five-story building carrying a woman who had weighed almost as much as she had. She hadn't fallen, because they would've found bodies. He kept that fact quiet from his fellow officers—he would keep it quiet now. He would just go with some official line, *investigating a missing persons case... yadda yadda yadda—seen anything suspicious?*

No reason to get descriptive at all.

As he stepped inside the office, stale stink of cigarette smoke wrapped around him like a cloying, embrace. It was going to cling to him, too. Sighing, he moved to stand at the desk.

As the older man ambled through a door behind the counter, Drew rested his hands on the old, stained wood. It was clean, though, cleaned and polished to a mirror shine. There was a smudged fingerprint there. Absently he brushed his thumb across the small smear. When he did, his elbow bumped into a cup of pens, knocking them over.

“Sorry.” He shot the owner an apologetic glance and scooped up the pens on the counter. Then he crouched down and gathered the pens that had rolled onto the floor. That was when he saw it. If he hadn’t bent down on his knees, he never would have.

A piece of paper, maybe a receipt. Folded into a neat triangle, roughly the size of the end joint of his thumb.

She could never be still. For some reason, it had always charmed him. That wild, crazy energy she had inside her.

The little folded triangle lying on the floor could have been left there by anybody. Logically, Drew knew that. But as he picked it up, that itch along his spine got worse, and his blood roared in his ears.

Slowly, he stood. The hotel manager was at the counter now, a friendly smile on his face. But it faded when Drew pulled out his shield and laid it on the counter.

“Officer. Can I help you?”

“Detective.” His hands were sweating, he realized. His

hands were sweating, his heart was racing, and he felt more than a little sick. Dakota...was she here? How could she have hurt Nicole? How did Dakota even know about her? “I’m looking for a woman who might be one of your guests. She’s about 5’3, mid-thirties, long, dark brown hair. She would have checked in yesterday or today. Have you seen her?”

Something flickered in the man’s eyes. He was good—very good. But Drew saw it, that flash, there and then gone again.

With a smile, the man said, “Naturally, Detective, I want to help. But I have a responsibility to my guests as well. You’ll need to give me some sort of warrant before I can tell you anything.”

Still gripping that small piece of paper, Drew returned the man’s smile. Then, without a word, he left the hotel’s office. The man had already told Drew everything he needed to know. The rest, Drew figured he’d just take a look around and see if he couldn’t find those answers for himself.

Sick at heart, tired and hungry, Dakota rose from the floor. Nicole was sleeping on the bed, if her restlessness could be called sleep. The fever had come on her yesterday, the Change hitting hard and fast.

As hungry as Dakota was, Nicole needed to feed. Drawing

her knees to her chest, Dakota pressed her face against them. "I'm not equipped to handle this."

She had never brought anybody over. She knew the basics. After all, she had gone through this herself, and all of the Hunters were taught—they had to be, in case they ever had to make a choice like this. Ideally, this would've been done in a better place. A more controlled environment. Too bad life didn't happen under ideal circumstances.

So Dakota was doing the best she could—the best she could think of was to get Nicole to Excelsior. But first she had to get somebody here so the newborn vamp could feed when she awoke. Which meant Dakota needed to go trolling.

Her destination was the town's single bar. Of course, it involved her leaving the security of the hotel before the sun set. She could do it, tolerate some of the evening sun, but not for long.

Nicole would sleep longer but if Dakota wasn't back fast enough, the baby vamp would rise and hunger would drive her out on her own. She was too young to be able to control it yet. The hunger would drive her to do awful things if somebody wasn't there to help her.

Staring at the tousled blonde head just barely visible under the blankets, Dakota sighed. "This isn't what I signed up for. I wanted to kill the bad guys, that's all."

It only cost him \$20 to convince the gas station owner to let him leave his car there. Not bad, and it only took him five minutes to make his way back to the hotel. And he got back just in time to see something that left him rather floored.

No. Just... no.

It was her, though. Dakota. He couldn't see her face—he was too far away. But he recognized that hair, and he recognized that walk. Even with her head down, her shoulders slumped—it was her, all right.

Was she leaving? Did he go back for his car?

But even as he went to do just that, Dakota glanced back toward building behind her. There was hesitation in her steps.

What in the hell...?

As she started back toward her car, suspicion settled in his gut. Suspicion. Fear. Maybe even hope.

The skin on the back of her neck crawled. Dakota had the weirdest damn feeling she was being watched. The wind blew her hair back from her face and the sun was already stinging her skin. She breathed in deep, trying to pick up something on the air—the

strong wind was throwing her off, though and she didn't have time to linger if she wanted to be back before Nicole woke. And this wasn't just a *want*—it was a *need*. She *needed* to be back.

So she didn't worry about the strange sensation of being watched. Whoever it was, they were human. A witch, a were or vamp—any of those would have set off her internal alarm in a different way. Since it wasn't that, she needed to focus on the problem of her baby vamp and keeping her fed. Safely.

Maybe God would smile on her and there would be a town drunk. Wouldn't be a tasty treat for Nicole, but a town drunk would be pathetically easy for Dakota to use her not-so-impressive mental skills on and once Nicole had fed, Dakota could wipe the memory away. Nice, simple...

Drew circled around from the back, making sure any nosy managers peeking out from the office wouldn't be able to see him. He'd noted the general location Dakota had looked and it had to be one of two buildings. Her car had been parked closer to this one, too. So he figured this was the best option. But he was wrong. The curtains were partially open. If anybody was using either of these rooms, they were an obsessive neat freak. The same could be said for the next unit. But the one next to it...the curtains were drawn

tight. Not even a sliver of the room could be seen.

His gut was a cold, hard stone. He stood there, staring at the door. Images flashed through his mind. Nicole twisting on a bed. Crying out. Begging for help.

Swearing, he lifted his hands to his face. Yeah, he'd relied on his instincts a lot in life. Listened to his gut—sometimes he had hunches that had played out in ways that had been almost spooky. So what if this felt *almost* like one of those things? He couldn't—

Swearing, he stepped back just a pace. Enough with this shit. Blocking everything else out, he kicked the door in. As it went crashing back, he braced himself. If he was wrong—

The sight of the blonde laying in the bed almost sent him to his knees.

“Nicole!”

But she didn't move.

When he ran to her side, tearing back the covers, she barely stirred. As a matter of fact, she barely seemed to be breathing.

Dakota slowed and pulled into the parking lot of the town's sole bar. It wasn't even a block from the hotel, if you cut across the back lots. But since she planned on picking somebody up, using him

for a pint or two of blood and then taking him to wherever he lived...well, she'd rather not be *seen* so much. Climbing out of the car, she sighed and stood there, studying the toes of her black leather boots, wishing she knew why she was so edgy.

Wishing—

There was a breaking sound. She tensed and slowly lifted her head. The bottom of her gut dropped away. Vampires had pretty spectacular hearing.

“*Nicole!*”

That voice...she knew that voice.

Swearing, she took off running toward the hotel. Screw the car. Screw catching attention. He couldn't be *near* Nicole now. And damn it, how had he found them?

Chapter Five

Her skin was too cool. She wasn't waking up, either. Lifting one eyelid, Drew peered into Nicole's blue eyes, studying her pupils. No reaction—fuck, was she drugged? Sick? *What*—

“Get back, Drew.”

Hearing that familiar, low voice, he looked up.

Dakota stood in the doorway, her eyes locked on his face—for a second, they almost looked like they were glowing—
Shit.

“I think *you* need to get back,” he told her as his heart split in two. She'd done this. Damn it. She'd somehow hurt Nicole. How could he have misjudged her—?

She came into the room, frowning at the door for a moment and then shifting her dark eyes his way. “Drew...get away from her. It isn't safe.”

Drawing his weapon, he leveled it at her. She didn't even blink—damn it, she could stare at him over the barrel of a gun and not blink. Who in the hell was this woman? “You kidnapped a lawyer, Dakota. You've done something to her. You got any idea how much trouble you're in?”

“I didn't kidnap her.” She lowered her head, pressing a

hand to her temple. When she looked back at him—

Drew stumbled back. Her eyes—*shit*—they *were* glowing.
“Get back, Drew. *Now*.”

His legs started to move. He was halfway across the floor before he could make himself stop. Shit. Not right. This was so fucking *not* right. Spinning away from Dakota, he stared at Nicole. “I’m taking her out of here and getting her to a hospital.”

I need to call the cops. That was what he needed to do. But his gut told him Dakota wasn’t going to let that happen. His gut also told him, though, that she wouldn’t hurt him. Maybe she’d hurt Nicole and God knows who else, but not him. Yet. He’d use that to get Nicole safe, and then he’d make her pay—

Returning to Nicole’s side, he bent down to lift her, still holding his gun. He had no chance, though. A hand closed around his arm. Small and feminine...it shouldn’t have been so strong. “No.” Dakota shoved him back. *Damn it*—

He fell into the wall, hitting it with enough force that it left his head ringing. Swearing, he shoved off it, wobbling for a step before he steadied. “Dakota—” He lifted the Glock he held and that crack in his heart widened, ripping his heart in two. “Don’t make me use this.”

Her lids flickered. “If that’s what I have to do to keep you safe, I will, baby. Please...just leave while you can...”

A strange, whimpering moan rolled through the air.

“Not yet, damn it. It’s not sunset...” Dakota swore, her gaze shooting to the bed. Then her gaze cut to him. “You. It’s you. Damn it, get *out*.”

If he’d been looking at Dakota, he might have seen the fear in her eyes.

But he was staring at Nicole. Watching her chest started to rise and fall...watching as her eyes opened, revealing glowing eyes of blue. Watching as her mouth opened on a broken moan. Revealing fangs.

“Nic...?”

She turned her head toward him.

He never even saw her move.

Dakota caught her just before Nicole reached Drew. Fast brat. Wrapping her arms around the baby vamp, she pinned the smaller woman. “No, Nicole—you can’t. Not now.”

“*Hurts...*” Nicole moaned low in her throat. She snapped at the empty air, like it might ease that burning ache.

“I know...shhhh...I know.” Dakota stared at Drew’s stunned, pale face. *I couldn’t have fucked this up more if I tried.*

“Dakota, please.” Nicole, begging and pleading, shuddered

in Dakota's arms.

"Here." Dakota lifted her wrist. "It's not going to help for long, but it's better than nothing. It will hold you for a few hours." *Long enough for us to get out of here, at least.*

And as Nicole sank her newly formed teeth into Dakota's wrist, Dakota stared at Drew, wondering if he'd bolt. He couldn't leave knowing what he knew—and she wasn't strong enough to wipe his mind. She'd tried and failed.

What now...?

"What's going on?" Drew asked, his voice tight and rusty as he stared at Nicole, bent over Dakota's wrist.

"What, haven't you read *Twilight*, seen *True Blood*?" Dakota forced a smile, even though her heart was breaking. She didn't know what to do.

Nicole, first. Make sure she wasn't going to attack him. Then she'd figured out the next step.

Although she had an idea. She couldn't wipe his mind, but there had to be somebody who could. He'd thought she'd kidnapped a lawyer—well, she hadn't. She suspected she might be getting ready to kidnap a cop.

"I can't believe you put him in the *trunk*."

It was hours later, nearing dawn and she'd heard this ten times already. Sighing, she shot Nicole a look as she hit her blinker. "Babydoll, I didn't have a choice. He saw us. He knows too much for me to just let him go merrily off. I wasn't able to wipe his mind, either."

"But you put him in the *trunk*," Nicole repeated. "He's a *cop* and you kidnapped him and he's my boyfriend and..."

Dakota sighed. "Nicole. I didn't have a choice. Unless I decided to stick *you* in the trunk, because you can't be that close to him yet. Even though you fed, you don't need to be around him." She made herself smile as she glanced over. "Besides, you've been through enough. You don't need to ride in the trunk."

"And he does? Damn it, he's got to be so worried. You should have let me talk to him."

"I will."

"You will?" Nicole stared at her. "When?"

"Soon." She took the turn. "The school is ten minutes away. There will be somebody there who'll know how to fix this."

She hoped.

She'd knocked him out.

Taken his phone.

Restrained him.

Oh...and let's not forget...Dakota was a fucking *vampire*. At least he was pretty sure she was, even though he hadn't seen her fangs.

When she opened the trunk and his eyes adjusted, the only thing he could think was...*I should have known. I just should have known*—not about this insane shit, but that she hadn't hurt Nicole. He still didn't know what in the hell was going on, but...

"Come on," she said quietly once he was out of the trunk. "I'll get you out of those cuffs. We'll talk. Figure out...something."

Figure out *something*...?

As she pulled the gag out of his mouth, he narrowed his eyes. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Drew, baby..." She shook her head and rested a hand on his cheek. "You really should have just left. Screw that. You should have just stayed *away*."

Yeah. He was figuring that out fast.

His skin crawled as he looked around. Everywhere, he saw people looking at them. And almost all of them moved with that odd, easy grace that Dakota had. Dakota...or Bo. Similar, but not the same.

Fuck, just how much trouble was he in?

"Calm down, sugar. Nobody will hurt you here."

He glanced at her. “Yeah? Somehow I’m not reassured.”
A sad smile curled her lips. “I guess not.”

“I tried.”

Dakota flinched as Malachi came into the other room and sank into a chair. He pinned her with a dark blue stare and she immediately looked down. He freaked her out in the worst way. “Tried?” she asked.

“Yes. I tried. He has a natural resistance, so it’s not just you. I can do it, but it would damage his mind.”

“No—” She jerked her gaze up, staring at him. Looking past him, she stared through the one-way mirror to where Drew had been placed. Like a prisoner, she realized. “You can’t.”

He was in there with Nicole now, talking to her, but they weren’t alone. Kelsey, the witch who ran Excelsior was in there, along with Shawn Lenning, one of the vamp instructors who stayed at Excelsior. The two of them could control her if the hunger returned. Shaking her head, she looked back at Malachi. “You can’t. He didn’t mess up—I did.”

“Dakota...” Malachi gave her a gentle smile. “Screw-ups happen. Something about his mind feels...well, strange. I think he’s probably got a bit of psychic skill and that’s why he’s resisting so

easily. Your biggest fuck-up was in not calling for help when things went to shit.”

Rising, he turned to the window. “I’ve enough on my hands now—dealing with a stubborn mortal cop and breaking his mind isn’t high on my list. But we can’t let him leave here if he’s going to talk.” Over his shoulder, he looked at her. “You know that.”

As he slipped out of the room, she swallowed.

“So...”

Nicole tucked her chin against her chest, staring at the table like it held something fascinating.

“So.” Drew, on the other hand, was staring at her bowed head. This was surreal. He was sitting in a room with a woman he’d been dating...and she was a vampire. In another room, just down the hall, the woman he was in love with? Another vampire. Surreal.

“That’s Dakota.”

Now it was *his* turn to study the table. Yeah. Pretty damn fascinating. “Shit, Nic.”

She laughed softly. “Hey, Drew. Stop looking like you kicked my puppy...or me.”

Shooting her a glance, he pushed back from the table and started to pace. “I wasn’t very fair to you,” he said softly.

“Stop.” Nic sighed, slipping him a sidelong glance. “You weren’t unfair. I knew you were seeing somebody. I knew you cared about her. I also knew you liked me...I just kept hoping in the end, I could make you like me *more*.”

She snorted. “Now if I’d met Dakota earlier? Seen how you look at her?” She shook her head. “You and me, we might have had a chance, if you hadn’t met her. But as it is? Nah. We’re friends. Hopefully we can stay that way.”

He had his own misgivings about that but he wasn’t going to say anything. “You think you’re going to be okay?”

“Yeah.” A smile curled her lips. “It’s going to take some adjusting, but I’ll be fine. What about you?”

That was something he couldn’t answer.

Chapter Six

The way they kept looking at him was driving him nuts.

The big guy, his bald head as smooth as polished quartz, shot him a narrow look before focusing back on Dakota. She had her back to him and her shoulders were slumped.

If he tried hard enough, he could hear them.

He didn't want to, though. He didn't want to think about the insane shit going on. Nicole seemed okay and that was the main thing, now that he knew Dakota hadn't hurt her. He didn't want to...

"—fuck up, you fix it. How you think you can fix this, kiddo?"

Dakota groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "I don't know, Shawn. I just don't know."

"Well. You need to think fast or you'll be the one paying for it. This is serious, D.C. People will die if word of us gets out—what were you *thinking*—?"

Closing his eyes, Drew turned away and started to pace. Damn it, he didn't know what to do. Nobody seemed to want to hurt him—not even that big, red-haired bastard who'd come in on them earlier. Although *something* had hurt—he'd felt something in

his head, like somebody was pushing on it.

But nobody had done anything to him—nobody had even looked at his neck. Well, except Nicole.

Still, he didn't see them letting him leave here, knowing what he knew. He could try telling them he wouldn't say anything. And he wouldn't—it would be a danger to both Dakota and Nicole. He couldn't risk that. But nobody here was likely to believe him and why should they?

Damn it, he was fucked.

And worse...so was Dakota.

You'll be the one paying for it.

What had that meant?

Was she in trouble now?

Blood roared in his ears. And as he stared at the floor... once more images begin to flicker through his mind, rolling like a silent filmstrip, completely and utterly fascinating.

Nicole had told him what she'd gone through—somebody had attacked her. Dakota had found her, but she'd lost too much blood. The only way to save her had been by making her a vampire. It hadn't been fun, either. Bad fevers, like she'd been sick. Seizures. Dakota had been forced to restrain her. Like what he'd been seeing in his head. It was insane...so screwed up. But all of this was insane. All of it. Maybe this was what he needed to do.

How things were supposed to happen.

They had taken his service revolver, his phone. But there was one other thing. Feeling oddly disconnected, he reached into his back pocket. The knife wasn't good for much of anything except cutting open boxes and the like—he used it as a letter opener more often than anything else.

He figured it would open a vein, too. If it saved Dakota...

The smell of blood was something any vampire would recognize. Spinning around, Dakota stared at Drew's back. He was still standing, but he wouldn't for long—not considering the amount of blood—

“Drew!”

She lunged for him.

“Mother fuck...” Shawn whispered behind her. He was faster than she was, and he reached Drew just as the other man started to sway.

They were on the floor now, kneeling amidst his blood. As Shawn gripped Drew's wrists, easily cutting off the flow of blood, she cupped Drew's face. Okay...he would be okay. He was pale, but that was okay. He hadn't lost that much...

“Damn it, Drew, I told you that nobody would hurt you.”

She stared at him, her heart tripping a bit in her chest. “What are you trying to do?”

“Save you...” He grimaced and tried to pull away from Shawn. Dark lashes fluttered over his eyes. “They can’t hurt you for telling me if I’m one of you, right?”

“Saving me—?” She could smack him. Kiss him. Shake him. “Damn it, Drew. I don’t need *saving*. Nobody was going to hurt me.”

“They...” Confusion fogged his eyes. Or maybe that was blood loss. “But he said you’d have to pay...”

Shawn frowned. “He’s got good ears for a mortal.”

Dakota ignored him, swallowing. “It’ll be okay. You didn’t have to hurt yourself just to keep me out of trouble.”

He closed his eyes. “And what if I kind of wanted to be with you, too?”

As her heart did another one of those funny stutters, footsteps sounded outside in the hall. “Healer’s here, kiddo,” Shawn murmured.

“Be with me?” She shook her head. “But you dumped me. Damn it, no. We’re not talking about this. We’ll get you healed and then...”

“No. Because if I’m healed, I can’t be with you...” He opened his eyes and stared at her. “Can I? Not for real. Not for

good. That's why, Dakota. I needed more and this is my only chance for it, isn't it?"

He shot the vampire holding his wrists a look. "Let me go."

"Don't you *dare*," Dakota snarled. "I mean it, Shawn."

The black man grimaced at her. "Dakota...ah, well. It's kind of his choice..."

Shawn let go.

He slept.

For now.

Dakota sat at his bedside, feeling old. She'd slept until an hour before sunset, her body forcing it on her, even though she'd wanted to stay at his side. She was there now and she wouldn't leave until he opened his eyes, and fed...so she wouldn't feel so bad when she beat him.

Damn it, she wasn't ever going to forget what he'd done. She didn't fully understand it, either. She realized he had some disturbed, twisted sense that he'd been helping her, and while it made some part of her heart warm a bit, she *still* wanted to beat him.

"What were you thinking?" He'd slit his wrists. Damn it. He'd slit his damn *wrists*.

She felt sick. Sick at heart, sick in her soul.

She needed answers. She needed...

Him. She needed him. She'd needed him for a very long time. Pretty much from the first night she had met him. The night she should've turned around and walked away. And now look what she had done. How badly she'd screwed up his life.

Absently, she found herself thinking about what Shawn had said—what Drew had overheard.

You'll be the one paying for it... yeah. She guessed she was. But Drew was paying, too. And he didn't deserve that. He didn't deserve any of this.

None of it.

A moan came from the bed. Drew moved restlessly, tangled in the sheets. Rising, she moved to his side. The fever. It was coming back.

He was burning—so damn hot. Was he sick? Had to be... couldn't move, couldn't breathe, so *fucking* hot—why was he so fucking hot? Why couldn't he breathe?

What in the hell was going...?

Pain gripped him, twisted him. Tore at him like it was going to rip him into shreds and just when he thought it would drive him to

screams, it eased. And Dakota. He heard Dakota...

It was Dakota, right? Her hand in his, her voice murmuring to him.

But she couldn't be. They were over, right?

Images flashed through his mind—crazy images of glowing eyes, Nicole and Dakota. His mind couldn't process it. Maybe he wasn't sick—he could just be going crazy.

A cool cloth stroked across his brow. And he heard her again, that low, sexy drawl that had driven him mad from the first, now so comforting. He didn't understand her words, but he didn't have to; she was there and that was all that mattered. He wasn't alone. Listening to Dakota's voice, Drew slipped back into sleep. He just hoped she was there when he woke up.

She was there, all right. She was there. One look at her and he knew all the crazy dreams that had haunted him over the past hours hadn't been crazy dreams. Not unless he really was going crazy.

He opened his mouth to speak but he didn't even manage a word before gut wrenching pain ripped through his belly. Dimly, he heard a knock at the door. But he was too busy wondering if he was dying to worry about it. Doubling over, he tried to breathe

through the pain. Then a hand touched his brow.

“You need to feed. That’s what’s causing the pain.”

Feed... what? “Feed. What do you mean—feed?”

“Sugar, you’re a vampire now. What do you think I mean?”

He sucked in a breath and that was when he smelled it. Something lush, rich... *ripe*.

Drew was barely even aware of the next few seconds. There was a woman there, and then she was in his arms. It was a blur—a hot, brutal blur. Some part of his mind remained sane, almost horrified. He had to stop, he knew he had to, but he couldn’t, he just couldn’t—it was so *fucking good*—

And then two hands gripped his head, prying him away.

Snarling, snapping, he fought with whoever it was tearing him away.

That hot, heavy fog. Only got worse. Then somebody was whispering to him. “Calm down, sugar. You can do this—you made it through the worst. You can make it through this, just trust me. Breathe, just breathe. That’s it, sugar... that’s it.”

Sugar...

“Dakota.”

A hand touched his face. “Yeah. It’s me. I’m here. You with me?”

Misery gripped him. What had he done? “That woman—

what...how could I...*aw, fuck...*”

“Come on now. Open your eyes.”

He couldn’t. Not ever again. What had he been thinking?

“Beth.”

“I’m here, D.C.” That voice—Drew didn’t know that voice.

Opening his eyes, he found himself staring at Dakota’s face for a long moment. Then, he shifted his gaze past her and saw the other woman. She had blood all down the front of her shirt. But she was alive. Alive—how?

“What is going on?” He sat up, looking between Dakota and the other woman.

“Don’t you think you’ve got enough to process right now?” Dakota’s eyes, dark and gentle, rested on his face. “Beth, thank you.”

“Not a problem, Dakota.”

Drew called out after her, but he was ignored. Ignored, and left alone with Dakota. “How is she still okay?”

“We can talk about that later. Right now, we have more important things to talk about. Like me beating you, for example.” She jabbed a finger into his shoulder. “What were you thinking? You have any idea what you did to me?”

Scowling at her, he rubbed his shoulder. “Damn it, what are

you trying to do—put a hole through me?” Then, giving into the urge, he reached for her. As bad as he had felt earlier, as sick as he suspected he should be, he shouldn’t have been able to do it. Hell, he shouldn’t even be *alive*. But he pulled her into his lap like she weighed nothing. He actually ended up using too much force—and they ended up on the floor when he lost his balance. That was just fine with him. Fisting a hand in her dark hair, he closed his eyes. “Well, I guess I understand a little bit more about all those secrets you. But, Dakota, security? Couldn’t you do any better than that?”

“Shows how much you know.” She sniffed. “I do work in security, just not the sort you would think. You still haven’t answered me. What in the hell were you thinking? You didn’t have to do that—you didn’t have to do this. Not for me. I don’t think you realize exactly what you have done. This is permanent—it can’t be undone.”

“What makes you think I would undo it?” Opening his eyes, he stared at her, combing his hand through her hair to toy with the ends.

“Duh.” Rolling her eyes, she shifted around. As she did, Dakota grew aware of one thing—Drew was feeling better. A *lot* better. Swallowing, trying not to think about it, she stared at him. “Drew. Two things, one... you dumped me. Two... your girlfriend is here, she’s a vampire—you’re a vampire—maybe you two can ride

off into the sunset and live happily ever after... if you really love her. If you don't, you're stuck in one very long life and you very well may hate it. It's not a fun one, and it can be pretty damn lonely. You shouldn't have done this."

"My girlfriend." He rested his hands on her thighs. He had a look in his eyes, a heated, slumberous one that she knew all too well. "You know, you really ought to tell me how you knew about her. She's not exactly my girlfriend. We were kind of dating, and we were going to get more serious. But..." He sighed and shrugged. "Then the other night happened. And we need to talk about that. About just what *did* happen."

Stiffening, she stood and moved away. "I didn't hurt her. Somebody else did. They've already been dealt with. I got there too late to save her—she was already bleeding out. I did the best I could, and the best I could do was bring her over. I realize it's not good enough, but it was—"

"Hey, that's not what I'm talking about. I know you didn't hurt her. Already figured that much out. It just took me a while."

She shivered as his voice sounded in her ear. Close, very close. He was already so quiet...usually, it took a baby vamp a while to settle into their skin. It wasn't taken him much time at all.

As his hands closed around her shoulders, she set her jaw.

“Then what else is there to talk about?”

“Don’t you think maybe we can worry about Nicole and everybody else *later*?” He pressed his lips to her shoulder. “Right now I want to talk about you. You’re right, I don’t fully realize just what I did. But I do know one thing—I did this because I knew it was the only way I could have what I really wanted. I broke things off with you because I didn’t think I would ever have that. And as I was, I guess I was right. This sounds crazy, but while you were talking with that guy, I started seeing things—images in my head—I saw me, like this, I knew this was how I had to be if I wanted to be with you. And I wanted that more than anything for the past two years. I just didn’t think I’d ever have it—*that* was why I ended things.”

He tugged on her shoulders, forcing her to turn around. “I leaped before I looked. There is no doubt about that. Am I going to regret it? It’s possible. But the only way that will happen is if I did it for the wrong reason—I did it for you, because I think you feel the same way about me that I feel about you. I love you. I’ve been in love with you almost from the time I met you. I just didn’t think you were right for me, because of all your secrets.” He grimaced and reached up, probing his mouth. “I wasn’t prepared for this kind of secret, though. It wasn’t you the needed to make some changes. It was me. And I’ve done that. So... am I right or am I wrong? Did I

do it for the wrong reasons—”

The rest of the sentence never made it out of his mouth. Dakota lunged for him.

He caught her in his arms.

“You idiot...” She muttered against his mouth. “You stupid idiot. Yes, damn it. I love you.”

He groaned and trailed a hand down her back, toying with the hem of her dress. “Good.” His other hand, he wrapped around her waist, locking her body against his.

She rocked against him, pressing closer, but it still wasn’t close enough. Questions, demands, everything else faded from her mind. The two of them had plenty of time to talk, to figure the rest of things out. Right now, a bigger need dominated her mind.

“You know what, sugar? It’s been like...three months since I’ve seen you naked.” She caught his lower lip between her teeth and tugged. “That’s way too long.”

“Is it?” He caught the hem of her short black dress and pulled—too hard.

Dakota heard fabric tear and she might have been irritated, but the befuddled look at his face distracted her. “You’ll have to get used to it...you’re stronger than you were.” Shrugging out of the remains of the dress, she dealt with her bra and panties, lifting a brow at him. “I like my pretty stuff in one piece.”

He was still staring at the ruins of her dress. With a look at his hands, he looked at her. "I didn't...I mean..."

"Shhh." Catching his hands, she brought them to her breasts. "That's some of the stuff we need to talk about. But later. Touch me. I won't break or tear, I promise."

"But..."

"Touch me." She moved closer, crowding closer and going to work on his jeans. "Just touch me...please. Damn it, I thought I wouldn't have this again, be with you again."

She could feel the burn of his hunger, too, a purely physical hunger now. But he was worried...*that* she could scent, wrapping in the air around them. Staring at him from under her lashes, she smiled. "Drew...you should know...I play dirty."

For a vampire, lust and the desire for blood often went hand in hand. Her fangs had been threatening to emerge; now she let them. As she rose on her toes to kiss him, she bit her own lip just before she pressed her mouth to his.

He stiffened, went to jerk away. Chuckling, she clutched him tight. "Baby...you can't hurt me this way."

"Dakota..."

"You won't hurt me."

He shuddered. Then, with force that would have bruised her had she been human, he hauled her against him. There was

barely enough room between them for her to push his jeans out of the way. She managed though. He sucked on her lip and the sensation was so damn erotic, it drove her *insane*...

Tearing her mouth away, she gasped, "Bed."

"Fuck the bed," he growled. He lifted her up.

And then, without waiting another second, he pushed inside.

Oh...hell...

Groaning out his name, Dakota gripped his shoulders, sinking her nails into his shoulders. Her head fell back and dimly, she found herself thinking, it was damn good thing she didn't *have* to breathe...because she couldn't.

Strong hands gripped her hips, dragged her up. "Look at me."

Forcing her eyes open, she stared at him, into those beautiful eyes that had haunted her dreams for the past two years. Curling arm around his neck, she pressed her brow to his. "I love you."

"Yeah?" A slow, heated smile curved his lips. "I love you, too..."

His hands curled into her ass as he turned and took a few steps, until she had the wall at her back. "I'm not going to break a wall, am I?"

Dakota laughed. "If you do, you won't be the first..." She

gripped his hips with her knees. “Now stop talking. Make love to me already.”

“Bossy...bossy...” His eyes glowed as he pulled back.

Then he surged back against her, deep, hard. She cried out, arched her back. He did it a second time, a third, as he worked a hand between them and stroked his thumb over the hard knot of her clit. Hot, liquid delight burst through her. Her heart ached for him and the pleasure, even as it tore into her, it remade her.

“Mine...” he muttered against her neck. “Finally mine.”

“Always. I always was, sugar.” Arching her neck to the side, she pressed him closer...she needed...

As he sank his teeth into her neck, they both exploded.

Fuck...

“I bit you.”

His head was still reeling. Shuddering, he lifted his head and stared at Dakota’s neck. Then he gaped at he realized the holes were closing. “I...fuck. I bit you. And you’re healing.”

“You bit me...and I loved it. Now take me to bed,” she said, her low, raspy voice smug and pleased. “And maybe this time, I’ll bite you. Later on, we can have that talk...”

“But...”

She pressed a finger to his lips. “Later. We have plenty of

time to talk, sugar. We need a night just for us...”

Dazed, stunned, he looked back at her neck. Then into her eyes. She was smiling. Didn't look worried at all. Shit. She was right.

“Yeah.” Dipping his head, he whispered against her mouth, “You know what...yeah.”

* * * * *

Look for more Wickedness—releasing every six weeks—all year long..

January

Karin Tabke
BAD TO THE BONE

February

Sylvia Day
ALL REVVED UP

April

Cathryn Fox
TORN BETWEEN TWO BROTHERS

May

Shiloh Walker
HUNT ME

June

Beth Williamson
LUCILLE'S LAWMAN

August

Nikki Duncan

THE BACK-UP FIANCE

September

Mackenzie McKade

DEADLY DESIRES

November

Shayla Black

WICKED TO LOVE

* * * * *

To learn more about the *Wicked Reads* and The Wicked Writers,
visit:

www.TheWickedWriters.com

* * * * *

Biography

Shiloh Walker has been writing since she was a kid. She fell in love with vampires with the book *Bunnica* and has worked her way up to the more...ah...serious works of fiction. She loves reading and writing anything paranormal, anything fantasy, and nearly every kind of romance. Once upon a time she worked as a nurse, but now she writes full time and lives with her family in the Midwest. She writes paranormal and contemporary romance, as well as romantic suspense.

Check out her next *Hunters* book, due out in June!

UNKNOWN PAST

Something strange is happening to Nessa. Ever since she survived a near-death experience she's not exactly who she used to be—and enjoying every minute of it. Then she's called upon to go to battle against darkness. If only she could remember why.

UNEXPECTED LOVER

Dominic is having his own problems with memory, sanity, and hallucinations. Sent to Excelsior, the covert Hunter training facility, he senses a female presence that seems so hauntingly familiar. That's because he and Nessa share a forgotten past.

UNSEEN EVIL

As Nessa and Dominic regain their memories, their strange mission against evil becomes clearer. And all the more

dangerous because whether they should trust each other is the still the greatest unknown of all.

Read the first chapter at [Shiloh's site](#)

Other Hunter titles available in ebook

Hunters Declan & Tori
Hunters Eli & Sarel
Hunters Byron & Kit
Hunters Jonathan & Lori
Hunters Rafe & Sheila
Hunter's Mercy
Hunter's Pride
The Huntress
Malachi
Hunting the Hunter
Hunter's Salvation
Hunters Heart and Soul
Hunter's Need
Hunter's Fall (6/2011)

Read more about the [Hunters](#)...