

The Rise of Seth
The Bloodstone Chronicles
By L. Dee Walker & Sam Beach
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Illustration by L. Dee Walker

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Other Books by L. Dee Walker

Lies, Sacrifices, and Alibis

Special Dedication

First and foremost, God.

King Slush and Roscoe P. Dawg.

To our beta reader, Ashley Chapman. You took the time out of your very hectic day to read and offer pointers, and helped make it better. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

To Jonas Sparx, Bacchus, and Deva LaDevia for filling us in on the truth. Your secret is safe with us.

P.S. We still remember.

Chapter 1

It was going to be a ten-cup, pack and a half, one-hundred-Jellybean day – and it was only eighty-three. To top it off, she had to make one of *those* phone calls. The kind where she never knew the right things to say, even after rehearsing it over and over in her head. Be that as it may... it was time. "Reverend Reynolds, it's Dusty Garner. I'm calling about the missing person's report ya filed on Tara."

Reverend Jeremiah Reynolds once had deep brown hair and matching eyes. In his late forties, he was still quite the looker, but the months of heartache bore evidence his soul had been tested to its limit. Many swore he was molded from Reverend Shaw Moore, the preacher in 'Footloose'. He didn't cotton to devil music, coed relationships before marriage, and didn't like it when he didn't know where his little girl was. Hopefully, the latter was about to change before he lost his ever-loving mind.

Finally, someone had news about Tara. It was as if she just disappeared off the face of the planet and no one knew a thing. His baby girl was gone for seven months, but it might as well have been a lifetime. Every day he prayed for good news, crying himself to sleep, but his prayers went straight to God's messaging center. With every salty tear, his broken heart cracked a little more. The police searched but when the investigation turned cold, something told him to give Dusty a try. "Yes, Dusty. Please tell me ya found her!" His southern accent sliced through the English language like a Veg-O-Matic.

"As a matter of fact, I have."

Exhaling a ragged breath of relief, emotion choked his words. "Oh, thank God! Our Lord Savior has answered my prayers! It's not like her to go a week without calling, much less seven long-drawn-out months! Is she okay? Can I go pick her up?"

"Well, I have good *and* bad news."

"Oh Lord, save my soul." His voice was weak and shaken. "What's the bad news?"

"She's in Paris."

"I *told* her to stay away from Henry County. Too much sinning happening over there. At least it's only a couple hours away. Where at? I'll hop over and get her." Relief washed over him. "I'm gonna lecture her about not answering her daggum phone!"

A detailed testimonial from Tara's friends, a photocopy of the airline's passenger list showing the three aliases the girls frequently used, and a copy of their illegal passports sat in front of her. "A few hours? Reverend, she went to Paris, *France*, not Tennessee."

"*France*? Lord Jesus, how did she even get there? I'm forever having to pay their electric bill!"

"The flight was reserved well in advance which applied a hefty discount. They used fake passports and IDs. Very good ones, I might add."

"Why in Sam Hill did she go over yonder for anyway?" His anger catapulted to volcanic levels, as he struggled to hide it.

The quality-assurance crew in her mind scrutinized every sentence. "From what her friends said, Tara, Karla, and Cindi traveled there to celebrate 'Jim Morrison's' birthday."

"That *damn* Cindy and Karla." Composing as well as possible, he continued. "I'm sorry, Lord. Please forgive me." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Jim Morrison? Is he a friend of theirs?"

Leaning back, she slowly rocked. "No. A deceased rock idol."

"Then... how's he having a birthday?"

"Good question. From what I was told, they've been doing this since they were twelve."

"Twelve?!" His voice was thin and tight.

"Yes, sir."

"How in God's creation did they pay for it? That would've run them in the thousands!"

Unfortunately, he was asking questions that only the three girls could answer. "That... I do not know."

"Didn't someone realize that *babies* were flying halfway across the world? Isn't there a law against that?"

"Laws have tightened up since then, but they had very good fake IDs and passports."

"How? They looked like babies!"

"You'd be surprised what a little makeup can do to make young girls look older than they are. They would fly out to Paris, celebrate a few hours, and were back before Bible reading."

He vaguely recalled a few times when all three were caught lying about staying at each other's house for the night. Claimed they had to do some late Christmas shopping without the parents around to see what they were getting. It was a flimsy excuse, now he realized why. He let out an exasperated whoosh. "Dusty, can't ya go and get her? I'll pay for everything!"

"Reverend, Paris is out of my jurisdiction."

"How do I get her back? For crying out loud, she's been missing for seven months. Surely that party's over by now! Her phone doesn't ring anymore, just goes to voicemail. It's full... of all my messages." His words were a loud whisper, thick with emotion, on the verge of tears. "Please, any help will be greatly appreciated."

Wincing at the pain in his tone, shards of thin glass fatally pricked her heart, making her sit up and start typing. "Call the American Embassy," she rattled out the number, "and then zero when ya hear the greeting. Explain what I told ya... then it's up to them. I have a form here. I can fax, email, or you can stop by and we can do it here. No matter which, I need ya to bring it to me

after you filled it out, so I can make a photocopy. Any pictures of the girls would help. I could send it with the file."

"I have a few from this past summer. I'll stop by on my way to church. Thank you. You've been a *big* help, Dusty. May the Lord shine down on ya for the goodness ya do for others. God bless you."

"And you as well."

Those calls hung over her head like a cloud ready to loosen a bucket of rain. Slapping the chair arms, she jerked to her feet, stomping over to the file cabinet. Yanking it open, she took out the dossier on the three, and the forms the other parents needed to sign; placing everything inside for safe keeping. The American Embassy could start the search with Tara, but the other parents had to start proceedings on their angels as well.

There was a punching bag in the office for moments just like this. After working up a sweat, beating the hell out of it, she washed up in the bathroom. Taking a moment to pull herself together, she called the others. Karla's parents kept asking her if she had the right number. Uncaringly claiming they didn't have a daughter, only a son, as if the poor girl never existed. Cindi's parents were hard to understand from all the sobbing and screaming out, "why?" after everything she told them.

A guarded hush fell over the office. The 'tick-tock' over the door sounded more like a drum beat. Over and over, hypnotic, peaceful, lulling her mind, relaxing her body. The high-pitched ringing of her phone, cut through the serenity like a foghorn, throwing her out of the comfort zone. Scrambling to silence it, she clicked the Bluetooth in her ear, righting herself, ready to take notes if need be. "Garner."

The stained mahogany desk, filled with files, folders, and papers, had a polished name tag that read: 'Dusty Garner'. Kicking back in the black leather chair, she propped her feet onto the shiny finish. It had been one of those days. This caller wasn't making it any better. Rolling her eyes, the worn-down soles of her boots thudded against the floor in anger. Sitting up, she snatched a cigarette from the pack, lighting it quickly, inhaling deeply. A mist of smoke rose to the rotating ceiling fan as she exhaled.

"Oh, hell no! Stop right there, Bob! We have a legal contract!" It was actually a verbal understanding, but it was the same to her. "Not happening! *Ever!*" Having lived in this small town for a few years now, she picked up that southern twang like she was born to it.

Robert Fuller – regional manager of the Sweetheart Detective Agency – was the 'Bob' on her Bluetooth. There were more colorful names Dusty assigned to him, but for business purposes, 'Bob' sufficed. Not much younger than she was, the man looked as if he spent a week at Comic-Con, in the 'I roleplay online using dice and enhancers' booth. It was a miracle he got a well-paying gig with a national detective agency franchise, instead of reciting, "You want fries with that?" a hundred times a day. Some might call it divine intervention, or he sold his soul to the devil.

Dark, greasy hair, wearing black, horn-rimmed glasses, and a full face of acne, Bob Fuller – aka VVXDragonriderXVV to the online roleplaying world – was Dusty's boss. Skinnier than Bowie during his 'Thin White Duke' stage, the young man's only stand-out feature was cyan-colored eyes, with flecks of hazel through them. His claim to fame was being selected 'most likely to die before finishing college' in the Ledgemont High School yearbook. "Dusty—"

"Don't you 'Dusty' me!" Her eyes narrowed and lips flatlined. "Ya know how I feel about that."

"It's out of my hands."

"You're the boss. Just tell... whoever... that it's *not* happening!" The irony was not lost on her.

"Dusty, he's an expert and we need him."

Sparks flashed in her eyes as she ran a hand through chocolate strands, layering them back in place. "An expert? So is the town vet! Not to mention, he's probably *more* qualified than some outsider! He knows which animals hang out around here. An outsider won't! It is, after all, an *animal* attack."

"I can't call him."

"Why? His number's in the book! But, I'll tell ya what," her sarcasm drizzled into gooey sweetness, "I'll send it to ya!"

"I have his damn number! Yes, the vet knows animals, but he isn't an expert in *this* field. Your new partner is highly trained."

Rounding a brow, she took another deep drag. Sitting back, eyes rolled up to the ceiling as she exhaled smoke. "I'm *highly* concerned this happens so often, someone trained an 'expert' to deal with it. What's the difference between the vet who has oodles of years under his belt and this animal expert?"

"Easy. This guy knows how to *find* the animal... track its location... capture it without hurting anyone. A vet knows how to cure an illness. It would be like going to a dentist for a shark attack."

Caramel-coated eyes looked at the far wall. Moments passed in silence before her shoulders fell forward. "When ya put it that way... but not as my partner! I work alone. He's just gonna get in my way!"

"Dusty, he—"

"I don't wanna *hear* how qualified he is! I don't give a rat's ass! I'll quit first."

"Oh, knock it off. He's the animal investigator, so let him do his thing. You do yours. After he makes his report, he'll be out of your hair."

If the neighborhood vet couldn't help, then it wouldn't hurt to bring in an expert to decipher what mutilated those bodies to the point they needed closed casket funerals. Months. That was how long this case treated her like the unknowing lab rat, running around the maze looking for nonexistent cheese. It was as crazy as this Mad-Hatter-wanna-be world. Taking a deep breath, she quickly released it, thinking about this 'ace'. Maybe it wasn't a bad thing. After all, she didn't know a thing about wild animals. "Okay, fine. When should I expect him?"

Bob fist-bumped the air. Smiling, he looked up, mouthing, 'thank you', before taking a deep breath. "He's arriving today and you two will be working together so don't give him a hard time. I know I can count on you. I'll call you later byee!"

Growling, she pulled the Bluetooth from her ear, hurling it on the desk. "You, son-of-a-bitch. I'll get even with your ass."

The morning sunlight streamed through, hitting the stained-glass sun catcher, washing the room with a cacophony of color. Her medium-sized office was perfect but with another body, it would be too small. Four metal filing cabinets took up the left wall. Being a small town, crime went from the occasional stolen bike down to an unruly bar brawl at the pub, barely filling a quarter of one. But yesteryear, crime overflowed with neglected cases. Reading into them, she discovered a bit of town history.

'Johnny the Knife' should've been called 'The Butcher' due to his uncanny ways using a blade; filleting flesh from bone. Being the exulted 'Godfather' caused even the strongest to go weak in the knees with just the mention of his unforgettable name. He had the mayor and the 'fuzz' in

his back pocket and anchored roots in Cider Lake, making it his area. No one messed with Johnny. That was a sure-fire way to end up in one of the filing cabinets, shoved in a folder, disappearing as if ceasing to exist. In the sixties, the man vanished without a trace and so did the heavy flow of crime.

Opposite the cabinets, the water cooler sat in front of the window. The portico led to the kitchenette. The customary appliances adorned the area: coffee pot, microwave, refrigerator, sink, as well as table and chairs. A vending machine stayed filled with the recommended, yet disregarded goodies. The coffee pot was the whore of the group; seeing more action than an escort service at a Shriner's convention.

The back office was the conference room with enough seating for twelve people. The murder board was at the front: the elephant in the room. All eyes were instantly drawn there. Especially hers. A mind-boggling puzzle baiting her to solve... before another death happened.

Back in the main receiving room, just on the inside of the front door, two desks kissed each other. Too close. Unacceptable. She pulled it to the opposite side of the room. Her desk, she yanked further away, leaving an enormous chasm between the two. Dusty put two chairs in front of both desks. The murder board separated them, sandwiched between a dry-erase and smaller cork board. The AC groaned, rattling out a sudden draft of cold air, blasting from a nearby vent. Satisfied, she walked into the kitchen to clean the 'office tramp'.

Reverend Reynolds didn't remember feeling so down, ready to throw in the towel. He prayed God would deliver him from this hell. In his hands were five pictures; to together and three single shots. Pulling the door open, he stepped inside looking around, his eyes instantly drawn to the 'murder board'. "Dusty?"

The coffee pot gurgled and hissed. Soapy hands gripped the roll of paper towels, leaving a wet palm print in place. Stepping into the main area, a gentle smile lit upon her face. "Reverend Reynolds. I wasn't expecting ya so early. Would you like a cup of coffee? I just put on a fresh pot."

Shaking his head, a heavy sigh whooshed. "Wish I could. I need to relieve sinners of their heavy burdens."

Smiling, she nodded, tossing the paper towel in the trash. "I understand. Let me get the paperwork."

"God love ya, Dusty." A spark of hope ignited as he prayed she could find the girls. "I can't get any help from the embassy. No one cares but you." Sitting down, he put the pictures on her desk. "Hope these are good. They're the best I have."

Deathly claws raked at her heart, hearing the desperation in his tone. The pictures showed three pretty girls having the time of their young lives. "Perfect." Grabbing out the forms, she marked an 'X' throughout. "Read and sign. I'll send it right away, so they can begin. Not sure why the police couldn't find 'em." Handing it over, she tried not staring at the dark circles under his eyes.

Pulling a pair of trifocals from their worn brown case, he slid them on, examining the papers. Tilting his head, he noticed her watching and smiled. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Taking a pen from his pocket, he signed. "Don't mean to be rude, but if ya don't need anything else, I have to listen to sinners in a half hour." His shoulders slumped. "And frankly," looking around cautiously, "I'm afraid I'll fall asleep in the confessional."

She smiled softly. The form, photocopy of the portraits, and application went into the pile. She faxed each sheet to the American Embassy in Paris, France. "Hopefully that'll help." After receiving confirmation, she put the originals in a folder, handing it to him, keeping her own copy for the file.

"From your mouth to God's ears."

"I promise you'll have closure. One way or the other."

Taking the folder, he embraced her tightly. "There's a special place in heaven for people like you, Dusty." Gently, he placed a fatherly kiss on her forehead, just as he did for Tara the night before she disappeared. He closed his eyes tightly, ushering forth memories and ghosts from the past, fighting the emotion.

Dusty wrapped her arms around him, giving him a warm embrace in return. "And you, Reverend."

Smiling weakly, he shuffled out of her office, closing the door behind him. Outside, he looked into the blurry sky. The tears welled in his swollen eyes from months of crying. He looked older, his hair thinner than usual. A broken man. The sun's rays shone behind him like God granting him strength. A halo appeared over his head. Removing the glasses, he set them back into their case. "Lord, it's written ya don't give nothing we can't handle. I believe that with all my heart, I do. But this," wiping tears from his eyes, "is more than I would wish on any man." Folding his hands, he prayed. "Please take this cup from me." After a moment of silence, he slowly walked away.

Dusty sat at the computer. It was time to jumpstart the American Embassy into helping. Being one of the best hackers in the world, she got busy finding a wormhole inside their system. Skillfully, she pulled up cases, jotting down names and positions, along with dates. After finding the correct pecking order for the dates needed, she put the boss's signature to the application, predated it, making it a 'lost' top priority. It made the new application look like a second one. Once completed, she erased all signs she was even there. For her own file, she put the right date: July 26, 2014. Leaning back, she stared out the window, wondering what this new partner was going to be like.

Chapter 2

Chicago. Tonight, it lived up to 'the windy city'. This unusually cold summer evening tested even the hardest Chicagoan's mettle. Huddled inside the all-night coffee house/internet café – called 'Install Java' – they stayed warm. Most were too preoccupied with Facebook, Twitter, and online gaming raves to give the man entering a second glimpse, but Jonas Sparx did.

The two were comparable; sporting neatly trimmed, chestnut hair, emitting sex appeal, drawing stolen glances. Jonas nodded as the man sat opposite him, his sea-green eyes issuing a silent challenge. "Kanis."

Though seemingly close in age, Kanis Vortek was much older. Unbuttoning his Trench coat, he sat back, stroking his villainous goatee. Dark brown eyes returned the challenge. "Good work. Chicago is a much safer place now." The Russian accent seemed more noticeable when speaking with Jonas.

Annoyed, Jonas scratched his close-cropped beard. "You didn't come all this way to pat me on the back. Get to the point. You're killing my buzz."

Kanis laughed. "Direct as always."

"Part of my charm. What do you want?"

"Very well." He slid a manila folder across the table. "We have a situation that requires your expertise." Settling back, he folded his hands on his lap. "A most horrific turn of events. One well suited to your," he paused for effect, "particular skills."

"I'm busy, Kanis. Quit shuffling and deal already."

He nodded to the file. "It is all right there."

Releasing an exasperated breath, Jonas skimmed over the papers in just a few minutes. "Interesting, but I don't see where this involves us or my," he too paused for effect, "*particular* skills."

"There has been an... animal attack. Many of them. He is killing without thought. We must stop it."

Shaking his head, Jonas looked over the grisly pictures before his eyes moved back to Kanis. "How do you know the problem is male?"

"Does that really matter?"

"It might." In his line of work, everything mattered was 'highly classified'. Only the key players got the goods. He wondered if this was one of those situations or more to it.

"Very well. *It* is running around killing, and *we* need to stop it." Annoyed, he rolled his eyes.

Once more he combed through the file, stopping at the woman on the back cover. She was beautiful and very much alive, unlike the 'ripper-style' pictures in the beginning. "What's her deal?"

"That, my dear comrade, is our problem... or rather yours."

"My problem? I wasn't aware I had any."

"You do *now*."

"Ninety-nine problems but a bitch ain't one," sounded off someone's computer.

After memorizing every detail, he closed the file. Arching a brow, he pointed to the folder. "Do me the honor of acquainting me with my," his arms folded over his chest, speculative expression on his face, "*problem*."

"Dusty Eliza Garner."

"Interesting name choice."

"She is like you a... How do you say... private dick."

Jonas grinned, sardonically. "*Investigator*, Kanis. Private Dick is politically incorrect. In fact, some people take offense to it."

His brow arched. "Odd thing to get offended by."

"People take offense to football team names. There's this whole gender issue... confusion in which bathroom to use. Colleges offer safe zone closets with puppies and coloring books. The world has changed... for the worst." He shrugged. "Your old school is showing."

"No matter. She is on this case."

Jonas flipped open the folder again. "Why does that worry us?"

"She is good. *Too* good."

Jonas took a sip of his coffee, grimacing at the cool liquid, setting the cup aside. "You're beating around the bush. Why is she my problem? What does she have to do with this?"

"I have had a conversation with her superior and you are going to be her partner, helping her locate the—"

"Oh, hell no!" Jonas bellowed, pushing the assignment back across the table. "I work alone. Give that to another agent."

Calmly, Kanis slid it back. "The other agents are busy. You are the only one available."

Jonas didn't comment about going from having 'great skills' to the 'only one available'. "What am I supposed to do with her?"

"As you normally would. Get in, find the animal responsible, get out again. Keep her from the truth."

Jonas nodded. "Ah. Why can't the faction handle this?"

"We are. As the leader, I am dictating this to you."

Since the untimely demise of the council, during the 9/11 attacks, he didn't dare refuse orders from the 'faction'. "How long am I supposed to lead her on a wild goose chase?"

"As long as it takes. She is in a small town called 'Cider Lake' just outside of Memphis."

Small town. As if the deck wasn't stacked enough. "I know where it is. Saw Elvis there at a fair before he became an asshole."

"You leave tonight."

Jonas nodded, glancing over the file again. "Fine, but I expect—" he looked up to an empty seat. Sitting back, he groaned. "Prick, you ruined my coffee."

"Another cup, Mr. Sparx?" the sweet voice sounded over his head.

Jennifer Francis was eighteen and barely legal. Men went crazy for a sexy, hot redhead. A native of the south side of Chicago, visions of California lifestyle, fueled big dreams of a spot at a fashion magazine. The bug attacked when she was eight-years-old. In her living room, the family gathered as Barbie dolls 'walked' the runway, showing off the latest style.

In high school, she made her own line of designer clothes. Friends knew her as the fashion guru. It was a crisis having nothing to wear. A skirt, ripped T-shirt, belt, scarf, cute vest, and a star was born with a 'Jenny Francis' exclusive. After snapping a few pictures, she placed them in her portfolio. One of the designers at the local spot was about to be fired. It was Jenny's time to shine! She applied, showing off all her goodies, guaranteed her name would be picked.

The coffee shop paid the bills while waiting for her pie in the sky job. Her parents had big dreams for their daughter. An Ivy League college was one of them, tempting her with a fully paid tuition to a reputable Law School; their alma mater. Every celebration, they dangled gorgeous up-and-coming men from the school in her face. As much as they wanted her to argue in front of a jury, she wanted to create clothing. Cutting her off financially didn't break her spirit or determination. Cute, just shy of beautiful, most men visited the café because of her. Her long hair and bright blue eyes drew them in like a magnet. All were hers for the taking, except Jonas.

Standing, he slowly shook his head. "No thanks, Jenny." Jonas knew she had an enormous crush on him. He didn't acknowledge it for obvious reasons.

Pushing a wisp of ginger from the corner of her mouth, she waited breathlessly for him to speak. "Are you sure I can't do *anything* for you?"

Setting his palm on her face, he smiled. "There is something you can do for me, Jenny." Leaning closer, he listened to her heart accelerating out of her chest.

"Name it. Anything." That word alone screamed of her desperation for him. Whatever he commanded would be her goal in life.

"Forget you know me."

His lips touched hers for one of the best kisses she ever experienced in life. Where was she? She didn't care. She felt her whole body come alive, as a million hands took over, setting fire to every nerve. As he pulled away, she felt... something... being taken from her at the same time. It made her shiver before staggering back. Her expression blanked. Staring at him, her eyes blinked once, then twice. She appeared bored, patience waning. Glancing around, there was a sense of Déjà vu. Looking up, giving a forced, devious smile that raked in good tips, she angled her head. Men couldn't get enough of her sinuous grin. "Nothing else then, mister?"

Shaking his head, he smiled, handing her a hundred-dollar bill. "Keep the change." Turning, he headed for the door.

Staring down at old Ben's face, there was a sense of familiarity about this. Visualizing a pair of shoes, it took a few seconds for her conscience to kick in. "Hey! Wait a minute!"

He stopped, turning back to face her. "Yes?"

"Might wanna check your wallet. You gave me a hundred. Tabs only three bucks. I'd be pissed if I gave someone a bill like this for *just* a cup of coffee." Holding it out, her eyes danced over his face, trying to place *why* he seemed familiar.

Glancing at it, he shrugged. "I know what I gave you. Have fun with it." One last wink and he turned to the exit.

"Oh, my God! Are you serious? A hundred dollars? That's like ninety-seven bucks tip!"

He waved a hand as he continued out the door.

"Holy fuck! Thanks! Damn!" Rushing to the back, waving the cash around like a white flag during a treaty, brought about a hip bump to anyone met along the way. "You guys see that shit? Dude was a huge tipper! Gave me a hundred for a cup of coffee! I'm buying tonight! Who's up for—"

"Pardon me, miss?" A deep southern drawl caught her attention. "Might I get a cup of that fine smelling coffee? Maybe a piece of pecan pie?"

Turning, she smiled. The man was absolutely gorgeous. Tall, blond hair, deep blue eyes, built like a Roman statue. She could see herself getting cozy with this one. "Sure can, mister. How about a scoop of ice cream on top?" Extending a hand, she introduced herself. "I'm Jenny."

The man looked up at her slowly, his eyes capturing every nuance on her face. Taking her hand, he kissed the back. "Of course, you are. They call me... Seth."

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Jonas approached Harley Bishop, a homeless man performing for change on the street corner. They called it busking, but in Harley's day, it was vagrancy. The hypnotic harmonica wail cut through the bitter wind. Jonas took a knee, enjoying the one-man show. The whirlwind joined in, adding its own arrangement to the mix. The old Bluesman – blind since birth – could tear it up with the best. Passersby couldn't help but stop and stare while he played. It mended the heart, if only for a little while.

Back in the days of 'Howlin' Wolf', 'Willie Dixon', and 'Son House', he would have made a name for himself. He blew a harp like no one before him. Rumors claimed the devil took his eyes as a down payment with the final check being his soul. The devil always looked for a quick deal, but there was a heavy price to pay. But that was just old musician stories, told to scare the young'uns.

Jonas didn't believe in the devil. It was how the church kept people in line. Do something bad and be tortured for eternity. Your only escape; torturing others. They fell in step, blaming bad decisions on Satan. It was easier to live with faults using a scapegoat. It seemed everyone was a writer, musician, or singer, so he thought Harley was just another starving artist.

Harley's deep brown skin – weathered from years of hard labor – welcomed the odd summer cold spell. After seventy years, his salt and pepper hair – more salt – receded in curled, tight ringlets, around his upper lip and jaw. Gnarled hands, which caressed some of the finest Mississippi tail, wrapped around that shiny Hohner. They said, 'when he played, the angels and demons stopped to listen'. As the last few notes of 'Little Red Rooster' faded, Harley grinned, pushing Ray Charles shades back on his nose.

"Go get yourself a room and a decent meal." Jonas slipped a hundred into the donation box. "You'll freeze out here."

"Weather don't bother me none, Mister Sparx," the Mississippi Delta poured through his nose. "Never has."

Jonas tilted his head, watching for a few moments. "How did you know it was me?"

"I'm blind, boy, not deaf."

Rising, he smiled. "Well, you take care, old man."

Harley pressed a foot against Jonas's ankle. "That sounds like goodbye. You leavin' town?"

After spending lonely hours listening to him play, he would miss him. "Yep. I have a feeling I won't be back. If I'm wrong... I'll be seeing you, but if not," he hung his head before looking back at the shades, "it was good knowing you, Harley Bishop."

The old man's lips pursed. "Folks comes. Folks goes." With a gentle shrug, he pulled back his foot. "Been 'round long as I have, you get used to it." Looking at Jonas for a long moment, he tapped the harmonica on his wrist. "Got me no regrets, boy. Best you don't either."

"I'll try to remember that, Harley." As he walked away, the strains of 'Hardhearted Woman' followed as if Harley sent him away with a warning. As the bitter wind claimed the last few notes, an empty space appeared where Harley sat.

It was pitch black in his office, but darkness didn't bother him. Making his way to the back, he packed a small suitcase with a few shirts, a couple pair of gray slacks and an odd-looking golden box. Zipping it closed, his eyes caught sight of the oblong wooden case resting in the corner by his door. Deciding it was better safe than sorry, he gathered it up as well. Giving one last look around, he took a deep breath, stepped out into the chilly night and hailed the nearest cab.

The flight from Chicago O'Hare International to Memphis International was quiet with only twenty other people on board. Some read, a few wrote, but most slept in awkward positions. Blocking out background noise, he opened the file, flipping past the carnage to his temporary partner. Kanis gave him all her information. Why... he wasn't sure. It was probably phony anyway. Most investigators had enough skeletons in their closets to get elected to Congress. His own was filled to bursting.

Chapter 3

It was well after midnight before Dusty realized... Bob lied. The expert wasn't showing up any time soon. Shortly after that realization, the roar of her black 1989 IROC-Z took off down the street. There was a lonely pup waiting at home. A normal person would go insane with her job. One dead end after another taunted her. Not a position anyone wanted.

The drink. That was the tell-all for the degree of stress suffered for the day. A glass of wine. A bottle of Corona. Alabama Slammer. Jack Daniels. Jim Beam. Crown Royal. Those were the hectic days, the top of the charts, the end of the list. That was why she was seated at the table, sipping on a glass with two ice cubes swimming in Crown, watching her dog.

The white Pitbull with brown splotches came into her life almost a year ago. He was running around the neighborhood, scaring everyone. He wasn't dangerous, just a fun-loving pup. She adopted him. His name was almost Sir Licks a Lot, but thanks to a friend, he answered to Hooch.

Right after his bath, the usual pitter-patter clicked on the hardwood floors. He tried his best to smell like a rotting corpse. Running at full speed, tearing around the corner, he pounced on the carpet; his personal towel. Rolling around, he dried off his short, wet fur.

She still had to finish laundry, clean the house (not that it was dirty to begin with), heat up leftover chicken from the night before (feeding most of it to the professional beggar at her feet) and relax. Hooch had other plans and they got into a roughhousing session that turned into a tug-of-war with one of his toys. Then it was time for bed... or so she thought.

Hooch had a bad night, rolling, kicking, scratching, and snoring loud enough to wake the dead. After being outside all day, he clearly made a meal out of a skunk. When he farted, she instantly woke up, diving under the covers in disgust. When he finally ran out of gas, she tossed

and turned, waking after dozing for no more than five minutes at a time. She told herself, it was the 'Case of the New Partner' coming in.

Chapter 4

Partner. The word – or Hooch's venomous gas last night – left a wicked aftertaste that even coffee couldn't disguise. She was on her third cup and couldn't say the word, much less think it, without presenting her greatest 'Elvis' impersonation with a curled lip snarl. 'The King' would be proud but her partner probably wouldn't care for it.

The weatherman guaranteed it was going to be a scorcher. Beautiful, but hot.

The black jeans snuggled her form but still allowed movement. Scuffed biker boots were good for all types of weather and job-related tasks. A lightweight, leather jacket, over a 'That's Miss Bitch 2 U' T-shirt kept her cool while concealing her weapon.

The small parking lot offered refuge for ten cars (two handicapped) and her reserved space. Reaching into the mailbox, she snatched the few envelopes out. Unlocking the door, she juggled everything while entering. After pushing the door closed with her foot, she walked to her desk. Setting down the thermos, fingers rifled through the batch like a dealer handing out poker cards. Satisfied nothing was for her, they soon joined the disregarded collection of unopened mail in the 'Dickhead' box. That was Bob's place.

After a few moments, delicious Folgers competed with the air freshener. Snagging out a handful of files, she sat at her desk, glancing over the manila folders. This case – a never-ending riddle – continued growing, adding corners to triangles, making squares of mystery. All day, every day, she stared at the mysterious pages, not knowing any more than when she first laid eyes on it.

'You need to see them all together to find the common denominator. Remember what I taught you.' That annoying voice in her head was right more than not. Did everyone get one of those or was she the only lucky – or crazy, depending on how you looked at it – one who got a personalized voice in her head? It was always there, for as long as she could remember. Goading her. Helping her. Keeping her alive. But where did it come from? Who was it?

Slapping her hands together, she looked from the folders to the dry/erase board as she rushed over and began writing, making a dot on the map for location of each body found. Looking over the list, she sank back on the desk. "Puncture marks. Scratches. Deep lacerations. Torn body parts. Animal attacks."

'Find the common denominators.'

Groaning, she stared hard. It took a few seconds, but suddenly her mouth dropped open and she jumped up. Racing to the board, she circled it on each one. "No DNA found. No blood."

'Bingo.'

"Wait," she argued with herself. "How the hell is that possible? Is there an animal out there that drains people of their blood and leaves behind NO DNA? That sounds... ridiculous. Impossible."

'That would be a question for the animal expert. Aren't you glad you allowed him to come in and help?'

"Oh, shut up."

The case at hand involved six people. The first to go missing in action was Tammy Barker. Twenty-three, a buck twenty in weight and five-five in height. Hair, strawberry blond, hazel eyes – more green than blue – and a red rose tattoo on the right top of her breast. There was also a jagged scar on the right top part of her hand. Her mother, Belinda, filed the report on 4/11/2014.

At first, Dusty thought the girl ran away, but Belinda said she was out with "just Donnie" her new boyfriend.

Three months felt like years. Dusty searched every inch, interviewing anyone that even looked at the girl. Friends and family said sweet things about Tammy. The whole town loved her. Once more, she read every word, detail, note, and interview like it was the first time. Her eyes alternated between staring at the murder board, the dry erase, and flipping through the file. Every second brought her ticks closer to finding Tammy dead. Diligently, she looked for that shiny needle in this murderous haystack that would eventually prick her delicate flesh.

Chapter 5

The animal expert arrived. Checking into the local 'no-tell' motel (cash only, no questions asked, no answers given), he examined his surroundings. Paint chipping off the walls, dirty plastic glass on the old porcelain sink, towels looking ancient. He pushed on the rickety bed then grinned. He had been in worse places.

He resembled the average guy on his way to a job interview: form-fitting, gray stretch slacks, white button-down shirt with breast pocket, nondescript black leather belt, and black socks. Most investigators dressed for the part. Jonas had that ensemble; brown trench, tan dress shirt, three-piece suit, and tie. He always carried it, rarely wore it. The only thing out of place, the pristine, high-top, red Keds. They stood out like a lighthouse during a storm.

Upon arrival, he searched the wooded areas for the creature. That was why he didn't meet Dusty until just before eight, pausing at the front window. Looking in, he noted her lost in concentration. The photograph didn't do justice. Too bad he was going to have to lie through his teeth about everything. The last time he worked with a partner, it didn't end well. This time, he hoped would be different.

Sighing, he opened the door. "Hello?" His attention went to the dry erase. Kanis was right. The woman was good. Everything was in a tidy, neat-like order. Nothing out of place. The strong aroma of coffee, coconut, and cigarettes attacked his senses at once.

Two visitors in less than a week was a record. Glancing up, she did a mental background check. Cute shoes, new to the area, city clothes, and lack of southern accent. This must be the expert who was dreadfully late. Strike one.

Her fingers danced over the keys, pulling up different sites, shooting pages to the printer. It sounded possessed, spewing many pages out in a rush. Standing, she moved to the dry erase, the pointer in her hand. "I've gone over these files countless times," she said, pointing to the papers on her desk. "Always looking for that one thing that ties 'em all together. What do they have in common?" Turning, she pointed to the board. "No DNA. Most animals leave behind some sort of DNA. Hair, saliva, claw, something. None were found on the victims. Another thing missing," she tapped on all the circled words in each list, "no blood. Now, ignoring that fact... which animal drains a person's blood?" She slipped back to her chair.

His expression was indecipherable. There wasn't a tic, expansion, or contraction of pupils, encased in a not-at-all-unpleasant set of sea green eyes. "With that description," he started as if ordering a large basket of onion rings. "Obviously, you have vampires or possibly even werewolves. Am I close?"

After a few minutes of intense staring, her brows furrowed. "Vampires? Werewolves? Get serious."

He offered his business card: white with cerulean inscription, showing his name, office address, phone, and fax number. The only abnormal decree was the one in eight-point Arial at the bottom; Specializing in the bizarre. "Jonas Sparx."

Glancing down at his hand, the glare relocated back to his eyes. "Dusty." Her tone spoke volumes.

Still holding the card, he gently tapped it with his ring fingernail. "Pleasure."

Pushing out of the chair, she stood before him. Her head to his chin. He was a tall one. Walking around him, her steps were light while sending a stern message. She was the alpha. Once again, she eyed him up and down. "Uh-huh."

With an amused expression, he winked. "Enjoy the tour?"

Puckering her lips, she motioned to his attire. "Ya look like five-O, sticking out like a yellow highlighter. Lose the old man pants and stiff shirt. Small town equals T-shirt, jeans, boots, leather jacket."

"Old man pants and stiff shirt? Ouch. And here I thought I was undercover," he teased.

"Not even." She reclaimed her seat. Reaching over, she pulled a cigarette from the pack of Marlboro Lights Special Blends on her desk, placing it between her lips. "Unless that 'dick wanna-be boss' look is what ya were going for. If so... point on."

"Dick, huh?" He pointed at her in return. "Hence your 'small-town' apparel?"

"Ya have to dress the part. People are more comfortable speaking to one of their own."

"Makes sense. I better do some shopping then."

Irritated, she rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"You should tag along. You obviously understand clothing better." Dropping the lonely business card on her desk, he took a seat.

"True." She continued ignoring the card. It hit the top of her desk, right side up, easy to read.

He watched her. "You're not allowed to smoke in an office building. It's a little thing called the law."

"My office. My rules. If you're the highly offended type... bitching about everything... get used to anger and disappointment. I'm not politically correct. I don't sugarcoat anything. Not worried about *wittle* feelings being stamped on."

The corner of his lip lifted slightly. He couldn't handle working with whiners either. "Noted."

Eyes narrowed before sparking the flame, lighting the end. Snapping it closed, she dropped it on the desk, pulling the cigarette away. Exhaling a mist of bluish-white, it encircled his face like a smoke ring. "Werewolves. Vampires. Ya wanna know what Dracula really was?"

"They say he was a man who liked the taste of blood."

"Fiction says that. In reality, he was nothing more than a mosquito."

His brow arched. "Vlad Dracul was *no* mosquito. A drunken Irishman and other so-called authors have no real concept of his true nature."

The 'smart-aleck' expression tramped across her face. "Gee, I wonder why? Ohhhh... riiiiight. Because vampires don't exist."

"True, but how do you explain it?"

"Ya need to be more specific. How do I explain what?"

"The vampire."

Shrugging, she continued rocking. "I have a logical theory."

"I can't wait to hear this."

"Mosquitoes."

His brows furrowed, and his lips pursed. "Come again?"

"Mosquitoes carried Yellow Fever. It caused high fever, hallucinations. Sensitivity to the sun and light. Infected people slept all day, coming out at night. Red eyes. Yellow skin. The infected attacked others while hallucinating. Biting... scratching... glowing red eyes... dead-like flesh. After witnessing it, people believed the undead drank blood, which in turn made them anemic. Hence their pallor. Locals bought it. Someone wrote about it and named it. Vampire. Dracula, giving him a romantic flair with the ladies."

Canting his head, he thought about it. "Interesting. Mosquitoes. Yellow Fever. Now that's one I've not heard before."

"You know how shit runs downhill?"

Cringing, he slightly nodded. "Gross."

"Well, bullshit flows even faster. People got sick and blamed vampires. They came in the middle of the night with fangs bared and red eyes. It started the shit ball. Town after town heard stories, added their own crap and... BAM! Ya got yourself a vampire plague. No one knew mosquitos were carriers and didn't see them at night."

"Mosquitoes are more like Kamikaze pilots. Can't fly in sunlight or wind. Perhaps you should research that theory further. Write a novel. It would be better than the twaddle that passes for vampire literature these days."

"Yeah, well I—" Scrunching up her best 'confused' expression, she stared at him. "Did... you just say... twaddle?"

Laughing softly, he nodded. "Sorry. I heard that long ago. It stuck with me."

"Anyhow... rumor has it vampires only exist in 'Twilight' sagas and they sparkle."

"Should make them easier to find."

Flatlining her lips, she bitterly stared. She didn't like him. His voice was like nails on a chalkboard, grating against her last fraying nerve. "Get serious. Answer my frickin' question."

"Which was? The whole mosquito, sparkling, vampire threw me off my train of thought."

"You're new to this case so I understand the flippant attitude. However, every day we don't find a missing person... means more than likely they'll turn up on a cold slab, in a murder folder. That's what I've been dealing with for months. So, please, spare me your idiocies. I deal with what I can see. Never seen a vampire in my life, but I have seen a mosquito. Tons of 'em."

Leaning forward on the edge of her desk, his tone turned serious. "Since you obviously have no difficulty being frank, a trait I do appreciate, let me be equally as blunt. You don't want me here. I don't want to be here. Unfortunately, your boss and mine threw us into this arena to find the killer. We must work together, so why not make this painless. We'll put our skills together, solve these incidents, and I'll be on my merry way."

"There's a bright spot in this," frustration laced her words. "You're in as much misery as I am at our 'partnership'."

"Misery loves company."

"So, I've heard. Around here, we call it cold-blooded murder, not *incidents*. People were torn apart, drained of blood, and killed."

"I stand corrected. Cold-blooded murders." Sitting back, his eyes locked onto her face. There was something alluring hiding within, but he couldn't place his finger on what it was. It didn't happen often, but he was drawn to her. "Since you've brought that up, you do realize that no animal, save one, drains blood from its prey."

"Not the foggiest idea. If I did, I wouldn't need an animal expert. I deal with human murderers."

"Then this is right up your alley."

"How's that?"

"Animals are instinctively driven. Hunger is a principal trigger. This was made to look like an animal attack. Only *one* species is capable of such deception."

"I'm all ears."

"Man."

Chapter 6

Dusty looked him up and down, scowling. Strike three. "You're not really an animal expert, are ya? Ya got that title from a Cracker Jack box, right?"

Slapping a hand on his leg, he laughed mockingly. "That's something I haven't heard in a long time."

"It was something *I* heard long ago." Taking a long drag off her cigarette, she slowly exhaled. "Lemme see if I got this straight. The *animal* expert... thinks the vics were murdered by a human. Not an animal. You do realize how moronic that sounds... right?"

"Sometimes, the truth is comical."

"I didn't say funny... moronic.... biiiiig difference."

He inclined his head to the folder. "How many have there been total?"

"Five. I'd like to find the killer before there's a sixth. However, *Mr. Expert*, you're wrong about which animal drains blood."

"Enlighten me."

Resting the cigarette in the ashtray, she headed to the printer, grabbing the manuscript-sized pile. Walking back, she dropped it in his lap, before reclaiming her seat. "October twenty-first, nineteen-fifty-three. An attack on Judy Don's home tore into her two large shepherds, ripping the dogs apart. There were so many pieces. They couldn't decipher which part belonged to which dog. Blood splattered—"

"Wait, so they weren't void of blood? How is this relevant to our case?"

"— all over the kennel. It looked like they exploded. They were missing heart, liver, intestines. The expert said tracks were deep. It was a big animal but were inconclusive as to which. Might've been a cross between a wolf and bear, weighing two-hundred-twenty... or more. He said it was nothing he saw before. The vet said it had large, razor-sharp claws." Quietly, she started a staring contest, waiting for a response.

"*Any* animal can do that kind of damage. Animal attacks are just that. Very *bloody*."

She continued. "In nineteen-fifty-four, it killed cattle, sheep, goats, dogs, rabbits. Attacks happened all over... too many to keep track." Once more, her eyes found his. "Yes, there was blood, but how do we know something like that isn't around here?"

"It could be a huge wolf or small bear. Only problem... bears, mountain lions, wolves, wolverines, and—"

"You forgot the vampire," she paused for effect, "bat... but I don't think it steals organs or tears its meal ticket to shreds."

"No." Glancing down, he smiled. "I'm familiar with this, Miss Garner. All the attacks were aimed at animals."

"Not *all*." Snapping her fingers, she turned back to the screen. "On January first, Mr. Clint's dogs were whimpering outside. While investigating, a large bear-like creature rushed him. He shot at it, scaring it back into the woods."

"Ah. Yes. Regardless, they still found tracks. In our case, there are none, either near or far from the victims. You could almost hypothesize they drained their own blood and tore themselves asunder, but that would gain you nothing but odd stares and whispers."

"Plus, a seventy-two-hour vaca in the psych ward for an eval."

"Precisely. As for the vampire bat, they drink small amounts. The fangs are like small knives slicing open an area lapping up the blood. The poor creatures have gotten bad press for doing what nature enabled them to do."

Glancing down at her notes, she pointed to her next question. "What about the Chupacabra?"

"The *Chupacabra*?" Shaking his head, his laughter echoed. "Legendary goatsuckers, because that's what Chupacabra means. Initially, they thought it to be a half human-slash-vampire beast. Some even said it was an alien, though their descriptions were more like alien-dinosaurs."

"So, why call 'em *goat* suckers?"

"The victims, most often goats and chickens, were drained of blood, but otherwise left intact. No evidence of a struggle or attack. Simply two puncture marks, sometimes three," he held up his finger, "about as big as a human finger in the animal's neck. Most of those were chalked up to hairless raccoons."

"Hairless raccoons? Did they go to the barber?"

He chuckled. "They're born that way. That's why I'm the animal expert. I know things you obviously don't."

"Raccoons? Seriously?"

Nodding, he shrugged. "A raccoon can drain the blood of chickens and not harm the body. Other times, they are so brutal, they bite off the chicken's head. There was a couple once who claimed they caught a Chupacabra in a trap. After all the hoopla, it was just a hairless raccoon."

"A raccoon can't do *that* kinda damage. People see them all the time going through their trash!"

"It isn't as cut and dried as you think. There's much more to the animal kingdom than you could even begin to imagine."

"Yes, but the raccoon hunts small mammals, not humans. Last time I checked, they aren't as big as a wolf or bear."

A spider walked across the front of her desk. Reaching over, he laid his hand in front of it. The arachnid stopped, read what was blocking its path, and slowly crawled up onto his palm. "Mankind believes itself to be superior, in every way, to any other creature in existence."

When he picked up the spider, she cringed. "Some more than others, apparently."

Lifting the tan creature to eye level, he studied it. "The brown recluse spider here is small but has enough toxin to kill an entire football team." Smiling, he lowered his hand to the floor, allowing the spider to go on its merry way.

After hearing the type, she jumped up like her butt was on fire. Racing over, she chased it down before stomping on it, twisting as if grinding out a cigarette. On the grooved welcome mat by the door, its mangled corpse found a new home. She took her seat again. "Where were we?"

Sitting back, he flicked at his pants. "Was *that* necessary?"

"Bathroom's over there in case you wanna wash your hands." Her brows furrowed as she huffed at him. "*Necessary*? I saved a whole football team."

"All life is precious, Miss Garner." His voice held sadness.

"Yeah... well... I hold *my* life more precious than that trespassing spider. I prefer not to have my date with the Grim Reaper anytime soon."

"You may have saved a football team, but was it worth taking a life, which was no threat to you?"

"No threat? I won't take the chance that it might not poison me when there's a chance it will."

"Each life exterminated adds a thorn in our crown. Though my own is quite full, they were necessary. I hope yours isn't as full."

"Killing that spider was mandatory. Don't worry about my crown, worry about your own."

No sense in beating a dead horse, or spider in this case. "I assume you're a grounded person, Miss Garner?" He looked around the office. On the wall was her license to practice. No knick-knacks. No photos. Nothing personal. All business.

"What do ya mean, Sparx."

"You believe what you can see, hear, touch, taste, and feel."

"Like most people, yes. I'm sure there's a *logical* explanation for all this."

He nodded. "There's always an explanation, Miss Garner. Nothing unreal exists. Even if that reason can often be outside the scope of our acceptance."

Double talk. She got a visual of a blank map. "Meaning?"

"Are you familiar with the statement, 'all things being equal, the simplest explanation tends to be the right one'?"

"Yes, but how does that fit this situation?"

"No animal could do this."

She rolled her eyes. "So you keep saying."

"I think you believe that as well. Therefore, it leaves us with what? Certainly, we have discounted vampires. I *seriously* doubt mosquitoes could do that. A raccoon wouldn't attack a person like that. Knowing this, what is left?"

"From the accounts of that newsletter and the hunters—" Time stood still for just a fraction of a second. "Why didn't Bob call you for that? We didn't get any animal experts on that case. It was just me and the town vet."

"I was probably investigating another attack elsewhere. They keep us busy. Once they become a predator to humans, we euthanize and take back to the lab. An autopsy will indicate why they've evolved in that manner." He motioned to her. "What happened with the hunters?"

"Panther. At first, it just tore trash open in town. Scared children and parents. Most likely the culprit for a bunch of missing pets. It moved to bigger prey. Started attacking people. Chewing 'em up. Lots o' carry permits issued. Someone finally shot it. I don't think this is another panther. They live on meat, not blood."

"True. They need two-hundred pounds a day. A deer or something equal in size."

"When we found the vics, they were half-eaten. Ain't no panther gonna drain its victim and leave all that meat behind."

"Unless they were found in a tree. They carry kills up for safe keeping and don't abandon a meal unless forced. They're carnivorous."

"The fang marks were small... nothing close to finger size. It could be raccoons, but we're talking about human beings. There weren't any defensive marks, which is hard to believe."

His brow furrowed. "Why's that?"

"Human nature. You're gonna struggle. Fight. Kick. Bite. Roll. Whatever it takes. There should be something. DNA under the fingernails or on the teeth. We got nothing. Like they were dormant... let it happen."

Smirking, he shook his head, laughing. "Wow... that sounds as ridiculous as your mosquito theory."

A brow arched as she thought of places to hide his body. "Really? Police Academy first course. Identifying a murder 101. This raccoon theory... how does it apply to the missing women? Four were found dead, with little holes in their bodies, like a horde of bats attacked. I seriously doubt it's raccoons. They don't usually travel in packs."

"First, a 'horde' of bats is called a colony. Second, a raccoon uses several dens within its home range. Adult males tend to be solitary, but family groups are quite social and will feed and den together into the fall. As they disband, raccoons become solitary but do use communal or group dens during winter storms. So... again... it's not all cut and dry."

The hatred for him leaked onto her face. "Noted."

"This," he said, glancing down. "I know. We use it when learning how to track animals. After I arrived, I went searching for whatever's doing this. I saw tracks. Deer, bear, fox, coyote, wolf tracks. I'm not saying bears or wolves couldn't do this. It's possible but highly unlikely. That's why I arrived so late. Time got away from me. My apologies. Now, I seriously doubt this bear-wolf has traveled to or has family in Cider Lake. I don't think you do either."

"Okay, hotshot. Tell me what ya figured out about this case." After exhaling smoke, she squashed the cigarette in the ashtray. "Let's see if you're as good as my boss thinks you are." Putting her feet up on the desk, she crossed her right ankle over the left.

"A test. Nice. It's been a long time since someone put *me* under a microscope."

"Good. Now dazzle-dazzle me."

"Very well." Closing his eyes, he folded his hands on his lap. "There were five victims. Four were female between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. All were reported missing in April. Tricia, Ashley, Celia, and Dawn were reported missing two days apart, and all four found exactly ninety-three days later."

"Not bad."

"The female victims had small puncture wounds like fang marks. Bodies ripped in various places. Blood drained. The male was torn to pieces. Organs removed. Decapitated. Heart ripped from his chest. He was reported missing the same day as Tricia. The two were most likely together. Both were 'out with friends', so that sounds about right."

"Color me impressed."

"Either way, we have an unsub whose hatred for men is shown through a savage attack. Our perp kidnaps women. Isn't biased in choice, though... tends to go for the redder shades. Possibly tortures them. I find it curious that the first to go missing, hasn't surfaced after one-hundred-ten days." Opening his eyes, he unfolded his hands. "I may have missed something. My memory's not what it once was."

He had a point. Most of the women did tend to have redder hair. Coincidence? Possibly. "Animals are torturing their prey now?"

"When the animal expert tells you there's no sign of an animal attack..."

"Granted, it's not like the hunters' case, but the scratches and fangs are too deep to be human-made, so it's got to be an animal of some kind. I can't explain the preference in hair color... just yet."

Again, he leaned forward, folding his hands on her desk. "We can sit here, slinging barbs at each other, but that's *not* going to solve the case. Since this is your town, I'll act as another set of eyes and ears and do my utmost not to offend you."

"I agree. Get the case over and done with... back to our everyday lives... without a partner."

"I'm not any happier than you. Trust me."

"Trust is earned, not—" The blaring sound of nuclear warnings cut off her sentence. Clicking on her Bluetooth, her feet came down with a thud. "Garner... Charlie! My main man! How the hell are ya?" Her eyes lit up, snapping to the page as she wrote. "No shit? Where? ... Yep, I know right where it is. How long ago?"

Feeling it rude to eavesdrop, he stepped away to make a call of his own. When Kanis answered, Jonas didn't bother with pleasantries, he wouldn't mean. "I need to speak to Amelia."

"Why?"

He didn't have time for this. "Do you want this handled or should I book a flight home?"

There was silence for a moment then a sweet British accent floated over the cell waves. "What can I do for you, *Sugar*?" Amelia Vargas, hacker extraordinaire, called everyone 'sugar', but it had a unique sweetness when she talked to Jonas.

"I need to know who's been within a hundred miles of Cider Lake in the last five months." His voice was low enough so Dusty wouldn't hear, especially with her own conversation going on.

Amelia's voice took on a sultry tone. "That's going to take time. What do I get in return?"

Jonas once told her she could make a fortune as a phone sex operator. "You'll have my eternal thanks, especially if you rush me the results."

"I guess that will do... for a start." She cooed. "You need to speak to Kanis?"

Jonas ended the call. Nothing else to say.

"No shit?" The mixture of excitement, surprise, and sadness said it all. "Is she still there?" Sitting back, Dusty snatched her cigarettes, putting them in her pocket. "Good. See ya soon." Clicking the Bluetooth, she ended the call.

"I take it there's another body."

Reaching down, she snatched up the chicken scratch. "Which do you want first... the good or bad?"

"Give me the bad news."

"They found another body at Watson Park."

"Obviously. What on earth is the good news?"

Gathering up her things, she grinned. "This time, we've got a witness."

They had a different opinion on 'good' news. "A witness?"

"Yep. First time we have more to go on than just a body. I'll drive." Grabbing her keys, she headed to the door. Opening it, she waved her hand for him to hurry up and exit.

His brow furrowed as he headed out the door. "Good. I don't drive."

"No worries," she locked the door behind them, "you're safe with me."

Something told him that might not be entirely correct.

Chapter 7

The glow in the twilight sky revealed the bright yellow tape like a neon restaurant sign. *Eat at Joe's* soon turned into: *Crime scene: Lookie here, folks!* Flashing red and blue flickered past the trees, overlooking the body. Loaded branches reached for the sky, as if the trees surrendered with that classic phrase, "Hey man, I didn't see nothin'."

The gloomy night, darker than usual, save for that mega-watt grinning full moon produced a clammy feeling. It got under the skin, turning into a traveling itch. Cider Lake was famous for its gentle breeze in late July, but tonight it was a boxing match between summer and winter with fall being the referee. Each blow sent a humid gale flying, carrying an odd aroma. People covered noses with handkerchiefs, trying to ignore the odor. Those who braved it described the painful stench. "It was like a band of pitchfork-carrying fairy demons setting up housekeeping in my sinuses!"

Lawn furniture, road debris, a loose section of fence, all turned into weapons of mass destruction. Even the surrendering branches of those blind trees became lethal projectiles. Anything in the way became a target. The stars twinkled, sending Morse code. Something was in the air. Mother Nature had one twisted ass sense of humor, that old bitch. The weather, the mournful wail of dogs, even the swollen moon seemed to be in on the not so subtle innuendo. It was her way of saying, "Don't go into the basement." This night was unmistakably creepy, bringing prickles to the flesh. The souls of the dead reached out, alerting loved ones of the impending danger, using any means possible.

"Shut the hell up, ya stupid mutts!" No one listened.

Ignoring warnings was never wise. Still, Mother Nature tried conveying the message by knocking over trashcans, leaving calling cards on each lawn. The aluminum barrels slowly rolled back and forth, banging into the side of the brick buildings. They added their own unique voice to the canine choir and whipping winds. It was just nasty Cider Lake weather. The darker clouds festered, streaks of lightning crawled through them, warning of what was to come. It wasn't a pretty picture where evidence was concerned.

Jonas got the message. He wasn't going to be able to wrap this case in a neat little box, tie a pretty ribbon on it, and file it away as 'Case Solved'. This one had 'ugly' painted all over it in bright, puke-green letters with ragged strokes.

Watson Park was far away from danger. Children had to cross through a field to get to the road, and by then a parent had enough time to catch them. It had a typical collection of kid-friendly features; merry-go-round, teeter-totter, a few swings, a slide, and a covered sandbox. Tonight, it held an extra attraction that brought out the vultures; a dead body. Human vultures fed on the misfortune of others, gaining a perverse enjoyment from their agony. A large circle of evolutionary screw-ups gathered, squabbling over this dainty meal.

After parking, Dusty hopped out. Reaching into her pocket, she grabbed a few jelly beans. Walking around the car, she caught sight of his shoes again. "Okay. What's the deal with those shoes? They don't do a thing for your outfit." Turning, she began moving them through the crowd.

"Told you I need your help shopping!" Trailing behind, he glanced at his watch. "You've set a new record!"

Producing her badge, she shoved people out of the way. "Oh? Do I win a prize?"

"No. Usually, it's the first topic of conversation... my electric sneakers."

"Ah."

Very few knew the story. "I'll give you the Reader's Digest version."

"Shorter the better."

"I was..." narrowing his eyes, a familiar scent drifted in from the crowd, stealing his attention, "married once. Caroline Zorn was my client to start."

She winced. "That's a no-no. What was it? Missing pet? Animal attack?"

"I wasn't *always* an animal expert. This was one of my P.I. cases."

"A P.I.? And you don't know how to identify a murder? Uh huh. What happened?"

"Typical case. Her husband, Nathan, was an ex-football player. Loaded... handsome... but had a nasty side that made an enraged bull look like a cute puppy in a display window."

"And people wonder why I don't date."

"They had a son, Zachary. Didn't live up to his father's expectations. He expected a 'chip off the old block', but the kid wanted nothing to do with sports. More into computers. Nathan accused her of cheating. No way *his* son wouldn't be an athlete. It was in the family genes. His father, his father before him, and so on. Made her take a DNA test, proving the boy was his. Disappointment got to him. He took it out on Caroline, figuring it was her DNA turning their son into a quote, unquote, 'pussy'. Then one day—"

"is be the devil's work!" An old woman interrupted using broken English, looking like she stepped out of a 1940 Universal horror movie. Missing teeth, gypsy clothing – tattered and torn – was nothing compared to that 'Popeye' glare. Her words bellowed over the howling wind. "Satan is afoot, and he'll—" staring hard at Jonas, she stopped short. Speaking in her native language, French, she pointed at him. "The finest trick of the devil was persuading you he does not exist."

His first thought was, if Disney's looking for their next wicked witch, they can stop searching. Giving the woman a gentle smile, he set a hand on her shoulder, answering in the same language. "What matters an eternity of damnation to someone who has found in one second the infinity of joy?"

At this point, Dusty realized there was a whole conversation happening behind her. Turning, her eyes took in the woman first. Talk about a face only a mother could love. "Um."

The woman's squinted eye popped open observing Jonas. Once more, she spoke in perfect French. "What?"

"Go home, Ma'am," he smiled gently. "This is no place for you."

Turning a twisted gaze toward Dusty, a gap-toothed grin formed on her wrinkled face. The woman canted her head like a puppy unsure of a spoken command. Leaning in, she whispered in the same broken English. "Look for the man who throws no shadow." Satisfied, she hobbled off.

Dusty's eyes locked on the woman. When she walked, it was like a balancing act, shuffling from side-to-side. Once the figure was out of sight, Dusty pivoted back to Jonas. Hitching a thumb over her shoulder, she arched a brow. "Do I wanna know what she said?"

"Wishing us the best on our investigation. Told of her sadness for the victim."

Staring at him, her brow arched like it was shot out of a cannon. "Well, that would be a first. Are you sure that was all?"

"I wanted to spare you." Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair as if broaching an uncomfortable topic. "You know how old people are. Started talking about some wart on the bottom of her foot that fest—"

"Stop right there!" Her hand moved faster than the speed of lightning in front of his face. "Entirely *too* much info." Rolling her eyes, turning back on her heel, she continued through the crowd with an annoyed expression. "That should remain private. It's all good, just don't finish that sentence."

"Where was I? Oh yes! It took a bit for Caroline to finally get tired of him. Maybe it was when Nathan accidentally broke her leg. Or how he treated their son like some leper waiting to infect them. Or when he put her in the hospital, not checking in once. No matter the reason, she finally pushed for a divorce. She walked into my office, hired me to get the goods on him. Many meetings, dinners, phone calls... all legit... business-related, but," he paused, shaking his head. "We still fell in love."

Wincing, she shook her head. "Still bad."

"You can put the rest together." He fell in step behind her. "The shoes belonged to Zach." Stopping short, she whirled around, facing him. "What happened?"

Glancing up, he focused on a star over her head. "I was out of town when Nathan came over. Broke. High. Loan shark after him. He called Caroline many times. Probably wanted money. One of the neighbors saw what happened." His eyes took on a distant stare. "He set fire to the house. When Caroline ran out, he put a bullet through her temple. When Zach did, he sliced the kid's throat. Almost cut off his head."

Eyes widened as brows shot up in horrified shock. "Sorry to hear that."

"It happened so fast, they were dead before the cops got there. A twelve-inch knife and Glock were next to Nathan's dead body. His final 'fuck you' to the world... and me. We had a couple run-ins. Didn't end well for him. He killed two birds with one stone. Took out my family. Broke my heart. Guilt grows. Consumes." Glancing down at the sneakers, a leaf blew over the tops. "These are a reminder that not all humanity is slime."

Taking a deep breath, she slowly exhaled, glancing around. "Least ya have something. They weren't near the fire?" Turning on her heel, she went back to fighting the crowd.

"Fire-proof safe. Zach loved them. Only worn on special occasions. To this day, I don't know what the big deal was, but now... I always wear them."

"Sorry for your loss." Once more, she stopped. They arrived at their destination. From a distance, the yellow tape looked like silly string, but up close was screaming-bright.

"Thanks. They also remind me... never get involved again. The pain of loss is... very intense. It's hard getting over love... when it's replaced by guilt."

"Never had to worry about that. Don't plan on it either."

"Why do you say that with such certainty? I didn't expect to fall in love. Sometimes you can't help it. Just happens."

"Meh. Maybe for some, not me. My heart's in a fire-proof safe with a complicated lock. Men have sex on the brain, not frustrating locking systems." Shrugging, she turned to the white sheet staked over the body. "Sounds more like a debilitating disease. Stops people from thinking, much less living."

"'Happily ever after' is a lie, Miss Garner. Told by starry-eyed poets who have no idea what they're talking about." He scanned the crowd. Turning back, he jerked a thumb toward the scene. "Shall we see who's 'happily ever after' we're about to destroy?"

"Let's do this." Reaching into the inner pocket of her jacket, she removed four latex gloves and matching booties, handing a set over to Jonas.

He slipped the clear booties on over his Keds. "You come prepared."

Snapping the gloves on, she watched him before slipping her own on. "Good thing... unless we wanna take pictures from the crowd."

Chapter 8

Crime scenes were the same; cops, detectives, and a forensic crew. Yellow tape separated them from news reporters, camera people, and the crowd of onlookers. All three groups strained to capture something no one else did.

Officer of the law.

A heavyset police officer prodded the crowd. "Back it up!" These nimrods failed to obey, which caused his right forefinger to twitch. This was the perfect opportunity for much-needed target practice. His eyes crinkled with a devious grin, imagining each person hitting the ground.

For Sergeant Charles F. Thomas, there were reasons he left Detroit, Michigan behind fifteen years ago and applied in Cider Lake. Dealing with the mentality of the jungle tarnished him. He needed country living to bring back the man he was. There were fewer chances to get shot, become road kill, deal with city gangs, ignorant assholes, or get caught with your hand in the cookie jar. Small town living also allowed him to indulge in his lifelong 'hobby'.

"Back it up! How many times I gotta tell you people! This ain't no damn circus!"

Sergeant Charles F. Thomas – some said the 'F' stood for Franklin, others said Fucktard – was the man of the hour. He was in his early forties with dark brown hair – silver creeping – and hazel eyes set too far back. His stomach hung way over his pants. Doc Martin warned he wouldn't see fifty if he continued polluting his body with fast food, but that didn't bother Sergeant Thomas. Hell, to hear Doc talking, he was a walking miracle making it to forty! Charlie saw himself as the intimidator; a title snatched from his favorite NASCAR driver, Dale Earnhardt Sr.

Many nights, he was up late, cleaning his favorite nine-millimeter, imagining punks he grew up with standing in front of him. Yep, let those 'sons-a-bitches' come and talk trash to Sergeant Charles F. Thomas. 'Say hello to my – big old nine-millimeter – friend.'

Officer of the law. Arrogant with anger issues.

Small towns did not usually have multiple homicides. News cameras zoomed in on the lone white sheet. Far as crime scenes went this was boring. No weapon, blood, or even a chalk line, just a white sheet. Something had to spruce up the dullness. Gossip in a small town ran thicker than the front-page articles in the newspaper: never mind if it was true or not. If it was good, it spread through town – growing with every whisper – like a wildfire in a gusting wind. It could scorch through faster than a Bible thumper hitting every door.

"Caught a peek under the sheet... blood everywhere!"

"Body was chewed up!"

"It was decayed... rotted from the inside out!"

"It just... exploded!"

"The eyes were like... gone."

"Baa," Jonas cracked, looking at the throng. "Lambs to the slaughter."

"Yep. Some lucky fool is gonna score on this scene alone," her eyes followed the crowd, "or at least his rendition."

"You gotta hearing problem, boy?" Charlie barked loud enough, drawing Jonas and Dusty's attention. After telling the crowd to back up, there was one idiot not listening.

The man was pale, thin, dressed head-to-toe in black. The 'boy' shook his head. "Nope."

"What's your name, *boy*?"

"Donnie."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Donnie what?"

"*Just* Donnie."

"Well, Mister *Just Donnie*," Charlie seethed. "I'm Charles Thomas. That's *Sergeant* Thomas to you. This is my crime scene. See this purty yellow tape?" He pointed. "It means ya don't get to play on my side." Pulling his nightstick, he jabbed Donnie in the ribs with every word. "Now. Back. The. *Fuck. Off.*"

The man snapped his eyes at Charlie, giving a wickedly evil grin. "Enjoy the rest of your evening, *Sergeant* Charles Thomas." He disappeared into the crowd.

Putting away his nightstick, he grumbled. "Got damn crackheads. I need a frickin' vacation." Charlie was a card-carrying member of control freaks. It was worse at crime scenes. He was like the bouncer in the club. You checked in or you didn't get through.

Making her way over, Dusty's fake smile lit up her face. "Heeeey, Charlie! Thanks for the heads-up." Hitching a thumb behind her, she tried not rolling her eyes. "This is my partner, Jonas Sparx. Sparx, this is Charlie. The fastest cop around."

The whole town knew Charlie liked Dusty. He asked her out so much, even she knew. One excuse after another – usually work-related – made him joke about their small town needing a private eye, but there was truth in it. Everyone in the diner groaned when he entered for morning coffee and a meal. Entertainment of the day was the secret pool; a page with blocks of minutes going for \$5 apiece, betting how long it would take before he brought up Dusty's name. The winner got half of the pot. Since the day they met, he bragged about how she would be his one day. It didn't take much to push him over the edge. Being a cop, he got away with more than the average Joe did, so people didn't tempt the fates or his nasty temper.

Seeing Dusty lit up his face until the introduction to 'pretty boy'. That caused the 'Joker' smile to fade. "Did ya say," he looked back at Jonas. "Partner? As in working together?" Instantaneous jealousy shot through him. Looking him over, Charlie gauged him for a body bag. Late night cram sessions with this model rifled through his mind like a back issue of Penthouse.

Nodding, her hand shot up, silencing his sarcasm. "Neither of us is happy, so don't bust my chops. It's these damn animal attacks. Sparx is the animal expert."

Charlie's brow creased. "Hell, if y'all needed an animal expert, ya should've called me. I know everything about these parts."

Jonas watched the man. It was obvious that he was crazy about Dusty. As if reading his mind, he couldn't help the self-satisfied smirk. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

Turning his attention back to her 'partner', he squinted. This 'Jonas' character was too handsome for words... working closely with 'his' girl! "You do that. Dusty has my number... on speed dial." Glancing down, relief flooded his features. "Well, hell, Sparx. Purty shoes there tucked into them booties."

Still watching the odd little man – whose face reminded him of one of those chubby angelic statues – he grinned. "Why, thank you, Officer Thomas!" Twisting his foot from side-to-side, he modeled for him. "They look spiffy in these 'booties'. Give off a certain flair. I thought about wearing them around town just like this!"

Charlie's lips pressed together, pointing to the badge, jabbing his own chest. "That's *Sergeant* Thomas."

Face instantly sobering, Jonas offered a slight bow of his head. "My apologies, *Sergeant* Thomas." Attention went back to his shoes, striking a pose. "You like them too? I could hook you up with your own set. Think it might start a new fashion style?"

"You're such a fashion queen. You a faggot, Sparx?" Most cops didn't like detectives walking in, taking over the scene.

"Why, *Sergeant* Thomas. I must say... you're a handsome man... in your own way... but it would never work between us." Noting the red flush, he leaned in. "I know you're attracted to me, but you might want to reel it in, son. Flirting over a dead body? Kiiiiinda creepy. I know you understand."

Charlie's hand instantly went to his holstered gun, "Boy, I oughta—"

"Excuse me!" Getting between them, Dusty snatched them both close enough to hear. "We're in the middle of a crime scene! Knock it off. Show a little respect for the dead!" Shoving outwards, enough force was used to move Charlie back, putting space between them.

The three made quite a spectacle, as people on both sides watched. It wouldn't be the first time Charlie shot someone in the line of duty. Those behind the barrier were falling over each other to record it. One of them landed on the opposite side of the yellow tape, looking around in alarm.

Charlie raced over, snatching the teenager by the back of his jacket. Hauling him up, he got in his face, shoving the nightstick in his gut. "I told you sons-a-bitches to keep back, didn't I?" He roared before tossing him back into the crowd. "Next one of you candy ass, shit heels cross my crime scene, gets a free night in my jail! You will fucking respect my authority!"

"Charles! If you so much as touch another one, you'll answer to me!" Dusty yelled. "I said, knock it off!"

No one else would ever speak to him like that. Not even his boss! Dusty was different. Instantly calming, he nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry. I won't do it again." Stepping under the tape, he used his arms, herding them away. "All right. Move it back. You folks go on home."

Jonas watched 'Sergeant' Thomas, laughing softly. "Is he always so friendly or do I just have that effect on him?"

Men always acted weird around her. One of the curses of being beautiful, but that was beyond the norm. "Oh, don't eeeeven act like you're innocent. You're just as guilty." A grin teased her lips. "Breaking that poor man's heart with your blatant rejection pushed him right off his rocker."

He smirked. "Can't help it. He's really not my type."

"Behave. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't know about this until going through mounds of red tape."

"That's not professional courtesy. He has it bad for you." Jonas turned, glancing back at Charlie. "Almost stalker-like. Too much encouragement could make him snap."

Looking from one to the other, she rolled her eyes. "Stalker? Charlie? I've been dealing with him for years. He's like a puppy in a box. Whining. Crying. I can handle him, but *you* need to stay clear."

"Why?"

"Why? He's a few cards shy a full deck, weird as all get out, but he lives here! You're the outsider. I swear he thinks about shooting people. Right now, for whatever reason, your presence sets him off."

"So... what you're saying is-"

"Credibility lies with whatever bullshit he spouts after he shoots you in your handsome face."

He smiled. "You think I'm handsome?"

She arched a brow. "What?"

"You said, and I quote, 'after he shoots you in your handsome face'. So, you must think I'm handsome." Reaching up, he buffed his nails on his shirt. "Why, thank you."

Shaking her head, she chuckled. "No. 'I don't think you're handsome. *Charlie* does."

"You keep telling yourself that." Grinning, his eyes drifted over her. "Do you really think he'd shoot me and get away with it?"

"Cider Lake equals small ass town. Crooked cops get away with murder because lawyers have no higher calling than money... heard by judges known to take bribes to slap a wrist. The more you pay, the better your chances. After that, they go fishing. Laugh about the whole thing."

"Ah! Well, in that case, he won't even know I'm here."

"I seriously doubt that."

Jonas looked out at the people. "Too bad there isn't a law against being an asshole."

"Vampires." Pointing at the crowd, she shook her head. "There they are, Jonas. Feeding off the misery of others. They want someone bleeding or dying." She sighed. "Let's talk to the witness. The body can wait. Can't do much until Willie gets here."

He shook his head. "You handle that. I'm going over to our victim. Maybe I'll find some... animal tracks." He pulled on the tight gloves.

Nodding, she headed in the opposite direction.

Walking over, Jonas lifted the sheet, peering underneath. "Ah shit," he whispered. Lifting up the gold crucifix, he turned it over in his hand. "A lot of good this did." He gently laid it back on her chest before easing the fabric back down, securing the sheet again. Rising, he closed his eyes, tilting his head down. "Find peace." Turning, he rushed back to Dusty, falling in stride beside her. "It's Tammy Barker."

The last one. Dusty stopped. Kissing her necklace, crossing herself, she moved again. "Of course, it is."

Arriving at the squad car holding the witness, Jonas peeked through the window. "She's scared."

Nodding, Dusty looked in as well. "Do ya blame her?"

"It might be best if you talk to her."

"Why?"

"She's a woman."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious." Pulling off the gloves, she shoved them in her back pocket. "Are ya being a sexist?"

Shaking his head, he held up his hands, defensively. "Not at all."

"Then what does gender have to do with it?"

"Women can be easier during interrogation. Most people view women as more trusting. If you must talk to someone, a gentle soul has empathy."

She nodded. "True. Men don't know how to talk to a woman. Either sound condescending or like an asshole."

A chuckle escaped. "Now look who's being a sexist."

"Nope. Just stating facts."

"Mhm. Regardless, you talk to the witness. I'm going to check if our animal left any tracks. That way, I get a better idea on what we're looking for."

Dusty nodded. "Fine."

He headed off, checking the dirt and bushes. Picking up a few leaves, he crushed them between his fingers, releasing a scent. Pulling out his phone, he pushed a button.

Amelia answered on the second ring. "Hi, Jonas."

"I take it by your tone I'm not going to like what you discovered?"

"You could say that." She cleared her throat. "The only one anywhere near Cider Lake in the last five months is..."

"Is...?"

"Seth."

Blinking, he shook his head. "Not possible. Check again. You're getting a cross check from something else."

"No honey," she told him slightly insulted. "It's Seth."

Glancing at the body, his jaw tightened. He thought something seemed familiar with this case. "How? The Council placed Seth in torpor far from here."

"I hate to be the one to tell you this..."

"Out with it."

"Promise not to shoot the messenger. You can't tell *anyone* that I told you. It's that big."

Rolling his eyes, he took a deep breath. "I promise."

"Kanis woke him. Not sure why. I'll find out more information for you, but for now... nothing."

"How do you know the problem is male?"

"Does that really matter?"

Now that snippet of conversation made sense. "After making me track him down? It was hard enough the first time! What the fuck is he doing?"

"He- Gotta go. Be careful, sugar," she whispered.

The line went dead just as someone tapped his shoulder. Turning, putting the phone away, he faced two men. Both dressed alike: dark suits, patent leather shoes, deep black shades. The only distinguishing feature was their ties: one blue, the other green. Removing their glasses as one, they stared at Jonas. The one three inches taller had dark hair slicked back, was clean-shaven, and had Hollywood blue eyes. The other had a light shade of receding brown hair with matching eyes. Both held their badges as if he had trouble seeing.

The taller one spoke up. "You in charge?"

Jonas looked from one to the other. "That depends. Who's asking?"

"Officer Thomas told—"

"*Sergeant* Thomas," Jonas interrupted with a straight face. "He gets angry when you don't say it right."

The man glared. "— us to see you. I'm Special Agent Mark Edwards. This is Special Agent Gregg Franks. We're with the F.B.I. Special Investigations Division."

It's the Men in Black. He looked between them. "I wasn't aware there was a 'Special Investigations Division'." They were on the same team, possibly the same division, but he couldn't divulge that. Their job was to wave badges, making their presence known. His was staying off the radar to catch the bad guy.

"Now you do. We're here to assume point in this investigation."

These two just added to the problem. "I'm not sure that's ho—"

"I'll need all the pertinent files. Every piece of paper. No matter how minor."

Jonas stared at him. Most special agents were arrogant, sweeping into a crime scene with instant authority. However, this one was more annoying than the rest. "Uh, I think you have to show some—"

Agent Edwards snapped his fingers. "Chop-chop! Get to it, boy!"

"Give me a minute." Turning, he headed for Dusty. This was her case. She could deal with these two while he found Seth. He didn't get two feet before a firm grip pressed on his shoulder.

"Not a chance, Chief. You don't leave our sight until we have all the documentation. Then, and *only* then, can you play Sherlock in another case."

Jonas glared over his shoulder. "You really should let go. You won't like it when I return the favor." His voice was light and playful-like, but his eyes held a threat. Edwards removed his hand. "As I said, I'll be back in a moment." Turning, he continued to Dusty.

Chapter 9

The woman looked more than terrified. In her late 30's, there was a streak of white laced through mousy brown hair. Her hands shook badly, like an alcoholic at the start of the D.T.'s. Bracing herself for the worst, Dusty opened the door. Climbing inside, she kept the door ajar. As she

reached into her left breast pocket, the woman recoiled. "It's okay. I'm Dusty, the lead detective in this case."

Pale blue eyes looked at Dusty, nodding slowly. "Okay."

"Just need to ask a few questions then you can go."

The woman looked around the squad car. When no one else joined, she relaxed. "Close the door."

Being trapped with a terrified witness in a locked car went against her training, but Dusty pulled the door shut. "Rough night, huh? Are you okay?"

The woman shook her head adamantly, wringing her hands together like manually washing clothes. "I just wanna go home. I've been here for-fuckin'-ever."

Looking around, Dusty scrunched her nose in disgust. "I don't blame ya. It stinks to high heaven!"

The terror eased as she cracked the beginnings of a smile. "I thought it was just my imagination."

"Ugh! I wish. Then I wouldn't be smelling it too. I noticed it the second I pulled the door closed." Reaching into her pocket, she took out the pad and pen. "Let's hurry so ya can get outta here." She noticed the flicker of 'not-again' flashing in the woman's eyes. "Just once more and we'll get you home. What's your name?"

Nodding, she sighed. "Carly Simon. Like the singer."

"It's nice to meet ya, Carly." Reaching into the other pocket, she pulled out a business card. Stopping short, she stared with a fanfare look of recognition. "Oh, my God! Ya look just like her! I'm surprised I didn't catch that right away! Is she kin to ya? Can I like... get an autograph or something?"

Smiling, she blushed, running fingers through her hair, trying to curb the unruly strands. "Thanks! No relation. You're not the first to say that. Lots o' people say I look just like her."

Turning, Dusty nodded, giving her the once over. "You could be her daughter."

Her mentor had his own ideas about interrogation. *"Put them at ease. A relaxed setting. Talking to their best friend. A loved one. You get more flies with honey than vinegar... unless it's a dead body. Once your witness relaxes, they develop a trust and will spill the beans."*

Carly sat up, color flowing back to cheekbones. "Wanna hear me sing? People say I sound like 'er too?"

Smiling softly, Dusty shook her head. "Can't. On the clock. We'll run into each other at Karaoke."

The woman calmed. "Oh! Gonna hold ya to that. I'm the Karaoke Queen."

Dusty handed over the card, winking. "Here's my phone number in case ya ever need a cop on your side."

Looking it over, Carly nodded, tucking it into her sweatpants pocket. "Thanks."

"Okay... so tell me what ya saw."

Carly faced her. "It was weird."

"Start at the beginning."

She nodded. "Okay. I had dinner. Put away leftovers. Then went for my nightly jog."

"Where do ya go?"

"Not too far from home." She pointed. "I stay off the main road cause of that hit-and-run a few weeks back. Remember that?"

Dusty nodded. "Yeah. Thank God we got the jerk."

"That poor woman didn't see it coming. Tossed her fifty feet in the air. So, I stick to the field."

"Can't say I blame ya. What did ya see?"

"I saw," eyes darted around the squad car, "*somethin'* bunched up 'round her. It was like—"

"Something?" Dusty arched both brows. "Was it animal? Human? Alien?"

"No clue what the dang burn thang was. It was nothin' I ever saw."

In the city, it was *fuck this* and *fuck that* and *you wouldn't believe the fucking thing I saw*. However, in the country, it was the *dang burn thang*.

"What was the shape? Did it walk on four legs or two?"

"It was dark. Looked like a bunch of... well... hunchbacks."

The woman's accent was very strong, made it hard to understand. "Like," Dusty looked at her, "in Notre Dame?"

"Yes! I figured it was my eyes playing tricks. We don't have hunchbacks! I did the census report."

"Describe them."

Carly slowly exhaled a ragged breath. "I can't! My mind gets fuzzy. It was like a... mixture of people and birds... huge bats... maybe."

"Hm. Okay. What happened next?"

"She was alive. Moaning. A lot. It was like an orgy."

"Moaning? Are ya sure she wasn't screaming?" Dusty jotted down everything.

"Nope! Moaning. She enjoyed whatever they were doing. I stepped on a branch. They looked at me. Moving at the same time. Like, if one blinked, they all did. Then they just kinda," her eyes turned to Dusty with renewed terror.

"What?"

After taking a deep shaky breath, she slowly exhaled. "Flew away."

"You sure they weren't birds?"

Carly shook her head. "No. Whatever they were... they was *huge*."

Where was the animal expert when she needed him? "Maybe buzzards, or owls. They tend to get big. What about the people? What happened to them?"

"I'm not sure they *was* people."

Her mind went back to the Chupacabra and raccoons. "It wasn't... by chance... a bunch of... hairless raccoons?"

Carly shook her head. "Coons?! Ain't nothing scary 'bout a damn coon! I used to hunt 'em. Bagged many! This was different. I keep telling myself there's no way I saw what I saw."

"Why? What did ya see? What were those... things... doing?"

"One of 'em turned. He was different than the others." Shaking her head, she wrung her hands again. "Blood dripped down his chin like... like... he was eating her! He had shining red eyes."

Dusty stopped writing, eyes snapped to Carly with both brows raised high. "Did ya say... eating her with red eyes?"

Carly nodded. "Yeah. Red. They weren't contacts, either. Just," she shivered, "*blood* red."

Dusty hung on her every word. "What did he do next?"

"A car came 'round the corner. They just..." She stared ahead.

"They just... what?"

Turning, she whispered, "flew away."

"The people too?"

"Yep! Straight in the air like Superman. A few blinked outta sight," taking a deep breath, "like they wasn't even there." Turning, she looked at Dusty. "How do people do that?"

"Good question."

"I nev—" Carly was interrupted by a solid rap on the window next to Dusty. It nearly sent her into cardiac arrest.

Soaked in adrenaline, Dusty reached for her gun, as her heart tried leaping from her chest. Seeing Jonas out the lightly fogged window, she took a deep breath, turning back to Carly. Reaching over, she set a reassuring hand on her arm. "It's okay. It's just my idiotic partner. You're still safe. We're done. Ya gonna be okay?"

Carly looked like she saw a ghost, but with Dusty's calming tone, she relaxed. "Yeah."

Pulling back, Dusty was business again. "Nice meeting ya. You've been a great witness. We'll get down to the bottom of it. Don't worry."

She looked around terrified. "You're not gonna just leave me here, are ya?"

Dusty shook her head. "Good heavens, no. I'll make sure an officer gives ya a ride home right away."

Carly put her hand on Dusty's arm. "Ya believe me... don't ya?"

Placing a hand on Carly's, she gave a reassuring smile. "I do." Turning, Dusty tapped the window and Jonas opened the door. Stepping out, she smiled at Carly. "You take care. I'll see ya soon at Karaoke." Winking, she closed the door.

"Karaoke, huh?" Jonas chuckled. "I didn't know you liked to sing."

She slapped his arm. "Way to scare the living shit outta someone! I need to check my drawers!"

Jonas bent down, smiling apologetically at Carly, before standing straight. "We have a problem."

"Did ya figure out what animal? From what Carly said, I don't know if—"

"No. We have company."

She was too tired for guessing games. "Let 'em know visitors see us in the office. Crime scenes are *no-go* areas."

"The 'Men in Black' are here. I don't mean Will Smith or Tommy Lee Jones."

Raising a brow, she curiously stared at him. "Who?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "The Feds are here."

"That doesn't narrow it down."

"A real asshole. Mark Edwards, and his *silent* partner Gregg Franks. They want to talk to the person in charge."

Her heart leaped into her throat as she instantly paled. "Agent... Mark... Edwards?" Her voice trailed off to a whisper.

"Yes. Here to take over the case." He blinked. "Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Her pulse roared. Glancing over his shoulder, her eyes locked onto Edwards. "Oh shit. They're here for..."

"Taking over the case. They want all the information."

"They asked for me?"

"No. They asked for the case lead. That's you."

Her lungs weren't functioning. What little air she managed to suck in wasn't enough. The world started getting darker. A bell rang in her ears. "Oh shit," she whispered.

Most cops were pissed when the Feds took over, like a pitcher replaced in a baseball game, but he didn't expect this reaction. She hadn't shown a hint of fear; ten feet tall and bulletproof. "I don't know what your deal is but go." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Get back to your home, or wherever you feel safe. I'll handle this. We'll sort through the B.S. later."

She pointed back to the police car. "What about—"

"I'll make sure she gets home safe. Now, get out of here."

Nodding, she turned, quickly disappearing into the crowd.

Chapter 10

Turning back to the witness, Jonas ignored the questions running through his head. He had to get the witness home before the Feds found her. Those boys didn't know what compassion meant, much less how to use it. When he opened the door, Carly plastered herself against the opposite side. Smiling gently, he placed his hand inside. "It's okay. I'm with Dusty."

Just the mention of 'Dusty' and she relaxed. "Dusty?"

"Yeah. She told me to come and get you."

Glancing around, Carly shot him a terrified look. "She said a cop was gonna take me home?"

"Yeah, but she said something about body odor and you waiting long enough. We're heading out now, so..." a smile lit up his handsome face.

"Where is she?"

"Went to get the car. We're going to meet her. I'm 'the idiotic partner', Jonas."

Carly smiled, taking his hand, sliding out. "I need to get home. I'm sure my husband's worried sick. I'm not usually gone this long."

Once she was out, Jonas pulled her into a hug, speaking in a soothing tone. "You saw something horrible but need not ever think of it again. Forget this happened. Find peace instead." He kissed her forehead.

Carly hugged him, then passed out in his arms.

Looking surprised, Jonas eased her to the ground. "Well, that doesn't happen every day." He tried tapping her wrist, brushing her hair back, touching her cheeks. "Hey, are you okay?" As she came to, he sat back. "Welcome back! You scared the daylights out of me. You need water. Come on. Let's get you up."

First, one eye opened and then the other. Shock and confusion turned into searing pain. Reaching up, she gripped at her temples, tears welling in her eyes. "Lord have mercy! I got a headache from hell! What happened?"

Reaching down, he helped her stand. "I don't know. You were jogging and keeled over. Good thing I was here." Stopping short, he smiled. "Waaaait a minute. Aren't you Carly Simon? The Karaoke queen?"

"Yes, that's me."

"I've heard you sing before. You're really good!"

Her face tinged with pink. "Thank you! I'm sorry ya have to see me like this. I'm such a mess. Why does my head feel like it's been split in two? Everything's foggy."

Placing an arm around her, he helped her toward the police car. "You probably collapsed because of heat exposure."

She leaned on him for support. "That's never happened before."

"Sometimes, you don't know until you pass out."

Furrowed brows turned in his direction. "But... it's cold."

"That's when you have to be really careful. The combination of the cold and your body overheating caused you to faint. You're probably dehydrated too."

"Dehydrated? Do ya think I should see the doc?"

"Not unless you feel worse. Take it easy for a few days. When you passed out, your body cooled. Probably why you have a headache." He opened the front door of the police car. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Um." Looking past the field, her eyes roamed over the area. "I was jogging over there. I cut across the park, then," her eyes darted back and forth, shaking her head. "That's it."

Jonas looked in the same direction. "That's probably when you passed out."

"Weird." Turning, she motioned to the crime scene. "What happened over there? It wasn't another hit-and-run, was it?"

"No. Looks like another murder."

"Oh no! That's horrible. *Another* murder? We got a serial killer 'round here?"

"No," shaking his head, "but I can't talk about an ongoing investigation. You understand."

"Sure," she said, hesitantly. "I get it. Thanks for your help."

"No problem. You're not well enough to get home by yourself." When she started to argue, he lightly tapped her head. "You don't know if your body is totally cooled down. You don't want to be out jogging and pass out again. It could be dangerous."

"Oh yeah." Glancing back to the crime scene, she shivered. "Ya got a point."

He helped her into the passenger seat. "I'll get the officer to take you home."

The door was barely closed when a voice registered from behind him. "Well, if it isn't Mr. Hollywood *Hotshot*. Where's Dusty?"

Smiling, Jonas turned, facing Charlie. Seeing a thin line of warm blood running down the man's cheek, his smile evaporated. "She's busy investigating a murder."

"Is that so?" Charlie grinned, hiking his pants up. "Good. You and I got some unfinished biiizness, and I always—"

Jonas was in his face, towering over him. "*Sergeant* Thomas, you're bleeding."

Charlie's eyes widened, as his throat went dry. "One of those nimrods took a swipe at me. Caught my cheek with her fingernail."

"Let me help." Jonas wiped the scratch with his forefinger, sticking it into his mouth.

Charlie's stomach lurched. "Ew." He cleared his throat, grimacing up at him. It took everything not to puke.

Disgusting visions of Charles F. Thomas trolling the internet, luring kids away from their homes with empty promises, pretending to understand them, filled his mind. Jonas saw him torture, murder, then bury their broken bodies in deep graves. "All those innocent children." Jonas's eyes turned red as he grabbed Charlie by the throat. "You vile sack of pus. I should kill you."

His eyes bulged, as he was hoisted off the ground. "P-please. I don't wanna die. I'm sick."

Releasing him, Jonas nodded. "I have a better idea." He placed a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "You're definitely sick, Charlie. You know what helps with your particular illness? Confession."

"Confession?" Something in him said, 'Sparx is right', but Charlie didn't think so.

"Yes, confession is good for the soul. Yours could use a lot of help. Turn yourself in."

"How's that gonna help? I've tried stopping but the demons won't let me."

Jonas motioned to the police car. "Trust me. This will help. You can do this! But first, you have to take this woman home. She passed out while jogging. Then you go home. Turn on your computer. Send *all* those hidden files, pictures, video, and location of the graves to the F.B.I. Attention Special Agent Edwards. Do you understand?"

Looking up, he slowly nodded. "I understand. And this's gonna help me?"

"It will make you a hero."

"A... hero?"

"You'll be taking another pervert off the streets, making it safe for children."

Charlie puffed out his chest feeling pride. "That's my job."

"Yes, it is. You're very good at your job. Dusty will be so proud."

With his head held high, Charlie got into the driver's seat and pulled out, headed in the direction of Carly's house.

Two problems down, one more to go. Seeing the Feds heading towards him, Jonas smiled.

Chapter 11

Agent Edwards tapped his watch. "Sparx, I don't have all day. You must be in charge since you didn't bring anyone back with you."

"Nope. Wasn't promoted in that short amount of time. The officer in charge..." Taking a deep breath, Jonas slowly exhaled, holding his hands out. "Disappeared."

Edwards glared. "What do you mean, *disappeared*?"

"Here one minute, gone the next. Could be with the medical examiner. Looking for evidence. Tracking down a killer. She could be anywhere."

"What about you?"

"Me? Just an animal expert helping with the investigation. That's my level of knowledge. *Animals*."

Agent Edwards ran a hand through his hair. "So where can we find the officer in charge?"

"Um." Jonas pivoted in a 360 turn. Playful eyes turned back to the Feds. "Well, for now, I guess that's me."

Taking a step closer, the Fed narrowed his eyes. "Are you playing games with me?!"

"Not at all." Jonas smiled. "I'm new here. Still sifting through the information. Everything's been thrown out of whack, people running around like in a maze." Motioning to the sheet, his voice dropped a bit. "This grisly scene must be investigated, so you're going to have to wait. I'm a slow reader." He held his hand up, stopping the man from arguing. "I know you don't have the time or the patience, but you're going to have to. It's not like I can pull the files out of my ass."

Agent Edwards shook his head. "That's unacceptable."

"I know! Trust me. I feel the same way." Shaking his head, he put an arm around both of their shoulders, turning them in the direction of their government-issued Ford. "It totally breaks protocol. However, there's one bright spot."

Edwards glanced at the unwelcome arm before snapping back to Jonas, his scrunched-up face the color of a steamed lobster. "What's that?"

"You'll be getting an email in the next few hours, you'll no doubt find appalling."

Interested, Edwards arched a brow. "What sort of email?"

"One filled with your future promotion. A *full* confession with disturbing pictures and video. Lucky for you, the author resides here in Cider Lake." Jonas inclined his head in the direction of the slow-moving squad car. "I assume you gentlemen can follow someone inconspicuously?"

After a quick glance at the squad car, the two men exchanged knowing looks. "Yes."

"Excellent! You know how we wait for that one case that takes us over the top?"

Taking a deep breath, Agent Edwards nodded again. "I suspected this was that case. Too many inconsistencies. Otherwise, it wouldn't have landed on our desk."

"This case? No. This is a rogue animal out of his element. Hungry. The other one... now *that's* something to sink your teeth into. Getting a psychopathic child killer off the streets. That arrest could get you boys a big, fat promotion. Private offices in the Hoover building."

Edwards went from just interested to full-blown out excited. "It's that big, huh?"

"Oh, *much* bigger. Landing this sicko will send you up the ladder. Wouldn't the Missus just love that?"

Edwards lips pursed. "Yeah. Baby's due any day. Paint peeling off the walls. She's been up my ass to move." He looked to his partner. "Orders changed. We follow that car, wait for the email, then nab that pervert."

"Agreed." Special Agent Franks nodded. "But what about the *other* issue?"

Edwards shrugged. "I didn't see her, did you? We were misinformed. We need to get away from the smell of shit."

"I know! I can't wait to blow this Popsicle stand myself." Jonas winked. "Get in your car. Tail Sergeant Thomas home, but don't jump the gun. Wait for that email before you bust in and make the arrest."

Edwards laughed, reaching out to shake his hand. "Thanks a lot, Sparx. You're all right."

"That's what they tell me." Jonas shook the man's hand.

The two agents got in the car and headed off, laughing, joking about how they were going to spend all that money.

Once they were clear, Jonas sighed, looking over at Tammy Barker's sheet-covered lifeless body. "This is turning into a clusterfuck of epic proportions."

He didn't know how right he was.

...

When he told her to rush off, Dusty easily lost herself in the crowd. She got a chance to witness him in action and it brought up uncertainties. Once the Feds drove away, she snapped on another pair of booties and gloves and headed over. She strode noiselessly toward the body, snapping as many pictures as possible. "I'm not sure how you managed all that, but thanks. I owe ya."

His eyes lit up and brows arched before slowly facing her. Glancing at the crowd, he gave a small clap. "Well played, partner. I'll hold you to that."

"I have a job to do," she told him, moving around the body. "So, hopefully, those two stay away."

"I don't think they'll be back. Bigger fish to fry."

Her mentor's voice pushed her beyond the emotional tug. "*Trained professionals have no feelings. You're a robot. Straight face. No tears, crying, gasps. The victim is your case. A thing. An inanimate object. A goal. Never a real person. Do your job without emotion,*" the words played over in her head.

The attack was brutal. The body, gray in color, was nude with fingernails and toenails white. The left half was intact, but the other was torn apart. Small 'fang-like' wounds dotted the right side with half of her face missing to the bone. One eye sunk into the skull, the other was gone. Bones peeked out from strings of raw meat, with pieces of tendon littering the gaping wounds. Her throat was a cavernous hole, large enough for a fist. Swallowing hard, Dusty looked at another vast space in the girl's chest. The left half was in perfect condition, except for a surgically severed hand, glued in place, forefinger pointing at the tattoo.

Her breath caught in her throat. It reminded her of peeling a carrot with a vegetable slicer. Dusty saw the tattoo; a maroon heart, dripping with bright red blood, amid beautiful lavender roses. It was right where the file said it would be. Tammy Barker. "That's odd."

"Which part?" Jonas watched her.

Peeking around the body, she looked confused. "Usually, there are insects burrowing in and out of the corpse. So many that the skin moves. She doesn't have any. Not one. No flies. She's been dead a while... so... where the hell are they? Come to think of it," she said, glancing around, listening intently. "I don't hear anything. No crickets. Owl. It's silent."

Jonas listened. She was right. Something was keeping everything away. Looking around, he saw markings in the dirt. Walking over, he reached down, picking up a handful, messing up the symbol. "Maybe she hasn't been here long?"

"Long enough to attract flies. Where's Willie? He should've," she slapped her arm, killing a mosquito. Flies began buzzing around the body as the night filled with different sounds of insects and animals alike. Glancing around, she looked confused. "That's creepy." Turning back to Tammy, she pointed. "Another thing. Where's the blood?"

"What?" Standing, he joined her.

"All this... and no blood? It's the same in all of them now."

Doctors make the worst patients. William "Willie" Taggart was no exception. Cider Lake's Medical Examiner, for the last fifty years, managed to sidestep most maladies that infected the elderly. In his mid-seventies, he only sported a slight limp. "Arthritis. Nothing to slow me down." A few widows in town could attest to that, but tonight he was running late. A nasty cold got the better of him.

All five of his kids – two boys and three girls – left small-town life behind, granting him four grandchildren. Since the murders started, he Skyped his kids three times a week, sometimes more. He knew everybody in town, even delivered some into this God-forsaken world. The stranger tailing Dusty had 'Big City' all over him. He headed for the body. "Hey, Dusty. How ya been?" He ordered the deputies to set up a perimeter, so he could work without the sheet.

Stepping back, giving him room, she took out her notepad and pen. "About the same as always, but you sound *horrible*!"

Smiling, he coughed into a hanky. "Yeah, got me a damn summer cold. Ya know how those stick around."

"Make sure ya take plenty of juices." She pointed to Jonas. "Willie, this is my partner, Jonas Sparx. He's the animal expert."

Looking up, Willie smiled. "William Taggart, medical examiner, but everyone just calls me Willie."

Jonas nodded. "Not counting the circumstances, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"In my line of work, it's never good timing." Turning, he pointed to his assistant. "Jonas, this is my young assistant, Clark. This boy's gonna take over one day."

In his early twenties, Clark was a handsome man with dirty blond hair and green eyes. His love of beer – and wife's good cooking – gave him the beginnings of a belly. "Hey there." Being shy, he bent down to his duties with a clipboard in hand. Taking out the thermometer, he began his assessment of the body.

"Hey, Clark." Dusty nodded to the body. "Willie, with this type of damage, shouldn't there be blood?"

"Depends. The murder coulda happened somewhere else. If so, this is just the drop-off point." Leaning down, he looked over the skin. "Don't see much insect activity. Safe to say she ain't been here long."

Clark held up the thermometer. "No sign of livor mortis. Her hand appears surgically removed and glued back with forefinger pointing to the tattoo. I ain't never seen anything like this."

Dusty looked from Jonas back to Willie. "So, she was drained of blood?"

"That's one possibility. If she bled out, there wouldn't be any left to pool." Leaning down, he looked over the body. "Boatload of deep lacerations. It's likely."

Clark checked her head and shoulders, jotting down on his paper. "Rigor Mortis only visible in head and shoulders. She ain't been dead long. Going off temperature and stiffness... a couple of hours... tops."

Willie nodded. "I'll be able to tell more after the autopsy."

Dusty nodded. "Okay, keep me informed."

Willie and his assistant continued with their duties while Jonas and Dusty stepped off to the side.

Slightly flushed, Dusty squinted. "Three months I searched. Combing every corner of town. Couldn't find her. I searched the woods, deserted buildings, houses for sale. Nothing. No sign."

"Dusty, it's not your fault."

"I hope she knows I never stopped looking. Every day searching for *something* I might've missed."

He slowly nodded his head. "I'm sure she knows." He couldn't stop wondering why Seth was concerned with Cider Lake again after all these years?

Watching Willie and Clark over the body, she arched a brow. "Look at her face."

"The world can be an evil place. It's gruesome. Whoever did this wanted her to be recognizable, yet horrific."

She shook her head. "Do ya see the look on her face?"

"I'm missing something."

"Pleasure. If something were eating me like this, I'd be scared to death. I wouldn't look happy."

He shrugged. "Maybe she was stoned."

Her eyes angrily snapped to his. "She didn't do drugs."

"Maybe her killer shot her up first."

"She's been torn apart. Drained of blood. Holes punctured through her. No one would enjoy that, but she did. Look at her face!" She pointed at the good side of Tammy's face. "That's bliss. Pure pleasure. It doesn't belong."

"We don't know she was drained."

Her hands tightened into fists, glaring up at him. "One whole side is totally mutilated. There should be blood somewhere!"

"Until Willie calls, we don't know what happened! The killer could've drugged her, she died in a happy trip to Lala-land then he tore her apart."

"We'll find out when Willie calls. Who could do this? It's very... destructive."

"Plan B," he muttered.

"What?" She turned, looking at him.

"I already told you," he said, voice turning serious.

"Don't even start. I asked Carly if it was a raccoon. The girl started hunting at an early age. She knows what they look like. Newsflash. It ain't no damn coon. A raccoon can't do this damage. Not even in a communal den." She looked back down at the ground.

"True." Glancing around, seeing no one was in earshot, he whispered, "but a vampire can."

Gnawing on the inside of her cheek, her hand rubbed at the headache building. Standing slowly, she glared at him. "What?" Her voice was low and deadly.

"Think of all you've studied with this case. Now, think of what you've seen tonight. You're right. A human can't make those marks." He shook his head. "But a vampire can. If you have a more logical explanation, I'd *love* to hear it."

"A vampire?" Without thinking, Dusty punched him.

Jonas could have easily avoided the hit, but there were too many witnesses. Instead, he gave an Oscar-worthy performance, crumpling to the ground. Cheers rose from the crowd. Even Willie managed a few good chuckles, pride in his eyes, before coughing up a lung.

Towering over him, she brought her face to his, whispering heatedly. "I don't wanna hear your fucking fairytales anymore. You just arrived. *I've* been here for every disappearance, every second they were missing, hoping, and praying not to end up in a crime scene rerun. Find your own way back!" Turning, she stormed away from him. Hopping in her car, she popped the e-brake, drifting around a few obstacles, tires smoking the second she hit the asphalt and the crowd went wild.

Slowly standing, Jonas dusted himself off.

"Ya must be a strong fella," Willie remarked between coughing fits. "I saw that purty lady deck boys twice your size. They don't get back up." He blew his nose into a hanky before pushing it into his pocket. "She sent many to the hospital."

"I work out." Turning, he watched as the M.E. knelt over the body, opening a small tool kit. Walking over, he stood near him. "Off the record, what do *you* think did this?"

Pushing black-rimmed glasses back up on his nose, Willie looked at Tammy Barker's corpse and sighed. "Seen me lots o' bad things, son." He ran a weathered hand through thinning, gray hair. "War, stupidity, husbands' taking their days piss out on their wives. But I ain't never seen the likes of what I seen in these last six folks. We might just have a pack of wolves running 'round these parts that only like half the body." Glancing up, he gave Jonas a serious look. "Not the kind that walks on four paws, if ya get my meaning."

Lifting a brow, Jonas shook his head. "Never known a werewolf to leave half a meal."

Willie blinked. "C-come again?"

"Nothing. Just being a smart ass." Looking around, Jonas cracked his neck. "You got this?"

The old man laughed. "Son, I been doing this since afore you was born. Reckon I can do it in my sleep. You go on. Got yourself a hike ahead of ya." He looked back down at Tammy.

Jonas smirked. "Bet I beat her back."

"Ha!" Reaching into his pocket, he grinned, pulling out a twenty. "Got me a fresh Andy Jackson, says *you*—" Jonas was nowhere in sight. "Sum bitch! Road Runner ain't got nothing on that boy." He put the twenty away. Kneeling once more, he sighed. "Well missy, let's you and I go for a ride. I'll drive careful. I know your momma'd appreciate that."

Chapter Twelve

I-40. 1,047 miles of Interstate Highways authorized for Tennessee by the Federal-Aid Highway act of 1956. Five years ago – Saturday, March 21, 2009 – on a chilly early morning, it was also where a horrific event took place. Red stains littered the side of the road where Charlie found

Martin Bradley decapitated. He had no enemies. Didn't quarrel with anyone. Went to church every Sunday of his life. His death was confusing and devastating to everyone. Through tears, Charlie told Martin's beloved widow that her husband, of forty-five years, was dead. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Grace. Not much to go on, but believe me, I won't rest 'til we find out who did this and bring 'em to justice."

It was another empty promise, but he played his part. He held her in his arms as she collapsed, crying on his shoulder. He did everything for Grace; drove her to the funeral parlor, helped pick out the casket, picked up the flowers, became part of the family. Visiting nightly, he brought something to eat. He was there for her while searching for the killer. She put the house on the market and Charlie finagled her down to sixty-five thousand, claiming it was all he had. It was worth three times that amount. Because of how close they were, she agreed. All she really wanted was to move to Florida and enjoy the sunshine. Charlie moved in and the fun began. It was perfect for his 'hobby' with over thirty acres of dense woods. Martin's killer would never be caught. The murder weapon would never be found. In a dark corner of Charlie's basement, a blood-caked machete sat.

After dropping off Carly, Charlie drove to his cherished bungalow, just outside the town border, oblivious to the black Ford tailing him. For the last five years, the house served its twisted purpose. Being the only one for miles in any direction, it allowed him to accumulate a collection without worrying about nosy people. No one ever saw the overly excited little guests who couldn't wait to see where Santa lived on his downtime, getting their own little puppy, or getting a fresh-out-of-the-warehouse free gaming system, not even in stores yet. No one heard the bloodcurdling screams. Not one person saw him leaving with a red-stained burlap sack over his shoulder. He wasn't a pedophile. The torture of each lasted a week, giving him a thrill when they shrieked. Pure hatred stemmed from a tortured childhood.

Compelled to confess by a force he didn't understand – yet couldn't fight – he sat in his driveway going over what to write. He had to explain the hidden compartments, videos, and torture devices. Account for the map's legend and how each push-pin represented a child; blue for a boy, pink for a girl. The handwritten ledger showing each child's name, where he grabbed them, age, date of death. Maybe he'd get lucky and a sympathetic jury would buy his defense. Being a victim of abuse warped his mind from years of dealing with daily torture. That was his reason for grabbing children. He'd throw light upon his past. Just another victim of a forgotten society. Charlie Thomas was a lost boy, who grew up to be a lost man. It happens on TV all the time.

He didn't notice the black sedan parked a few hundred feet away.

"Who lives here?" Edwards took a sip of cold coffee.

Franks checked the tablet. "Sergeant Charles F. Thomas. Local Five-O."

"One of us? That's surprising."

"You just never know these days. Unless... you think Sparx gave us bad intel?"

Edwards watched the house. "Let's give it an hour. If we don't get anything, we'll go back and deal with Sparx."

Charlie dragged his feet up the walkway. The wind swirled about him, causing a shiver. Stopping, he spun in a complete circle, looking around. His mouth went dry. The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up. Something felt wrong, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Chalking it up to his getting caught, his shoulders slumped. Trying to swallow the dryness, he continued up the steps. A beer in the fridge and a bottle of Jack would help wash down the confessional. It took a moment to get through the three deadbolt locks (no such thing as too much

security). He felt a flutter of air, like a presence on his heels. Glancing over his shoulder revealed nothing, yet Charlie trusted his instincts.

Relief flooded through as he walked into the house. Resting against the door, he took a few deep breaths. Setting his keys on a burlwood side table – a catch-all for mail, loose change, notes taken at a crime scene – his eyes drifted over to the new laptop. Beneath the map of *his* children, it was open and waiting for his confession. A pang of loss struck. After catching kids getting stoned behind McKinley Pub, he gave them the 'scared straight' version of life in the 'Big House'. They paid Charlie with all the cash and drugs they had, to let them go. If only that would work with Sparx. Flipping on the light switch, he took a step forward and froze.

"Evening, *Sergeant* Thomas."

It was 'just Donnie' from the crime scene. The need to write a confession was replaced with a single pounding thought quickening his pulse. *Run*. Spinning around, Charlie slammed into a brick wall in the guise of a tall man. Stumbling back, he looked over the figure blocking his escape.

Well over six-foot-five, the man was dressed in head-to-toe black leather, sporting a head of spiked ash-blond hair; eyes as red as coals in a furnace. When he spoke, the southern drawl seemed out of place. "Why don't ya just set a spell?"

Instinctively, Charlie drew his gun. "Y'all are trespassing." The gun quivered in his grip.

"Oh, my! What a mighty big gun. Are ya," his eyes dropped to Charlie's crotch before moving back up to his eyes. "Compensating for something?"

Intuition told Charlie this man had no fear of – or respect for – an officer of the law. That thought made his trigger finger twitch. Turning, he pointed the gun from one to the other. "I'll shoot and be well within my rights to do so!"

"Did ya hear that, Donnie? This man is threatening me with violence. *Me!*" He put a hand to his chest in an over-dramatic fashion. "A guest in his home. Sir, I am offended." His hand shot up, stopping any apology from Charles. "Yes, *highly* offended, but you do what ya must. I have only one request." He pointed at his chest. "Aim for the heart. I don't wanna suffer none."

Donnie grinned. In a blink, he was behind Charlie, cold hand on his shoulder, egging him on. "Go on, Sergeant Thomas. Shoot him. Now's your chance. Trespassing, breaking and entering."

Charlie's blood ran cold when Donnie touched him, but the boy was right. No jury would convict an officer of the law for protecting his home. He was well within his constitutional rights as a—

The gun fired. Charlie looked down. Donnie's pale hand closed around his own, one thin finger over his, squeezing the trigger.

The blond tilted his head. Looking down, he examined the hole in his chest. "Oh dear. And I never got Obamacare!"

Charlie's jaw dropped. "What the...?"

Seth pushed the bullet back out and into his hand. "Damn Chinese and their gunpowder." Tossing the slug aside, his gaze returned to Charlie. "Things were so much more," a smile curled the man's lips, "civilized before then. Why I remember when men settled their differences honorably with blades or bare fists. Duels. Now, it's just... How's that sayin'? 'Bust a cap in yo' ass'? It's revolting, I say. Just revolting!"

Charlie looked on, shocked, confused, downright terrified as the hole sealed. "Wh-what are you? You should be dead!"

"Typical. Shoot first, ask questions later. Since you won't be spreading any of this 'round... my name is Seth. You met Donnie here earlier while working crowd control at our little artistic

display. He's a *might* upset 'bout the police brutality, and well," he smiled, "he'd like an apology if it's not too much trouble."

Charlie blinked, thinking he was having a nightmare, possibly sleeping in his car again. It couldn't be real. Turning to Donnie, he bowed his head, apologetically. "I'm sorry. I was," he dropped his gaze, "stressed out."

Nodding, Seth smiled. "Now, see there, Donnie? I told ya he was reasonable! Now, we can all be friends!"

Donnie shook his head. "I don't believe him. He's just saying what you want to hear."

"Donald!" Seth scolded. "That's plain rude. We'll discuss your manners at home." The two turned to leave, but then stopped short. "Forgive me, Sergeant Thomas, but there's one small bit of business we need to conduct." He pointed to the hole. "When ya shot me... well... outside of the fact that this here vest cost me five hundred dollars," he turned his gaze back to Charlie's frightened eyes and grinned. "I'll be needing a transfusion."

Arching a brow, Charlie pulled out his wallet. Rifling through it, he took out five one-hundred-dollar bills. The last bit of bribe money that he was saving for a new TV. So much for that. He handed it over. "Here ya go. Sorry 'bout that."

Seth appeared pleasingly shocked. "Sergeant Thomas, you have restored my faith in humanity! Yes, sir!" He pocketed the bills, turning to Donnie. "You see, Donald? There are good men still left in this world!" Smiling, he turned back to Charlie. "Now, about that transfusion."

Charlie shook his head. "I-I can't help ya with that."

His smile turned to a twisted evil grin as twin razors of death descended. "Indeed, you can." His eyes turned a deeper crimson. "Let me show you how."

The front door almost flew off the hinges as Agent Edwards and Franks kicked it in. Dropping to a crouch, they pulled their weapons, aiming at the others in the room. "FBI! Everyone down on the ground! Now!"

Turning to the crouched men, Seth's grin widened, exposing the full length of his dangerous fangs. "Why look, Donald. The FBI has delivery. How thoughtful." Turning back to Charlie, he winked. "This won't take long, but just in case you're thinking of stepping out on me..." He let fly with a powerful right to Charlie's face, knocking him and a few of his back molars to the floor.

Agent Edwards cocked the hammer back in place, aiming it at Seth's face. "I said free—"

F.B.I. Special Agent Edwards never finished his last sentence. The speed with which Seth took the man's life was blinding, surpassed only by its viciousness. Sinking fangs deep, he drove a hand into the agent's chest, ripping out his quivering heart. Blood spurted from Edwards like a fountain. The look of pleasure on Seth's face, feasting on the still beating muscle, was the last thing Edward's saw before Seth tore off his head, letting his body crash to the floor. The pool of blood at his feet flowed out of the still moving headless body. With a feral snarl, he slammed the agent's head against the wall, creating a blood splatter like no forensics team ever saw. "Jackson Pollock eat your heart out."

Donnie hadn't learned restraint. He was still young. When he attacked Franks, he went for the jugular, drinking, moaning. Agent Franks tried to get away, but Donnie's hold was vice-like. When he had his fill, he ripped off his arm, flinging it off to the side. Agonizing screams sounded as the youngling tore his remaining limbs off, blood spraying in every direction. Donnie, covered head to toe in pieces of Franks, stood over the corpse grinning.

Seth rose, drenched in blood. Picking at his teeth, he mused over the scene. "Mm, that was very satisfying gentlemen. Nice and lean. My compliments to the chef." Looking over at Donnie, he pointed. "Wallets."

Retrieving the leather-clad billfolds, he tossed them over. "Here you go."

After combing through the compartments, Seth threw them onto the bloody remains. "Credit cards. Doesn't anyone use money anymore?"

Donnie laughed. "Not really. It's just—"

"Shut up."

Donnie kicked a foot away. "What are we doing with him?" He jerked his thumb at Charlie.

Seth tilted his head, glancing at Charlie's kitchen. "I believe Sergeant Thomas has a terrible gas leak."

Donnie looked around, sniffing the air. "I don't smell anything."

Rolling his eyes, Seth headed for the kitchen. "I am surrounded by morons."

Chapter Thirteen

Jonas made it to the office ahead of Dusty. Being a few hours before dawn, there weren't many people out. Good thing. Taking a seat on the bench, he crossed one leg over the other. His assignment changed. He had to make her understand the truth. Her life depended on it.

The ride back, as well as chain-smoking cigarette after cigarette, cooled her off. She couldn't get Tammy's look of pleasure out of her head. It didn't belong. Jonas was right about one thing. The killer could have filled her with mind-altering drugs before executing her, but why? How? An attack like that was brutal. It wasn't planned. It looked more like a fit of rage, except for the one whole side untouched. That looked meticulous. And that severed hand. It was obvious someone wanted them to see it was Tammy, but again... why?

It had been a rough night and it took a toll on a body, mind, and soul. The fresh air swirled around her when she exited the car. Guilt set in about leaving Jonas. Groaning, she headed toward the front door. Pinching off the filter, she flicked it away.

He watched her flick the cigarette butt away. She didn't have a smoker's cough from tar buildup. Probably ran faster and farther than anyone in town, another of the many facts that scratched at him. That punch caused him to wonder as well. It hurt. She didn't look, smell, or feel any different than other women, but...

Blinking, she stopped short, as if running into an invisible brick wall. Her eyes widened, mouth dropped open, staring in shock. "How the *crippity-crap* did ya beat me back?"

"Somebody who drives faster."

Showing interest with raised brows, she looked around. "Who?"

"Young kid. Just got his license. Sorry. Didn't get his name."

Shrugging, she continued to the door. "Pity."

'Hey Y'all, listen up! I got a wallop of a tale! Y'all ain't gonna believe this shit!' Gossip was the big news topping headlining newspapers. It was bigger than the what-for during the O.J. trial. People in the café were yakking it up about Dusty sending her partner down to eat dirt. There were seventy-five people taking pictures and videos from the forensic crew collecting evidence to the deputies putting up the sheet. No matter how many people bragged about catching it, they found nothing but audio. The people who uploaded it to YouTube found the same problem. Pictures were too blurry like someone flashed a light.

With all that action, people forgot about the storm. The crackling of lightning, the clashing of thunder, the threat of a downpour, and that violent wind. It caused many to race out of their homes, chasing their belongings two streets down. Mother Nature did her part. Now, it was up to Jonas. Only one person needed to understand what was happening. "We need to talk." He looked around. "But not out here."

Taking out her keys, she went to unlock the door. "Let's step into the office then."

He swung his arm out. "Ladies first."

As she went to put the key in, the door opened. Her eyes widened, thinking instantly about the Feds at the crime scene. "Oh shit! They found me!" With gun leveled in her hands – one under the other – she raced inside. Flipping on the lights, her eyes roamed from one section to the next, checking under desks, lightbulbs, behind pictures, running her hand over the walls.

Stepping in, he leaned against the wall, observing her actions with growing curiosity. Red flags and warning lights sounded off inside his head. She was hiding something, but what?

After finding the place empty, her eyes snapped to the door. "What the hell?! I *know* I locked that door!" Holstering her piece, she ran a hand through her hair. "I don't like it."

"Maybe you only thought you did."

Angrily, she huffed. "I locked that freaking door!" Looking around, she noticed the empty dickhead box. "Ah. My idiot boss." Grabbing her chair, she took a seat. "The dipshit should've locked it, but he is a Grade-A moron."

Jonas thought of Kanis, nodding in agreement. "Most bosses are."

Taking the memory card from the camera, she inserted it into her computer. Pulling out the pictures, she labeled them, pointing to the chairs. "Sit. You talk. I'll work. We have a loooong day ahead of us and it's not even light out yet."

Taking a seat, he laid a crisp hundred-dollar bill on her desk. "Ahem."

Glancing over, she arched a brow. "What's that?"

"This hundred says I can get your gun from your holster, take three bullets out of your clip, put the magazine back, holster it, change this hundred for a fifty, and sit down before you know what happened."

Rolling her eyes, she continued typing. Opening the crime scene folder, she glanced over the pictures, searching the crowd, zooming in on certain faces. A few were fuzzy. Some were blacker than night. "Sparx, I don't have time for your games. A lot of these didn't take. Hopefully, I can lighten 'em. If you can write a report about which animal did it, we can find them. Carly said she saw people not animals. So... ya might be right. It could be a man doing this with some exotic animal. Just need to know which for the file. Then you can find it and I'll get him."

Waving a dismissive hand, he motioned to the bill. "Humor me. It will take all of three seconds."

Turning, she grabbed the c-note, inspecting it. "You're gonna do all that, in *three* seconds, without me seeing?" After a thorough inspection, she set it back down.

Nodding, he leaned back in the chair. "You win... you get an easy hundred. I win... you stop what you're doing and give me your undivided attention with an open mind. Deal?"

"I must've hit ya harder than I thought. There's no way you can do that."

"If I can't, you get a hundred dollars."

Once more, her eyes danced over the bill, letting out a soft breath. "Okay." Her eyes never left his. "One. Two. Three." The man never moved. A brow rose as she grinned. "You're not even gonna try?" Shaking her head, she grabbed the bill. "Sucker! Now, *I* need that animal—" The smile disappeared. It was a fifty in her hand. "What the hell?"

He opened his palm showing three Wolf Gold Line nine-millimeter widow makers. "One-four-seven grain. You don't fool around."

Shocked, wide eyes traveled from his hand to his eyes. "You had those up your sleeve."

"Did I?" He wiggled them around in the palm of his hand. "How would I know the exact brand and grain you use? Check your clip."

"Hell if I know, but there's no way you—" Lifting her jacket, she saw her gun on the wrong side. Her holster was backward. Her eyes slowly moved back to his.

"I won." He set each bullet down in front of her.

Sitting back, she stared. "How the disappearing Houdini did you do that? And don't tell me it was magic either."

"Shut off the computer and we'll talk. The world you know, Miss Garner, is about to change... drastically." *That* was the first step. He had to convince her about the rest but knew it wasn't going to be easy.

Putting the bill down, she turned off the monitor. Switching her holster right, she pulled her weapon. It was missing three bullets. Snatching them off the desk, she put them back in the clip, muttering about psychotic partners. Snapping it in place, she secured it once more. Sitting back, interlacing fingers together, she rested them under her chin. "You have my undivided attention. *How* did ya do that?"

"You won't need that," he inclined his head toward her sidearm. "But I understand the comfort it offers."

Arching a brow, the silent *are you kidding?* question etched across her face. "You didn't say how long I had to quit working."

"I also said keep an open mind."

"You're on borrowed time. Make it quick. We have a lot to do. Don't have time to play mind games."

His lips pursed. "I owe you an apology."

Once more, her brow arched. "Go on."

"Well, you and Miss Barker. I was out of line. Poor timing on my part and for that, I am sorry."

She nodded. "Apology accepted."

He looked up at the ceiling, closing his eyes. "May Miss Barker be as forgiving." He opened his eyes. "Cider Lake has a vampire problem."

"Are we gonna do this again?"

"I guarantee you, one-hundred-percent it's a vampire."

"How do ya have such an iron-clad assurance this fairytale exists?"

He looked down at his shoes before looking back at her. "I know because..." What he was about to tell her broke the very law he upheld since rebirth. "I *am* one."

Chapter 14

Both brows shot up. "Beg your pardon?"

"I'm a vampire and have been an investigator for much longer than you've been alive. The bear-wolf story? *I* was the expert in that case. I labeled it an animal attack. It was a vampire."

After silently watching him, she tipped back her head and laughed, slapping the desk a few times. Slowly, she shook her head. Her imitation sounded like Mickey Mouse on steroids. "*I am a vampire.*" Laughing, she turned back to the computer. "Damn good trick! Show me the one where you actually start working. That would be a good trick. You should write novels with that imagination of yours."

A knowing smirk graced his face. "I've written a few through the years. If I may toot my own horn, they were far better than the drivel that passes for literature these days."

Turning the monitor back on, she glanced at him. "Really? You're an author too. I feel so privileged to be working with a super sleuth as you." She shook her head. "You're delusional. A

mental case! If you're not gonna help me, you can leave anytime. Next, you're gonna tell me ya worked with Sherlock Holmes, or you were with Moses when he parted the Red Sea."

"Moses was before my time, but I have known a few who were around when he started talking to burning bushes. As for Sherlock, the books are fiction, but the man is not. I worked with him in London in eighteen-seventy-four. *That* man was brilliant."

Her eyes darted from him to her monitor, waiting for the punch line. "Uh-huh. I find that hard to believe. *He* knew what defensive marks were."

Nodding, Jonas watched her. "There wasn't anything beyond his scope of deduction. I used to get a thrill watching him work. All he needed was the slightest clue to solve the case. I was highly upset when he disappeared while investigating the old Shoscombe place. We never found him. Not sure what happened. It's still a mystery."

She watched him in disbelief. He sounded sincere. If it wasn't so preposterous, she might even start to believe it herself. "We should take a trip to the hospital. Check in on the sixth floor. You can look for him there. Eating checkers or running from white fuzzies."

"You really don't believe me? Even after I did the impossible that no mortal man can do."

True, he had a point, but logic told her what he claimed wasn't even a possibility. "That you're a vampire? That ya worked with a fictional character?" Scoffing at the absurd notion, she shook her head. "Not even. That you're a delusional magician in need of a psychiatric evaluation?" She nodded her head furiously. "Without a doubt. We should have that done immediately if you're gonna help find who or what's killing people."

"Hmm. What you need is irrefutable proof." Standing slowly, he motioned down to her. "Name your proof, Miss Garner."

"Do ya think everything's a joke? Carly gave me enough to believe that there was a group. It could be a cannibalistic cult. No defensive marks. No blood. Ripped to shreds. Now, figure out what it is so we can find the killer! Stop horsing around. I have to stop them, with or without you!"

"Shall I change into a bat? Gaze deeply into those beautiful eyes of yours, rob you of your will, and drink deeply from the wellspring of your sanguine fluid? I so hate those overblown, pompous phrases. Blood is blood. Let's call it such. Yes?"

"Excuse me? Stop talking stupid, Sparx."

He placed his fists on her desk, leaning forward. "Come, come, Miss Garner. Think how ridiculous I'll look when I can't do what you demand as proof. Surely, that is worth the price of admission to my world. No?"

Standing, she pressed her hands flat on the desk, almost touching her nose with his. "Ya mean into your delusional world? No thanks. *One* of us in the psych ward'll be enough. You can go chat with Sherlock. Logically, ya couldn't have done that. Right now, I don't give a flying squirrel's dick how ya did. Now, sit your ass down and help solve this case or get the hell out! Don't make me escort ya out. You won't like it one bit."

His eyes narrowed. "*You* won't either."

Unafraid, she pointed to the door. "Sparx, take your candy ass outta my office. Don't make me take out my gun and shoot your fucking head off!"

Smiling, he wiggled his brows teasingly. "*That* is a splendid idea!"

She arched a brow. "Come again?"

Pushing off the desk, he opened his arms wide, flashing a seductive grin. "Shoot me."

Taking a deep breath, she slowly exhaled. "You know we're not allowed to drink on the job, right?" Slowly, she shook her head. "See, this is why I don't take partners. At first, they seem easy going. Then they flip a switch. Turn into psychos that *I* have to deal with!"

"So, shoot me."

"Shoot you, huh? That's gonna prove you're a vampire and not some psycho who needs to be locked up?"

"Without a doubt. I'll either die... or... well... you'll see."

Rolling her eyes, she sat back down. "If I did that, *I'd* be the one locked up, looking for your infamous Sherlock. Sorry, pal. Not happening. I'm not sure what kind of a psychotic episode you're having..."

His jaw clenched. "I was sent here to make sure you didn't figure it out. That plan changed. I didn't know how bad it was then, but I do now. I'm not crazy nor am I having a psychotic episode. People are dying, Miss Garner, and more will. You have *the* vampire problem to end *all* vampire problems!"

"The ultimate vampire problem, huh? Didn't realize they came in levels." Slowly rocking, she gave him an arctic stare. "Does your boss know about your mental disability?"

"Very well, Miss Garner, live in your insulated little world, but not your bullets, crosses, holy men or the weight of a thousand churches are going to stop what has begun. I'll show myself out." Turning sharply, he headed for the door.

"Finally! Jeezy-peezy! Don't worry, Sparx. If all vampires are candy-ass little bitches like you, I won't have a problem." Turning back to the computer, she muttered under her breath, "pussy."

Reaching for the door, he paused. "Candy-ass little bitch? Pussy?" Turning, his eyes burned a deep crimson, his voice menacing. "Is that what you want, Miss Garner? A fight?" Before she could react, he yanked her out of the chair, removed her gun, and slammed her body against the wall.

There wasn't time to think about her next action. She dangled there, bruises forming, staring into blood red eyes. It was more than unnerving, but she tried holding it together.

"Blood dripped down his chin like... he was eating her! He had shining red eyes... They weren't contacts, either. Just... blood red." She heard Carly's voice in her mind.

Her lungs clamored for breath in a room suddenly void of oxygen. "The killer had red eyes, just like yours. Are you the killer?"

Clicking her weapon's safety off, he paused, pointing it at his head. "Seriously? Did *you* get your license from a box of Cracker Jack? Let's end this boring game of cat and mouse." Winking, he pulled the trigger.

"No!" She screamed, but he didn't die. Wide eyes stared in horror as his grip tightened. Not taking her eyes off him, barely breathing, she was suddenly fearful of what he might do next. The nine-millimeter hole in his head broke every law of physics. There was no logical explanation for it. Especially, when he dug out the bullet, holding it up.

"Can you hear me *now*? I wish I could tell you how much that hurts," dropping the slug onto the floor, "but it doesn't." He released her as the hole started slowly healing.

She had one thought in mind; *run*. Instead, she gripped the wall with open palms, watching in shock. Her mouth was dry, making swallowing impossible. She needed a stiff drink. Words jumbled in her head in no coherent pattern.

"I have been many things, Miss Garner," he turned to leave again, "but a candy ass bitch or pussy, as you so eloquently put it, has *never* been one." Reaching the door, he turned back to face her, eyes green again. "Believe or don't, Miss Garner. The decision is yours but make it quick. As you stated, we don't have a lot of time. I'm staying at the Bluestone Motel, room 101. Should you

feel up for a chat, come and see me. I don't sleep, so the hour doesn't matter. Good evening." Then he was gone.

Staring at the closed door, it took fifteen minutes before she moved. When she did, her legs gave way, spilling her to the floor. Absently, her hand touched the pendant around her neck. It offered comfort in stressful times. Pushing off the floor, she settled back in her chair. His words repeated in her mind, like a broken record. Reaching into the bottom drawer, she pulled out an unopened bottle of Crown Royal. After shakily removing the cap, she tilted the bottle, taking big gulps, bracing for the liquid fire. She loved the taste, but the burn was enough to keep her grounded. Feeling pain meant she was still alive.

'You don't have time for this. If you don't go talk to the man, more people will die. Do you want that?'

"No," she said out loud. That stupid voice in her head always had something to bitch about. "Why me? Why is this on *my* dang burn head?"

'Every action has a rhyme. You're the only one who can do it!'

Sighing, she shook her head. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I'm not buying it. Arguing with yourself means you're flipping crazy. Right?"

'Maybe.'

Rolling her eyes, she stared at the door. Part of her wanted to down that bottle, get her drunk ass and her dog out of town. However, this was her home. She wasn't allowing anyone to run her off. Once she won the internal battle, she put the bottle back in the drawer. "When this is over, you and I have unfinished business."

'Good, now do what you do best.'

"Stupid voice." Even though it was right – as always – it didn't mean she had to like it. Saving the town fell on her and a vampire. Vampires. There were apparently two... could be more. Jonas was right. It wasn't an animal, but it wasn't a mortal either; it was an immortal being. If she was going to work with Jonas, she needed to know a few things. She slowly typed into the search engine. It looked foreign, almost like a joke.

Vampires.

Chapter 15

Dark smoke billowed to the heavens, looking like an F-5 tornado, filling the night air with the smell of burning wood. Gray ash – and an unpleasant rotting scent – floated on the wind, landing on anything within fifty yards. The fire trucks lined up with hoses extended, stretching along the ground, as they battled the monstrous flames. The trucks served as resting places for the sweat-stained weary men who battled the raging inferno for hours. It was a fire like no other. The blaze shifted from bright orange to an eerie green, determined *not* to be put out.

"Anything left?" Fire Chief Samuels asked, pulling off his helmet.

"Not a dang burn thang, Chief," Lieutenant Kyle Logan replied. "If there was anybody in that house when it went up, I don't think even their bones'll be left."

"I got a few teeth," hollered one of the firefighters, running over to the chief with a small baggie.

"Who lived here?" Samuels asked, examining the bag's contents.

"According to town records, Charles Thomas."

He shook his head. "Poor bastard. Nasty way to die."

"Chief! Chief!" hollered one of the rookies standing at the edge of the woods. "Ya gotta come see this. It's like... well just get over here."

Rushing over, Samuels saw at least one-hundred open gravesites. Glancing into the closest one, he gasped. The child was approximately seven-years-old. She had long blond hair, a cute pink dress with bows and ribbons, and black sandals. Her arms and legs had been skinned and removed. Now, they were pieced together like a puzzle. Tears welled as he rushed to the next in line. A boy maybe ten or twelve. The head chopped off and limbs removed. The skin was gone. The eyes were sunk into the skull. Running to the next, he saw skeletal remains.

Don Samuels had seen a lot in his forty-plus years fire-fighting, but nothing prepared him for the horrific scene before his eyes. Dozens upon dozens of open graves as far as he could see, each one with a time-worn burlap sack resting at its edge. The many Amber Alerts flooded through his mind.

"Get forensics out here!" he managed, feeling his legs go weak. "The children."

Chapter 16

Jonas could have easily covered the two miles without being seen, but the walk gave him time to collect his thoughts. Head wounds were the slowest to heal, especially at point blank range. It was early morning, not many people about; the paperboy delivering the Gazette, the milkman with glass bottles of fresh milk, and the owner of Biscuits-n-Such – one of three small diners along the main road.

Andrew Bopulus – "Bopper" to the locals who lined up for his famous biscuits and gravy (not for the calorie conscious or sushi lovers) – was opening for the morning shift. Smiling, he tipped his ball cap. "Morning, sir. Looks to be a right beautiful day. It would be even better with some of our scrumptious biscuits and gravy!" His light red brows creased, noticing the man's wound. "Y-ya okay, m' friend?"

Jonas put his hand on the spot, scratching. "Head lice."

"Sorry, we're closed!" Andrew's face paled, rushing inside, quickly locking the door.

The sky glowed red as the sun began to rise. Passing by Duffy's diner, the freshly brewed coffee grabbed hold of him. Looking inside, one lone woman sat at the counter. Catching a sweeter scent, nostrils flared, inhaling the fragrance of the woman's blood. Feeling the hunger, her heartbeat thrummed in his ears. It had been decades, but now he wanted to drain her dry. Reaching out, his hand tightened around the small brass knob until another faint heartbeat stopped him. Crimson eyes snapped to the smiling woman resting a hand on her stomach.

"Shit!" Looking at his watch, he covered the half-mile in a blur. Reaching his door, the key card shook as he fought for control. It took three tries, but the green light finally showed. He was losing every facet of logical thinking, turning into a creature driven by a single thought. Blood. Praying that housekeeping wouldn't show up, he bolted the door. The ability to keep the beast at bay was fading fast.

Trembling fingers grabbed the suitcase, tearing at the zipper in a rushed frenzy. Opening it, he tossed the contents onto the bed and halfway across the room. Finally, he saw the latched compartment. Fumbling it to the floor, he scolded himself for being careless, growling as he tightened his fists. Leaning over, he retrieved the small gold compartment. It looked foreign. His mind played tricks on him. The combo lock grinned up at him in defiance.

Overwhelming panic scorched a fiery path through his system. He stared at the three roll locks. "What's the fucking combination?" His mind was a mess of numbers, bloody pictures, and words. It was only when he looked down at his shoes did the realization flash in his head. It was another reason he wore them. "Nine-one-eight! Zach's birthday!" The case snapped open. His

fingers shook as he snatched the plastic bottle out. Tossing the cap on the floor, he turned the bottle over, spilling two red pills in his hand. "Fuck!"

"Take one every twenty-four hours or you... well... won't like what happens," Garrick, the vampire's mixologist told him, when they finally turned the Hemosynth into tablet form.

It was far better than the injections. Tossing one back, he steeled himself for the retching spasms. His world exploded as Hemosynth flooded his system. A war between control and instinct took place. Arms and legs flew out in grotesque convulsions. Groaning, his mouth opened wide as his fangs extended. A noiseless scream stuck in his throat as the drug won its battle. Collapsing on the floor, his breathing steadied. His eyes shifted back to their usual tint. Seeing a spider walk past his face, he smiled.

"Hello, old friend," he whispered, rising from the floor. Cracking his neck, he looked around. "I need maid service." Taking off his shirt, he started cleaning.

Chapter 17

The Internet had the mother lode of information. Some references took her to a movie or TV show. They all started the same way. A beautiful girl in a small town living her ho-hum life. After some life-altering travesty, she meets the vampire. Dashing. Charming. The best-looking man in town. Tempted to click the 'x', she watched anyway. Research.

After sitting at the computer for hours, she deleted the search engine, snatching a few jelly beans. A bowl on the desk and a bag in her pocket was a quick fix to low sugar. Those Grade-A bullets of hers could tear a man apart but wouldn't do a thing to a vampire. Time for new supplies. First, she had to close the case. Taking out the stamp pad, she labeled Tammy Barker's file; Animal Attack. It was the worst case of injustice, but no one could ever know the truth.

The squared floral print, in the center of the office, gave it a woman's touch as well as hid a few things. Snagging out a hammer, she lifted the corner of the carpet, folding it over, revealing the planks beneath. After removing two, she took out the steel fireproof box from the floor. Inside were passports and different IDs – with her picture but different names. Pulling out a handful of large bills, she counted them, shoving a wad in her front and back pocket, setting the box to the side. Putting everything back together, nothing looked out of place. Turning, a gleam in the corner of the room caught her attention. Holding up the discarded bullet, the light caught the exit marks. Not a speck of blood. She shoved it deep into her little pocket. As if there wasn't enough to worry about with vamps killing off the town, they also had trigger-happy Federal agents. It would be hard staying invisible on their overly-sensitive radars if they stuck around.

Closing the door, a tingling sensation struck the very core of her soul. It felt like someone was watching but chalked it up to her imagination overload; finding out some fiction was a reality. It was just after seven in the morning. Opening the trunk of her car, she put the box in a special hiding place. Climbing in, she headed off, thinking of taking the exit out of town. Tempting. It was very tempting.

Chapter Eighteen

Harland Watson was one of Cider Lake's founders in the early 1920s. That parcel of land was known as 'Hillbilly Heaven' to the local townsfolk. Mobile homes stacked on top of each other, some looking as if they were about to fall but didn't. Others showed no sign of how to get to the top, but someone lived there. Broken down cars and trucks scattered across the yard. Old freezers and refrigerators littered the backyard missing locks; a playground for the kids. Dogs, cats, and chickens ran around the yard chasing each other. The clothesline showed the assorted sizes of

people living there. It went from freakishly large panties, looking like a missing parachute, to the unhealthy doll-like clothes.

Beware of Dog.

Dusty waited until the bunch was far enough away before pushing the door open, stepping out. The whole pack turned, glaring, snarling, barking, and then ran straight at her. Once close enough, tails dropped, and they whined to be petted. Untrained, they almost knocked her down. Laughing, she greeted each by name, doling out equal amounts of head scratches and belly rubs. She pried one friendly boy off her leg before making it to the front door. Knocking on the metal screen, produced a banging against the wooden frame like a homemade doorbell.

Pulling open the door, she hollered inside. "Cletus. You up?"

Cletus, Bubba, Billy-Bob, Willie-Joe, Bobby-Sue, Patty-Lynn, and Tommy-Lee. Not long ago, Cletus talked her into going to their family reunion where she met the whole crazy lot. Willie-Joe tried giving the dog a run for his money on her other leg. She gave him the same customary pat on the head before pushing him off.

Cletus Watson came to the door, holding a plastic bowl and a fried chicken leg. Liquid Crisco formed a shining halo around his lips, with a small line meandering down his chin. The Rebel flag flew proudly on his oil-stained tank top. Tinkering with that old sixty-nine Ford sprayed him with new stains. It sat in the same spot since Dusty first met Cletus, five years ago. "Well, hey there, Dusty. Ya hungry? Patty-Lynn made a mess o' Granny's fried chicken. Ain't nut'n better for breakfast."

"No thanks. Here on business."

His belch sent a few mutts running, as he swiped his forearm across his face, glancing at his watch. "Almost time fer Judge Judy, but sure. Let's step into my *spayshul* room."

The place was a pigsty, looking like a tornado ripped through. The outside was bad, but nothing like the inside. Takeout, delivery boxes, and food wrappers littered the house. Pepsi and Coke cans gathered under the couch like an apartment complex for roaches. The house smelled of skunk spray, sweaty bodies, and stinky gym socks. Piles of dirty clothes stacked waist-high in the corner. Heaps of whites and colors mingled together forming a mountain of cloth. Books and papers scattered on the floor. A cloud of gnats swarmed around the food-caked plastic bowls. The kitchen was worse, reeking of fried everything from chicken to frogs. The counters were dirty, almost black. The command center for flying insects buzzed over a sink full of crusty dishes.

Sidestepping over whatever food/trash was on the floor, Dusty shook her head. "Damn, Cletus! What is that smell?! You should clean this place! Maybe even demolish and start over."

Cletus stopped, his Crisco grin flattening. "If ya wanna volunteer to—"

"Hell no!" A roach the size of a mouse ran across the floor. "You couldn't pay me enough. Start meeting me out front. They don't make vaccinations strong enough for this."

"Okay." He shrugged before navigating through the landmine of 'Chez Watson.' Everyone knew he had a crush on her; she was his fantasy girlfriend. His wife told her how Cletus was "real good" when he thought of her while they "was making luv", screaming out Dusty's name during climax. Patty-Lynn didn't care. He might fantasize, but he'd never touch. Sitting in the chair, he turned to look at her. "Haven't seen ya since the reunion. Girrrrrrl, ya shoulda been 'round here after that. There were fireworks, but they weren't shooting off in the sky."

"What happened?"

"Willie-Joe finally got a girlfriend. He forgot she was coming over. Had himself a tryst with another woman. That boy's as horny as a damn coon dog going after a bitch in heat. Anywho... his

girl came here, caught the two locked together, threw everything she could at 'em. Those girls fought. Patty-Lynn had a hold of both their heads, pushing 'em out. They never stopped fighting."

Her expression fell before annoyingly clearing her throat. "The reason I came over... I have a special project for ya." Five years ago, a little boy shot himself with daddy's illegal gun. Cletus surfaced on her radar, selling stuff you couldn't get on the street. After a crazy manhunt, she arrested him. Some fast talking later, he became her 'weapons expert'. No questions asked.

Another belch rumbled. "What's this special project? I gotta warn ya. I done heard 'em all."

"As many wooden bullets as you can make."

Arching a brow, he tossed her one of his *you've-got-to-be-kidding* looks. "Well, sumbitch! Never heard that. Got some silver ones. Keep 'em handy for... well... ya never know when ya might need 'em. Don't have wooden ones. I can make some."

"Thanks." Then as an afterthought, she nodded. "Yes. Add silver ones too. Better safe than sorry. Make a lot."

"Okay. How many's a lot?"

"Enough to take out an army."

Slowly rocking, stubby fingers rubbed his chin. "I keep my nose outta your business. It's our agreement. Tell me one thing. Should I be making enough for the rest of us?"

Things could get worse. Taking a deep breath – cringing at the smell – she sighed. "Ya shouldn't be in danger back here, but just to be on the safe side... load your guns with every kinda bullet ya make. It could save your life."

He stopped rocking. "Okay. Thanks for the heads up."

Pulling out a wad of cash, she dropped it on the desk. "Let me know if that's not enough."

He handed over two cases of silver bullets. "These'll get ya started. I'll get busy on the rest."

"Thanks, Cletus. How long will it take?"

"Shouldn't take more'n a few days, but gimme a week. I'll bring 'em out when I'm done."

"I'll be in touch." Grabbing the cases, she moved toward the exit.

"Dusty," he called out softly.

Stopping, she looked over her shoulder, hand on the door. "Yeah?"

"Be careful."

Turning the knob, she winked. "Don't worry. I got this." She flew out of the house.

After a moment, Patty-Lynn walked in, setting her hands on his shoulders. "I suppose you heard all that?" His lazy drawl was gone.

Kissing the top of his head, she rested her chin on it. "Yeah."

Reaching back, his hand covered hers, hiding the small pentagram burned into her flesh. Turning, a pair of bright yellow eyes met her own. "Better call a meeting. It's starting again."

Chapter 19

Thoughts ran together like a scrambled jigsaw puzzle. It seemed just seconds later, she was parked in front of the Bluestone Motel. Getting out, she looked around. Every city has a 'bad' part. This was Cider Lake's. Bullet holes peppered the outside. Reddish-brown stains blotched the sidewalk. Every other weekend, trouble brought more fame to this motel. This live-in death trap found a few missing persons chained to the bathroom pipes. Nothing but drug dealers, prostitutes, Johns, and pimps hung out there. After quickly going over her speech, she knocked on the door.

"Yeah, sorry for the noise. I-" he blinked seeing her.

Her breath caught in her throat. An artist sculpted him from a vision of a Greek God. Ripped and torn in all the right places. Just his chest and abs – not to mention pants unbuttoned but zipped – made him the perfect model for a trashy novel cover. He was beyond beautiful. "Umm."

Expecting some disgruntled guest, a surprised brow arched, followed by a 'cat-that-ate-the-canary' grin. "Missss Garner. What can I do for you?"

Her eyes couldn't get any wider. Pulling in a sharp breath, she slowly exhaled. Clearing her throat, she bounced his own words back. "We need to talk, but not out here. May I come in?"

The whisper of the TV caught his attention. "Thank you, Susan. I'm here just outside of Cider Lake where they sectioned off the entire property. Over one hundred small skeletons found."

Switching it off, the silence was deafening. Leaning against the door frame, he grinned. The Hemosynth hadn't leveled off yet. Jonas flashed a bright smile. "Now, Miss Garner, you should never enter a vampire's dwelling. It gives them enormous power over you. But, since you're already here..." stepping aside, he winked, bowing slightly, "mi casa, es su casa."

An alarm went off in her mind. He wasn't his usual 'stick in the mud' self. Brows furrowed, looking him over. "Why ya acting so weird? Been hitting the bottle this morning?"

"Nothing to worry your pretty little self about. Residual from the shooting." Still holding the door open, he peered out, looking in both directions. "Are you coming in or are we whispering sweet nothings to each other out there?"

Groaning, she stepped inside. "Uh-huh."

He locked the door behind her. "Pardon the mess." Walking over to the bed, he reached down to pick up a wayward shirt.

Taking a few steps inside, she grabbed an overturned chair, flipping it right-side up. Sitting, she put her cigarettes on the table. "You're too proper to be messy. Wild party or a fight?"

"A fight of sorts. A bit of an episode. Nothing I can't deal with." Smiling, he flopped on the queen-sized bed, folding hands behind his head. "If this is a social call, I hate to disappoint. I never sleep with a woman on the first date. Man's gotta have *some* social graces."

"You're still drinking on the job. Lucky for you, this isn't a social call," she grimaced. "So, strike that thought."

"I was afraid you had business in mind."

"Yes, business."

"I'd offer you something to drink, but I didn't opt for the platinum package."

Arching a brow, she shook her head. "Couldn't tell it by looking at ya."

Laughing, he sat up, crossing his legs Hindu style. "So, what brings you here, Miss Garner? Want another shot?"

Taking out a jelly bean, she popped it in her mouth. "We don't have time for games. Carly said people surrounded the body. Would that be a group of vampires?"

"A 'group' of vampires is called a 'clutch', or 'brood'. Some use 'clan' or 'pack', but those are usually just bad horror novelists. See how misunderstood we are?"

"Gonna take that as a yes. So... all teasing aside... how do I kill a vampire? I did research and have supplies coming."

The Hemosynth eventually leveled off. His mood changed. The serious tone returned. "Oh? What did you find?"

"Hard telling truth from fiction. Some believe others don't. Most agree on garlic, crosses, holy water, fire, vervain, the sun, and a stake through the heart as ways to immobilize, if not kill."

Pressing palms to his thighs, he shook his head. "Are they still spouting off that rubbish?"

"It's not true?"

Shrugging, he sighed. "*Most* of what you read is based off fiction. All those things will just piss one off. Then you become a play toy... a pet... a lot of painful torture."

"Then... tell me the truth."

He slid to the end of the bed, dangling his legs over the side. "How to kill a vampire..."

"I'm all ears."

"There are all-inclusive, tried, and true ways. Take off the head. Keep it from the body or you'll end up with one very pissed off immortal."

"When a vampire finds out I'm hunting it, the pissed off part will begin right away."

"Time doesn't mean diddly squat. We have eternity. You're on borrowed time. The vampire doing this... he *knows* you're hunting him." His eyes locked onto hers. "He's counting on it. Remember the severed hand? That was no accident."

"Greeeat." Taking a deep breath, she slowly exhaled through pursed lips. "Who is he and how do we beat him."

"Ways people use in books and movies aren't really effective. Crosses? Not sure where that one came from, but it served as a *deus ex machina*. If the cross is silver, that changes the game."

"Why?"

"It causes something like second-degree burns. Holy water is dirty water that tastes like ass."

Grimacing, she sat back. "I'll take your word. My research said werewolves were affected by silver. I'm gonna pray some fiction is definitely... make-believe."

He gave her a 'you-really-don't-want-to-know' look. "Silver can deter most supernatural. Each has a distinctive reaction for different reasons."

"So then, silver bullets are good to have. Good to know." As his words registered, she stared at him wide-eyed. "What do you mean *most*?" Before he could answer, her hand shot up, stopping any response. "Never mind. Continue please."

"The old 'wooden stake through the heart'? It doesn't kill us but will immobilize."

Her face scrunched in bewilderment. "Immobilize how? For how long?"

"It's a deep freeze until the stake is removed. It keeps one secure. A horrid state. We see and hear everything."

"So... if I staked you... cut off your head... cut out your heart... burned them with your body... would that work?"

His eyes widened. "Yes. That sounds nasty."

Cringing, she nodded. "Yeah, it does. Cutting off someone's head is usually frowned on by the legal system. However, in *this* situation... I could."

"It's a lot easier said than done."

Popping a jelly bean in her mouth, she shrugged. "Have ya done it before?"

"A few times. I try not to make it a habit, if possible."

"Understandable."

"I hope you don't become a vampire hunter. Most of us are attractive. Charming. Irresistible. When we sire, we choose the beautiful. It's just the way it's been."

"Short. Tall. Skinny. Fat. Ugly. Gorgeous. A killer's a killer. The only way I'd hunt your kind is for killing off mine, such as now. If not," she shrugged, "we're good."

"We were all human at one time. None of us wanted this. Wrong place. Wrong time."

"Do the stakes or... bullets... have to be a specific wood?"

"No." Glancing at the small gold case, he picked it up. "Sunlight. Now *that's* a killer."

"Can't bottle up the sun."

"Too bad. Most can't exist in it. You mentioned fire. Most are terrified of it. Every other supernatural cannot touch flames. We were born of it, in a manner of speaking. Other than burning off our clothes, we can walk through flames without injury... as long as we have our head." Sliding off the bed, he grabbed a clean shirt out of the dresser, slipping it on. "So, you see, Miss Garner, killing one of us isn't that hard."

Scoffing, she watched him. "Sounded hard to me."

He buttoned his shirt, tucking it into his waistband. Turning, he was back to his usual self again. "It's *finding* us that is the trick." Picking up the other chair, he set it right, before sitting down in front of her. "Now, I gave you all the information you need to kill a vampire. I feel justified in asking a few of my own questions."

"Such as?"

"Who were those men at the crime scene, and why did you react so negatively?"

"Ah. I was a special agent with the CIA."

"Ah-ha! *Now* things make more sense. That might explain your mental block."

"The CIA didn't train me. My uncle did when I was a child."

"That's a rigid discipline. Why so young?"

"I don't know. Before the rooster crowed till I crawled back under the covers... it was like boot camp without a break. Training. Mental and physical."

"You never played in the rain? Set up a lemonade stand? Made mud pies?"

Her face crinkled in disgust. "Mud pies? Ew! Thankfully, no! My alcoholic, paranoid, delusional, survivalist uncle was more worried about some planet slamming into us... the government taking all our freedoms... and the coming zombie apocalypse. He ranted about how I had to be ready for it all. Driving me to the brink of exhaustion based on his fears. I was on the verge of killing the old coot. His liver beat me to it. Once he was gone, I joined the police academy, so no. No lemonade stands, playing in the rain, or... that *other* thing."

"You must have excelled above and beyond normal limitations."

"Top of my class. I noticed similarities between the academy and my home training. I thought it was why my uncle was so hard on me. He wanted me to be a cop."

"Is that when you applied to the C.I.A.?"

"I never applied. They sought me out. Came home from work, popped around the kitchen, and there he was sitting in my living room. Almost shot him. My test scores were off the charts. A friend of his recorded me during training. Offered me the job, talking about how I owed it to my country to take it."

The corner of his lip lifted in a sardonic grin. "A cocky lot they are."

"In everything."

"So, that's why your uncle trained you?"

Sighing, she shrugged. "His reasons died with him."

"CIA *Special* Agent? Which department?"

"Hacking was my specialty." Cracking her neck, she glanced down at the floor. "The other? I went places virtually impossible. Did things no one could."

"Mission Impossible. An operative then? Why did you stop?"

Taking a deep breath, she slowly exhaled. "I was on assignment... get close to a known terrorist and her family. They wanted to kill the president. I couldn't find Intel confirming that. Then my assignment changed. Take out the entire family. She begged, *pleaded* to spare the children, telling me they did nothing wrong. She was right. None of them did a damn thing."

"Mercy can be a difficult thing in that line of work. Did you grant it?"

She slowly shook her head, not meeting his gaze. "No. I never let assignments cloud my vision. I assassinated my target as ordered. Accident, suicidal, botched robbery, cold-blooded murder. I stole artifacts, files, papers, pictures, and people. That last job... I heard their pleas in my dreams... saw their faces everywhere. I couldn't do it anymore. That was when I researched *all* my targets. Scientists creating cures for cancer. Whistleblowers about vaccines, chemtrails, and other crimes against the government."

"Is that when you quit?"

"You don't just quit the CIA. I was a trained assassin. Knew too much for them to just let me go."

His brow creased. "What did you do?"

"I died." She stared a hole in the floor. "My car went over the side of a mountain. My family buried a pile of ashes. I was dead. Changed my name, dyed my hair, and moved into what I thought was a piss-ant town. No one would figure out I was still alive."

"Ah. You burned yourself, so to speak."

"Yes. You aren't an animal expert, so what are ya?"

"The same as you. A private investigator... investigating paranormal deaths. Usually, they tie in with vampiric killings. I appreciate you allowing me a glimpse of who you are."

"You showed me yours. I showed ya mine. Trust has to begin somewhere. Especially, if we're to work together."

"Touché. I know what it's like to disappear, Miss Garner. I've reinvented myself many times in five hundred years."

Looking him up and down, her brows furrowed skeptically. "You're really five-hundred-years-old? You do hide your age well."

Chuckling, he nodded. "I'm fairly young for a vampire. I was reborn at thirty-five. When a mortal is sired, you freeze at the age you were turned."

"So, you're telling me," she lit a cigarette, "if you're unlucky to be changed at fifty, ya look fifty *forever*?"

"Exactly. Twenty, you stay at twenty. Fifty, you stay fifty, but whatever has happened to your body – wrinkles, age spots, moles – they vanish along with ailments. Your basic physical appearance doesn't change."

"Doesn't sound fair."

He shrugged. "Sometimes people aren't brought until they're very old. A family bond. The favor of eternal life for saving one from an angry horde. There have been a few that wouldn't have been brought over, had there not been a promise. Not by me, but others."

"Probably a mess of people lining up for that curse."

"Yes," he slowly nodded, "many people want to live forever. What they don't understand... the monster they become. Every ten years or so they have to relocate, leaving friends and family behind. Travel far away. Start all over. Never return again."

"Why?"

"We never age, get sick, our appearance never changes unless we *want* it to."

"Not everyone's rich. A normal person couldn't do that."

"Money's never a problem. Even the newest vampire can compel. I walked into the bank, took out a loan for five-hundred-thousand dollars, under the name of Mickey Mouse."

Taking a deep drag off her cigarette, she chuckled. "Mickey Mouse?"

"He was a big name in every household. Young and old alike loved him. I paid it back. His credit score was in the low eight-hundreds after that." His tone turned serious. "That kind of power is never without cost. You outlive your relatives, your friends, your lovers. The dead haunt your memories and that is *only* the start."

"I never had a loving family. I have a few friends and my dog. It would be horrible watching them grow old and die. Moving away makes sense."

"In the beginning, it's hard. Your soul fights with every bit of humanity *not* to change. Over the years, it gets easier." A faraway look clouded his eyes. "I felt guilty every time I had to kill so I could live. It was horrible."

"Can't feed without killing?"

"I didn't learn about that until many years later. This curse doesn't come with instructions. We learned how to control the bloodlust, but you still had to feed daily. I was like a snake eating once a month. I was starved. Couldn't stop. Killed hundreds."

"Drinking blood." She cringed. "I couldn't do it. Not if someone had to die so I could live."

"You'd be surprised. One of the problems with staying around family, they taste the sweetest and spark your bloodlust."

"Why?"

He shrugged, shaking his head. "We haven't figured it out, yet."

"Sounds like undead incest. Sick."

"My turn. Why are the Feds interested in small-town murders?"

"Murders with cult-like signatures usually point to devil worshippers. Small town. Huge problem. A cult recruits. Could grow as big as Waco. Their job is to nip it at the earliest stages."

"This isn't the first-time vampire actions have been blamed on Satanists."

"Or... they know I'm alive and really wanna put me in the ground," she added with a note of indifference.

His lips pursed. "If they knew you were alive, you wouldn't see them first. I have no desire to attend your funeral, Dusty. Destiny has thrown us together to stop this, so consider yourself protected by a vampire."

Arching a brow, she shook her head. "That was deep, Jonas, but I don't need you—"

"You recognized one of them. Ex-partner?"

Her lips pursed. "We worked many cases together. He's good but not as good as me. I had blond hair at the time, but he would still recognize me."

Watching her, he smiled. "I imagine you turn heads, no matter the color of your hair."

"So, who's this vampire?"

"His name is Seth. Each of us has a sire." He settled back. "One who created us. We are bound to the point we cannot refuse a direct order."

Her face crinkled in disgust. "What do you mean, *can't* refuse?"

"Like mine ordering me here as your partner. It's a sire bond. Blood bond. It's real. Nothing we can stop."

"Hmm, so... like your boss?"

"In a manner of speaking. Long ago, there were ancients. Over time, with ego, jealousy, greed, and lust, their numbers fell. Today there are three. Deva, Bacchus, and the one terrorizing Cider Lake." His lips tightened. "Seth."

Taking another drag off her cigarette, she knocked the ashes off onto her jeans before wiping them in. "So, who is he and why is he killing off my town?"

Grabbing the ashtray, he set it on her thigh before sitting back. "Seth is over three-thousand-years-old."

Eyes bugged as her mouth dropped open. "*Three-thousand-years-old?!?*"

"Yes. The ancients are powerful. They've seen and learned a lot. What you've seen me do..." Arching a brow, he shook his head. "Parlor tricks compared to what Seth, Deva, or Bacchus can do."

"What does he want?"

"I truly do not know. He was in France. In Torpor. It's a kind of hibernation. He was supposed to stay like that for another one-hundred-fifty years. However, someone woke him early. Why? I don't know. I do have ways to find out, however."

"Okay, but 'partners' means together. Understood?"

"What I know, you'll know." If it got around that he told her everything, she would be a walking target. With the two of them working together, they just might stand a chance.

Taking another drag off her cigarette, she looked at him. "Curious minds wanna know how ya were turned. Did ya know the vampire who did it? Was there a specific reason they chose you?"

Sinking back, he lifted a brow in surprise. "It's been a long time since a mortal has shocked me. In five-hundred-years, *no* one has ever asked me that. Not even my wife."

"Curious is all."

"The tale is long, but I have a better way to make you understand. Instead of boring you with words, let me show you."

Once more she was suspicious, not taking her eyes off him. "How?"

He held his hands up, defensively. "I promise there's no danger. It'll be like watching a 3-D movie."

If he wanted her dead, she would be. Squashing out the cigarette, she moved the ashtray to the table before sitting back again. "Okay."

Pulling his chair closer, he took a deep breath, closing his eyes. Reaching out, he gently set his palm on the right side of her face. He'd never met someone so complicated, so buried beneath layers, hidden behind a wall she spent many years building. She did a good job. He couldn't get through. When he spoke, his voice took on a soothing baritone, which relaxed her in its hypnotic pace and rhythm. "You have to open your mind to me." His tone was firm and to the point.

It was something she never did. She was taught that her life depended on it. However, they needed to form a trust somewhere. She removed the blockade barring him. Her body instantly relaxed, her mind slowed, but she could still hear everything.

"I was born to my human life in the year fourteen-seventy-nine."

As he began, her mental block was released enough to see images unfold, to smell scents and hear the sounds that tickled her ears.

Chapter 20

Toledo Spain, 1495

A woman's voice faded in. "Diego!" Isabella Ramirez shouted. "Diego Ramirez! Do not make me come out there to find you! It is almost nightfall! You must come in *now*."

Sixteen-year-old Diego Ramirez, Toledo Spain's youngest and brightest nobleman, came running around the corner of his family's brick and tile Hacienda, breathless. "Si, mama."

"Aye, Dios Mio!" She lightly whacked her son on the head. "You know your papa is in France! You *cannot* run through the countryside like some peasant! You are better than that!" Gently shoving him into the dwelling, she pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders. It was

getting late and the horizon swallowed the sun. A full body shiver erupted as fear crossed over her features. Crossing herself several times, she hurried inside, bolting the door.

"Mm." Diego stood over the pot of thick Caparrones. The delicious smell filled the room and his mouth watered. It was his favorite. The stew was simmering. He had a wooden spoonful ready to taste when his mother snatched it.

"I will teach you manners if it breaks me!" Hissing, she tossed the spoon back into the cauldron. Sighing, she took a hold of his shoulders, tenderly turning him to face her. "Don Diego Ramirez," the gentle tone cooed. "You are nobility. What would people think if they saw you eating like some animal, eh?"

"That I was hungry?" He joked.

He made her laugh and the room echoed with the contagious sweetness. No matter how angry she was, he charmed her out of it. "Now, go wash. Come down when you finish and wait to be served. You will not touch a single bite until grace has been said." It was clear the way those bright green eyes looked at her son that he was the light of her life.

He came down after washing his face and hands and combing his dark hair back. The light fuzz etched across his chin and upper lip; granting him attention from the young ladies. He was growing into a handsome man like his father.

Don Juan Ramirez. The royal bad boy. His string of scandals – mostly involving married women – followed him around. Being a distant relative to the royal family saved him from many Town square hangings. The playboy out for fun no matter who she was promised to. After meeting Isabella, all that changed.

Fairytales told of love at first sight. Many swore it happened. He didn't believe, until Isabella. All other women faded when he saw her. He courted her relentlessly. Having heard about his tawdry ways, she wanted no part of him. After he remained faithful for three months, she agreed to become his wife. Many of the town's women were heartbroken. The men celebrated because it meant their ladies were safe from his clutches.

King Ferdinand the second and Queen Isabella the first were among the guests attending the wedding. The chapel was standing room only. There were flowers, ribbons, divine pastries, rich food, and gold statues around the room. The couple's love for each other was obvious with her radiantly shining, and him doting on her.

Court business did not wait for newlyweds. Leaving her for even a few hours broke his heart. That changed when she became pregnant. It was the first of many they spoke of having. The king allowed him to perform his duties at home. He stayed with her as much as possible. Every night, he gently spoke to the baby, showering as much attention on him – he swore she was having a boy – as he did his beautiful wife. He couldn't wait to hold his firstborn in his arms.

It was a hard delivery, many hours of screaming in pain. Isabella was a strong woman, but it finally took a toll on her. With every shriek, Squires had to tackle Juan to the floor. Men were not allowed in the birthing room, no matter their status. The last scream brought about a baby's wail. The child was alive! Everyone cheered until they heard there were complications. The doctor worked diligently to keep Isabella alive. It was the midwife who brought the boy out to him. Holding his son for the first time, he gazed down into his own eyes and fell in love.

After a few hours, the physician joined him, bringing bad news. There was a lot of internal damage. Isabella would never be able to have another child. It was bittersweet. He was thankful God had not taken her, but he wanted many children. Not just one. The sadness turned to anger. He glared down at the demon spawn in his arms. This boy killed all his dreams. Handing him back,

he went to Isabella. His wife wasn't to blame. It was the child who tore her asunder upon his exit. That poor baby would never know the love of a father, no matter how often he begged.

Juan spent a lot of time away. He claimed it was his business. Isabella lovingly understood. However, it was his adulterous ways, keeping him in the castle for months at a time. The love for his wife never changed, but he wanted to kill the boy.

Isabella loved them both. It wasn't Diego's fault. It upset her that Juan treated him so poorly, but she made up for it. This little bundle of joy was going to be her only child. All her actions proved just how much she adored him. Giving him a look of approval, she brushed off his shirt. Fixing his collar, she smiled lovingly. "There is my handsome boy," ruffling his hair, "now sit. We do not want it to get cold, now do we?"

Smiling, he sat down. "No, mama." Lowering his head, he folded his hands beneath his chin, waiting for prayer.

Isabella did likewise, saying grace. The servants followed suit, waiting for the signal to begin serving. "We ask that the Lord bless this food and everyone in this house, keeping them righteous and clean of sin. Lord, we ask that you please make the world a better place and stop the warring so that Juan can return to his family. In the meantime, please keep him safe in your arms as he is always in our hearts and thoughts. Please, Lord, watch out for my handsome little man and guide Diego on the right path that you have laid out for him. Don't allow him to stray off the high road and allow him all the glory in the world before resting peacefully by your side. We ask in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen."

"Amen." Diego looked up. She was a God-fearing, selfless woman who would give her last crumb of bread to a stranger.

Nodding to the servants, she looked back at her son with a loving smile. "Te Amo." Flaming arrows rained down and in seconds the hacienda was ablaze. One broke through a window, burrowing deep into her back, puncturing her heart. Gasping for breath, she fell dead to the floor.

Things moved slowly as if time crawled. Diego's face fell. Tears clouded his vision. "Mama!" Jumping up, he rushed to her. Another fiery arrow struck him in the leg. Stumbling back into the arms of a servant, the few there desperately snuffed out the flames. Breaking the arrow in half, Diego fought to get to his mother. "I have to save her!"

"No! Diego, come! It's too late. She is in God's arms. We have to get you out of here."

Isabella had given strict orders, making them swear on a Bible. "Keep Diego safe at all cost. No matter the risk."

That was exactly what they did. Flames rained down as pieces of the roof fell. Opening a hatch in the floor, a few managed to get him out of danger. Most lost their lives trying to escape when a large section of roof crushed them, cutting off the hidden passage. The ones who escaped rushed him through the secret tunnels to a small building a mile away. Wars brought danger to anyone close to the royal family, blood or not.

Through a watery glare, Diego watched his beloved home, and everyone in it, burn to the ground. "I will have my revenge on those animals!" He seethed, beginning to fade from the pain and loss of blood.

"Si, but not today. You must live. I gave my word. It is all I have." The servant told him. Once Diego was asleep, he surveyed the carnage, before getting help. The village doctor was a friend. The two removed the arrow. They stitched the wound but could do nothing about the blood loss. They watched over him while he slept for days. Many times, the servant doused him in cold water, keeping the high fever at bay.

Screams woke him from sleep. Racing outside, he saw great winged beasts in the sky. Swooping over his house, they fed on the screaming bodies. Blood rained down like a torrential downpour. They ripped people to shreds, searching for something.

His blood ran cold as one appeared before him. The face looked human, save for the blood red eyes and twin needles of death. It screamed in his face. "The stone, boy! Where is the stone!" Getting no answer, the creature grabbed him. Flying, soaring high into the air, he released him.

Sitting up, his scream pierced through the nightmare. The fever finally broke. Looking around, he was still in the shelter. He was alone. Bloodied bandages were in the trash. Glancing down, he noticed a bandage wrapped around his leg.

Once he was able to stand, without falling back over, he staggered out. Tears filled his eyes. Where his house once stood, only smoldering ash remained. Dragging his injured limb behind him, he shuffled towards it. Bathed in sweat from the pain, he struggled to keep going. A solitary male figure stood where the kitchen once was. The servants were off to one side, heads bowed in prayer. Diego's face registered hope. His father had returned.

"Papa!" Screaming, he hobbled closer, recognizing the deep purple cloak of his father's station. The smile did nothing to stop the flow of tears, making a trail on his dirty face. He came back for him! His mother was right! His father did love him! Still devastated about her death, he was happy his father had not forsaken him. Rushing over, arms extended, he tried hugging him. It had been months since he last saw him. The man turned, and Diego caught the look of hatred in his eyes.

Stopping short, he almost fell over. Ready to run in the opposite direction, he realized too late the truth. His father didn't come back for him. He returned to mourn the ashes of the woman he left behind. The riding crop slashed across his face, biting into flesh, sending him to the ground. It fell on his shoulders, his head, and all over his body. When Juan saw the bloody dressing, he beat on the leg.

Curses rained down as he whipped his son, each strike was faster, with more fury than the last. Diego held up his hands, pleading with him to stop. That just made Juan attack his hands and fingers. Diego curled in a fetal position, protecting his leg. The blows landed on his back. His father blamed him for the attack, calling him a coward, blaming him for her death. The servants tried stopping him. The last thing he heard, before passing out, was that he was disowned.

Hours later, pain brought him back to the living. His father and the servants were gone, except one. The servant, who kept him safe, laid dead at his feet. The man would not leave Diego, fulfilling his vow to Isabella. Juan took his life. He was truly alone. His leg was on fire. The whip slashes, embedded in his skin, were a reminder of his shame.

Now, he was a nobody. Another street urchin without a home. He had no means of survival, left for dead, and no family. Steps were slow as he limped away, sobs racking his body, trying to ignore the pain. After burying him, he cried for the man who gave him more than his own father. Staggering away, the tears streamed down his face as he stepped into fate's cruel hands.

Numerous dangers exist while living on the street, but it's devastating when alone. Many nights, his hunger woke him. It was a feast finding trash. After wiping away the wiggling maggots, it filled his shrunken belly. He had to fend for himself. Drinking from a puddle after a rain, kept him alive.

Learning how to make a living meant stealing. Pickpocketing. Perfecting the bump, snatch, and flee, meant not staying in one area for too long. After bumping into his victim, slipping a hand into their pocket, he went on his merry way with a coin pouch in hand. He stole enough to survive

and then some. Years later, just after his thirty-fifth birthday, he met Kanis. The man looked like he had money. The perfect mark. It was time for a little bump and snatch. However, that plan failed.

As Diego bumped into him, Kanis snatched him up above his head. His long fingers wrapped tightly around his throat. "What do we have here?" His Russian accent was recognized as Cossack, taking back his coin pouch. "My evening meal, da? You steal from me. I steal from you."

Diego shook his head, feeling true fear for the first time in many years, reminding him of a dream he long ago forgot. He struggled to be free from a hand which held more power than any man should. "Please, let me go!"

Kanis sized him up before furrowing his brow. "What is your life, gutter rat?"

The nail that sliced open his cheek looked far too long to be on a woman's hand, much less a man's. A trickle of heat ran down his face. He watched in revulsion as a serpentine tongue snaked over the wound, collecting his blood.

The creature pursed his lips. At one point, he looked hard at the young man, as if in recognition of something. "What is your name?"

Green eyes looked down as Diego struggled in his grasp. It was hard to breathe, much less speak. "D-Diego Ramirez," he squeaked out, stammering the answer.

Kanis laughed. "Well, Diego Ramirez..." He carried him into the darkened foul-smelling alley. "I think you will do just fine."

The image in Dusty's mind faded as Kanis sank his razors deep into Diego's neck.

Chapter 21

The Bluestone Motel, Room 101, 2014

Bam! Slam! As the image closed, reflexes shut her mind like a loaded spring trap. Both felt it. No gentle fade to darkness. It felt like being submerged underwater, gasping for breath at the surface.

Exhausted, Jonas rubbed his nose. A single blood tear slipped down his cheek. "Now you know." He didn't remove the tear, letting it coagulate. A shower would erase it from his flesh, but no amount of time or water could wipe it from his heart.

Sitting back, she instantly rubbed the throb on her tender nose. "That was different." Nodding slowly, her fingers reached up, quickly wiping away her own tears. Snatching a cigarette, it was quickly lit and inhaled to calm her frayed nerves. "Wow! I thought *I* had it bad."

He shrugged. "I've had five centuries to get over it."

Noticing how dark it was in the room, she glanced at her watch. "How the hell is it almost midnight?"

"Vampires see years rolled into minutes while feasting. Mortals see them in real time. You don't have the ability to fast forward."

That would explain why her bladder was about to burst. "Oh. Hold that thought. I gotta pee!" Racing to the bathroom, she slammed the door behind her. After a few minutes, she returned to the chair, drying her hands on her jeans. "I felt everything. All the emotion, pain, physical *and* mental torture. I heard your thoughts like they were mine."

"It puts you in my place. You sense everything I did. Almost like an out of body experience. You're tied to me, so you feel what I felt. Those memories, you never forget."

"Is that why I want Caparrones? Never tasted them before... except in your memory!"

Smiling, he nodded. "Yes. My mother made the best. The craving and pain will pass. It has a lingering effect but doesn't last long."

Nodding, she rubbed the phantom ache in her leg. "Good. How did Kanis know everything about ya by licking your blood?" Her back was already easing the tension away from the whipping.

"The blood records everything. If I drank from you, I'd know more about you than *you* do."

"Whoa. That would give a whole new meaning to dinner and a movie."

He chuckled. "Exactly."

"That's cruel. Stuck with a never-ending curse. Your 'food' shows you a life ya never got to experience. Someone to grow old with. The birth of a child. Family gatherings. Holiday celebrations. Happiness. That perfect stranger turns into your best friend. All their happy thoughts, sad events, accomplishments. Knowing exactly what you're taking from them and others. A mother from her baby, alone in the house. A child from a parent who relies on that person to live. Sad."

"It was in the beginning. I tried like hell holding onto my humanity. I didn't want to kill to live. Who was I to take another life? But then... something happened. Maybe a failsafe within? I don't know, but I lost it. Then I looked at hunting mortals as a sport. Stalking. Watching. Picking those interesting, so it was at *least* a good show."

Arching a brow, she shook her head. "I can't see ya as a stark, raving lunatic hunting people for sport."

"It happens to all of us."

"Right before Kanis bit ya, I felt... terrified. What happened? Ya didn't show me."

He arched a confused brow. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it looked like all he did was bit ya. I couldn't tell. Ya slammed the door on me."

"The agony of rebirth is like no other pain you have ever experienced. The poison literally forces your DNA structure to change."

"What does it do?"

"It affects the blood and organs, causing a breakdown. Breathing hurts. Tissues die. The nervous system reacts with bone-breaking seizures until death. Shortly after, we wake up. I don't have to breathe as often as you do. A breath every hour, maybe. We learn to, so it's natural again. We have to keep up the appearance of being mortal. Food is a thing of the past. Blood is the main source of nutrition. All in all, it's not pleasant."

"Doesn't sound like it. One bite? What about those girls? Needing to dig up the bodies, chop off heads and burn everything might be hard to explain."

"No. It's not like that." His eyes swam over his shoes.

"What then?"

"We choose when to feed and create. The girls... just food, sadly enough." He glanced up at her. "Think of the snake."

Skeptically, she furrowed her brows. "Like... a *regular* snake?"

"A venomous one. Some give a dry bite, not wasting any poison. Most make it from a special gland inside their head. Depleting the source means rebuilding the supply. It's used sparingly... on food. Sometimes, inflicting a painful bite will do the trick. Knowing the snake is poisonous, they panic. There are more deaths by fear-induced heart attacks than actual venom-induced ones."

"I didn't know that."

"Vampires do the same. During rebirth, we develop a venom gland. Creating another, we feed, injecting them with venom. It takes one drop. Unlike the snake, we control how much is secreted."

"I didn't read that anywhere."

"It's best some things don't get out."

"So... ya don't need vampire blood in your system to turn?"

Amused, he rolled his eyes. "*Most* of what you read is fiction."

"I see. What does your venom do to you?"

"Gives certain capabilities. Speed. Strength. The ability to change our physical appearance. Some of us can be bat-like creatures, like the one in my nightmare. The longer we live, the more powerful we become."

"Ah. Good to know you're not a monster."

Frowning, he stood. "I'm still the same monster. Never forget that. The beast within me is," he paused, looking at the floor before his eyes found hers again. "Controlled but should that fade..." he shook his head.

"You? Lose control? I can't see it!"

"We're going to be working closely together." He ignored the vote of confidence. He knew what he was in the wrong situation. "Whatever's happening here reaches further than *just* Cider Lake. I promise you that. We may be the only ones to stop it, which means... we could be partners for longer than either of us cares."

"Nothing like added pressure."

"One other thing. This is important. I need your word on this."

"On what?"

"No matter what we've gone through... no matter how long we're a team... should I lose the ability to keep the beast in check..." Turning to the bed, he bent down. Reaching underneath, he pulled out a dark mahogany case.

'Should he lose control... you must do this. And it will be hard.' That know-it-all voice in her head sounded urgent.

Watching him, she had a bad feeling about what was coming next. "Do what?"

Lifting it up onto the bed, he unlocked and opened the case. Wrapped in purple cloth – the same his father wore in the vision – was a sword. Gold hilt. Pearl handle. Beautiful. The blade shone as if just forged. Carefully removing it, he handled it with a sad reverence.

She blinked. "No way."

'You must.'

"Cleave my head from my body." He held it in front of him, examining the edge, running his thumb over it. It opened his flesh as if it was a slip of paper. He smiled, showing her before it quickly healed.

"It's beautiful. Where'd ya get it?"

"It was my father's Salamanca. A year after I turned, I found him... by chance... in a brothel. Sullyng my mother's memories."

"Uh-oh. What happened?"

Sighing, he shook his head. "He was a penniless, broken old man. One too many scandals kicked him from the court's favor. Ruined him. He didn't recognize me. I should've just walked away, but I didn't. Couldn't. Rage. Years of anger and resentment. I told him what disowning me did. Took my anger out on him. I made him pay for destroying my life by taking his... slowly. His memories became part of me. That's why you were able to see events happening before I was born. I made him suffer just as I had... then took his sword."

Looking at it, she arched a brow. "How did ya get that on the plane? They won't let me take a fingernail file!"

He grinned. "By charming TSA agents." Placing the blade back, he slid it toward her. "I am a monster, Dusty, and don't *ever* forget that. Keep this. If I ever give you a reason, don't hesitate."

No matter what you see, no matter what I say, send me to hell. Because if you don't, I will surely bring you over."

"Bring me over?"

"Yes. I will poison you and dine from your blood and make you one of us."

'You must.'

"Oh." Mulling that over, holding his stare, she shrugged. "Well, when you put it *that* way... I'll stake you, chop off your head, pull out your heart, then burn your body with your organs. Will that do the trick?"

"Yes, that would do the job, nicely."

She took a drag off her cigarette. "Only way to keep a vampire away is silver?"

"Daylight is the only thing that will keep most of us away. Not all can move about during the day. But silver?" He nodded. "Silver can really inflict serious damage."

"Do ya have to touch it, or will it work just by sight?"

"No, nothing affects us by sight. Do you have anything silver? I'll show you. That way, if you suspect you might be talking to one and need to know for sure..."

Trust. There it was again. They were both learning how to trust each other. Pulling out her gun, she removed a silver bullet – fresh from Cletus – from the magazine. "Will this do?"

"Nice. I'm not sure what you had to say to get a silver bullet, but nicely done. That will do the trick." He held out his hand. "May I?" When she dropped it, he closed his hand around it. A wisp of smoke curled upwards. When the bullet touched him, it began disintegrating his flesh. His jaw tightened. There was smoke, but no smell. After a minute, he dropped it to the floor. It looked as if a firecracker went off in his hand. The black, angry wound began to swiftly close. The skin returned to its normal color as if nothing happened.

"Wow. You guys really don't like silver."

"We don't feel pain, except for silver and the sun. If it touches our body... it's like Superman with Kryptonite. Anything silver. You don't have to fire a silver bullet to find out."

"Good. Randomly shooting people would be hard to explain. Especially on the off chance, we were wrong. I have a couple of silver and turquoise rings. I could start wearing them again."

Looking down at her hand, he nodded. "Good idea. Only coat it in a thin layer of gold then carefully file off a section from the palm area. It will look gold. If you meet a possible vampire, shake his hand. You'll know right away."

"Good idea. I have just the guy to do it. If it's a vamp, I'll just shoot."

"Aim for the gut. Talk about a peptic ulcer."

Curiously, she looked at him. "Why the gut? Why not heart? I'm a hell of a shot."

He shrugged. "They hurt more but fire at whatever. Remember..." In the space of a heartbeat, he was behind her. "None of us..."

She flipped around, but he was gone.

His voice sounded on the opposite side. "Will just stand still..."

Once more she pivoted to find nothing but air.

Then he crooned from the door. "While you shoot."

Blinking, she tried keeping eyes on him but failed miserably. "Holy crap you move fast! Kinda figured I'd be aiming at moving targets. No one's gonna stand still, but damn!"

Winking, he grinned, leaning against the door frame. "Don't buy a garlic necklace either."

Bending down, she picked up the silver bullet off the floor. It looked fresh out of the store. Shrugging, she slipped it back in the magazine, holstering her gun once more. "Another myth?"

"Yep. Not sure where they got that baloney, or why anyone would believe it would stop a vampire. I love garlic. It adds zest."

"You eat real food?" Pointing at his stomach, she rounded a brow. "How does that work when you're missing things?"

He laughed. "Another misconception. Our internal organs don't disappear. They just work differently. Hearts beat slower. Based on your athletic shape and job... I'd say yours beats approximately forty a minute, give or take, pending situation. Mine beats once every hour or so. If hooked up to an EKG machine, it's undetectable. Flatline. Doctors don't wait an hour to call it. Remember, we don't have to breathe. Stomach, liver, pancreas all do the same thing. Just with blood as the food source."

"How does that work?"

"It has white and red cells, platelets, hemoglobin, and plasma. It keeps us healthy. We don't touch hemophiliacs or someone with hepatitis. Tainted."

"So... like a wolf."

Now it was his turn to be confused. "Wolf?"

"Yes. With this case, I did research. If ya have anything wrong with your body, wolves sense it and won't eat ya. Tainted organs and meat."

"Yes, something like that."

"So... not everything on the internet is true?"

"We encourage fiction. People tend to think books are real. Speaking of food, when's the last time you ate?"

"Other than jelly beans?" She popped a couple in her mouth. "Um..."

He smirked. "That's what I thought. Let's go get something."

"I could eat. I know an all-night diner."

"Okay. My treat. We can get to know each other. I won't bite, and if I do... you know what to do."

"This isn't a date." Standing, she set the ashtray back on the end table.

He smiled. When their eyes met, he got a strange mental image. It was like the flash cards that children used to burn facts into their head. It was brief before she shut him out. He filed it away to bring up later. "Not a date, Dusty. Just good food, good conversation, and the best sex either of us has ever had, but definitely not a date." His eyes sparkled with flecks of gold, like art glitter or shooting stars; a sign he was joking.

She wiggled her finger back and forth. "Good food, good conversation, and no sex, Jonas. That's not happening. *Ever*."

"I was joking, Dusty. A mortal having sex with a vampire can be... painful." He didn't elaborate. Glancing around, he noticed the gold case. Picking it up, he slid it back into the hidden compartment of his suitcase. It wasn't time for that yet. Smiling, he turned around. "Ready?" Opening the door, he pointed to the wooden case on the bed. "Don't forget your lifesaver. Keep it where you can easily get it."

"In my little sports car? That might be tough." Clutching the case to her body, she headed out the door.

"Surprisingly light, isn't it?" He locked the door behind him. While walking to the car, he shot off a text.

Jonas: One left. Gonna be in Cider Lake longer than I thought. How fast can you get more to me?

Garrick: That's cutting it damn close, chief! I'm in L.A. Where the fuck is Cider Lake?

Jonas: It's 40 miles southwest of Memphis. Tennessee. Look just call me!

He hated talking on the phone, but it beat mashing tiny buttons. Shortly after, his phone rang loudly; *Pleased to meet you... hope you guessed my name.* "Yeah?" he slid into the passenger seat, groaning. "Quit trying to be my conscience, Garrick. I've got a lot on my mind."

While he took the phone call, she went to the trunk. The sword was huge! Her sports car was compact. The two did not mesh well. It couldn't fit under her seat.

"I don't give a shit what you're doing! Get them to me or I'm coming for you!" Jonas demanded over the phone. There was a short pause. "Good... one-month supply... overnight them to my P.O. Box, I'll text you the address."

The sword wouldn't fit anywhere but the trunk, but that wasn't easily accessible. What the hell was she going to do with it? Closing the trunk, she moved it to the backseat, throwing her winter coat over it.

Jonas rolled his eyes. "You're a sick man, Garrick." He chuckled. "Right, you too... Garrick, something heavy's going down so watch your ass." After shooting off the address, he dropped the phone into his shirt pocket.

Finally deciding on a good spot, she climbed into the driver's seat, and before long, they were headed in the direction of the all-night café. While driving, the car drifted onto two wheels as she ignored the speed limit and 'safe' turns. "Is everything okay?" Glancing over at him, she pulled the e-brake, drifting around the corner doing fifty.

Seeing a few parked cars getting too close for comfort, he shifted in the opposite direction. "Other than your driving? Yes. I keep the beast at bay with a little pill. *No* clue what's in it. Getting too low for comfort. Had to request more."

"Calling your dealer. Gotcha," she said joking, though somewhat true.

He blinked at the way she wheeled her Z. While the IROC Z's were set up to handle well, he doubted General Motors had this in mind. Even vampires couldn't defy the Laws of Physics and motion. Each turn sent him sliding in the opposite direction. Watching a mud-caked Dodge Ram come too close for comfort, he gasped. The license plate read, YEEHAW. The Z could have fit underneath with the monster lift kit and commercial tractor tires. "You did say it was an all-night diner, right?"

"Yep! Best food around. Gotta get a good parking spot," she teased, drifting around another corner, slamming the gears in place. "It fills up with drunks."

"And yet, I'll bet they drive better than you do," he muttered, getting slammed into the door again.

Chapter 22

Bobbie-Jo's never closed. On Christmas, every customer got a free holiday dinner. It was steady but never crowded. A few insomniacs sipped coffee while others wolfed down her special 'taters': home fries, mixed with grilled onions, green peppers, and bacon. It was a staple. Some said it should be a food group. It won first place at the fair nine years running.

Bobbie-Jo was the boss, at the grill, training her new line cook. Doing great a week in, but his biggest hurdle was those damn taters. "That boy burns everything," Bobbie-Jo grumbled.

Being on his probational period, the regulars were betting on his survival. Bobbie-Jo was willing to help. Poor kid was going through a rough spell and needed the job. If only he would stop watching the big screen TV.

"Hollis!" Bobbi-Jo hollered. "You're gonna burn 'em taters if ya don't watch yourself! I told ya... ya gotta turn 'em, and turn 'em, and turn 'em. Those onions and peppers have to be cooked

just right. They can't be too crunchy." A small bell sounded as Dusty and Jonas entered. Bobbie-Jo gave a customary wave. "Y'all have a seat." Her sweet drawl seemed inspired by Paula Dean herself. "Anywhere's fine."

A few diners turned to see. Recognizing them, Dusty started to wave but stopped when they turned back around. Normally, everyone was friendly. Not today. Good. Dusty didn't feel up to hearing about the weather or how 'Earl Jr's finally shitting right'. "Come to think of it," she said, sliding into the booth. "I'm starving."

Turning to Hollis, Bobbie-Jo hip bumped him aside, snatching the oversized spatula. "Go get their order." Looking down at the black taters, she scooped them into a metal garbage pail. Waste not, want not, the hogs would love them. "Lawd Christ almighty! That boy ain't got nothing tween his ears but air. Bless his heart."

Hollis Parker, the new cook/host/waiter, just turned seventeen. Dirty blond hair, sky-blue eyes, he was a shoe-in for Kurt Cobain's little brother and the local heartthrob. His mama had to beat the girls off with a baseball bat. *"You're gonna make something of yourself," she told him. "Girls are trouble. Just ask your daddy."*

He placed the menus in front of them. "What can I get Y'all?" Glancing at the TV, he saw Bobbie-Jo waving the metal tool in his direction.

Jonas didn't look at the menu. "I'll have coffee. Black."

Dusty instantly flipped it over, looking for something appealing.

Hollis nodded then looked at Dusty. He smiled at her like he just won the lottery. "You're 'bout the prettiest thing I seen all day."

Everyone was acting strange today. Glancing up befuddled, she smiled before turning back to the menu. They never had a conversation, but it wasn't like they didn't 'know' each other. It was confusing.

Jonas smiled. "I tell her that all the time, son. What's your name?"

All the time? Dusty continued looking over the menu, ignoring the oddities. She had eaten there enough to know everything was good.

"Hollis. Hollis Parker."

Jonas was all business. "Have you worked here long, Mr. Parker?"

"'bout three weeks. Had to quit school. Count o' mama being sick and all."

"Sorry to hear that! Is it serious?" Dusty chimed in. She knew his mother. Everyone called her 'mama'.

He shrugged. "Don't know yet. Doc ain't sure what's wrong. They're running a buncha tests."

"They'll figure it out. Give her my best, will ya, hon?" Offering a soft smile, she went back to the menu.

Jonas nodded. "Yes, truly sorry to hear about your mother." He slid a one-hundred-dollar-bill into his hand. "A donation to the cause. Hopefully, she gets well soon."

Looking down, Hollis's eyes widened. "Thanks, mister." He shoved it into his pocket.

"You're very welcome. Tell me something, have you seen anyone come in... late at night... around this time? Maybe someone you never met before."

He tilted his head. "You ask a mess o' questions. You some kinda cop?"

Jonas nodded. "Some kind, yes."

Thinking all cops were like *Sergeant* Charles F. Thomas, Hollis didn't want to piss this guy off. The hundred made sense now. Squinting, he thought about it before snapping his fingers. "Yeah! Now that ya mention it. This weird looking fella always comes in. Don't never order

anything. Dresses in black leather. Dark hair. Sits alone ignoring everyone." The small bell rang, and Hollis looked over, then back to Jonas.

Jonas watched the young man walk in, taking a seat in the far corner with his back to the crowd as if trying to remain invisible. *Stupid*, Jonas thought.

Hollis smiled, hitching a thumb over his shoulder. "You're in luck, mister. There he is. I'll go fetch 'em for ya."

Jonas grabbed his arm. "That's okay. He's not the one I'm looking for. We're ready to order."

Grinning, he turned back to Dusty in a dreamy stare. "What can I getcha, miss?"

She pointed. "Chocolate shake. Heavy on the whipped cream. Well done cheeseburger with everything. Um. Taters with fried onions, green peppers, mushrooms, topped with cheddar cheese and Ketchup. Pickle slices on the side. Order of crunchy fries. Damn near burn 'em." After ordering, she handed the menu back to him.

Jonas chuckled. "Tasty."

Hollis looked back at Jonas. "Just coffee?"

He nodded. "Black."

Dusty cringed. "I like coffee, but it's gotta be sweet."

"Defeats the purpose in having 'coffee'." Jonas watched Hollis collect the menus and head back to the grill, giving Bobbie-Jo the order.

Curiously, she looked at Jonas. "What was that about?"

"This being a small town, everyone knows everyone. It's like six degrees of Kevin Bacon. If Seth is here, he has a posse with him. Mostly younglings. They'll be trying to hold onto their humanity."

"By coming to an all-night café?"

"Among other things."

"The guy he described... would that be Seth?"

Shaking his head, he chuckled. "No. Seth is arrogant. Most older vampires are, but the ancients are worse. He would *never* come in here, looking like his dog died, and sit alone in the corner."

"Ah." Another quick glance around the diner brought her back to Jonas, arching a brow. "What did ya call him?"

"A youngling. Someone recently brought over. Inexperienced. New to the feelings and urges. Trying to hang onto being a mortal, in any way. The urge for blood is strong. Like a junkie craving a fix. It goes deep. Painful when ignored. He believes he's *still* human. Doing mortal things. He surrounds himself with people, trying to fight the craving. Thinks he can control the urges. Be normal. Like an alcoholic in a bar."

"Why do something that's gonna trigger an alert?"

"We all did it. Trying to be something we're not. Believing we're stronger than the demon that calls... sweetly... promising powers beyond your wildest imagination. I did the same thing. I bet myself how long I could last. Remember, we're very alluring to mortals. You want to be around us. You can't resist."

She scoffed. "Psh! I can."

Giving her the once over, he tilted his head. "Oddly enough. Tell me ... are you good at seducing?"

Cocking her head, she glared. "Well, that's a question ya don't hear every day. It falls under none of your business!"

He couldn't help but laugh. "Not for me. I want you to seduce," he up-nodded to the stranger. "Him."

"You want me to *seduce* him?!"

"Yes."

"What good'll that do? Ya said he's craving blood, so why seduce him? I appreciate ya looking out for my carnal desires, but I'm not in the market to get laid right now." A quick glance at the guy, "plus he's really not my type, but thanks for the offer."

"I won't let it go that far. There's an alley next to the diner. It's perfect. It's the only way to find out where Seth is. Trust me. He knows."

Her food came, stalling their conversation. Glancing down, she shot a wink up at Hollis. "Looks good!" He blushed and ran off. "Everyone's acting strange. Like they don't even know me." Shaking her head, she picked up a fry, dipping it in Ketchup. "Ya want me to get him in the alley for a quick, wham bam thank ya, ma'am'? What makes ya think he's interested?"

"He's a man. Younglings have intense feelings they don't understand. The bloodlust, regular lust, guilt. That boy will jump at the chance for a piece of ass. Eat. When you're done, we'll get into a fight."

Picking up the burger, she took a bite, feeling unusually hungry. Raising her pickle, she wiggled it at him before taking a bite and setting it back down. "I love a good fight. There are two problems with your plan," she said with a mouthful.

"What's that?"

"First, everyone knows me, though they ain't acting like it. If ya start a fight, they'll come to my defense. Second, Bobbie-Jo ain't gonna let two screaming people go at it in her diner. Bad for business and all." She washed it all down with a chug of her shake.

"I thought of that before we walked in. Take a peek," he pointed to the chrome napkin dispenser. "Just don't scream."

"What the hell did you do?" She grabbed it in a show of checking her makeup. Her eyes widened. Gasping, she almost choked, hissing at Jonas. "What the jumping catfish?"

Grinning, he arched a brow. "Problem?"

It wasn't her. The woman staring back had poufy blond hair with bright red highlights. Tilting the dispenser, she could see an added fifty plus pounds. Wrinkles lined her face and eyes. This person was old and fat with clown-like makeup. "What did you do to me."

Jonas winked, green eyes dancing in the fluorescent lights. "Problem one solved."

So *that* was why everyone ignored her. She *was* a stranger. "Explains a lot. When did ya turn me into a walking clown?"

"Before you got out of the car."

"How long does it last?!"

"Just until I remove the glimmer. I told you we get certain... abilities. This is one of mine. You'll be back to normal after we get him in the alley."

"That's blackmail! Won't he see through it?"

"Seth would, but younglings are too fresh."

Looking at her reflection again, she cringed, watching saggy arms flap. "And the second?"

"I'll deal with that if it comes up." Seeing her rage, he smiled. "You get to slap the shit out of me, so there's that."

"That doesn't even *begin* to make up for this." Picking up her burger, she took another bite. Seeing a hefty person in her body made her not want to eat. The rumbling in her stomach overrode everything. "What are we fighting over?"

"I'm going to call you some nasty names. You can accuse me of," he thought about it before snapping his fingers. "Infidelity. Then slap me."

"It would've been nice to rehearse this before just throwing it at me. I don't just slap someone for the hell of it. You deserved it."

"It was *more* than a slap."

"Whatever," she said, rolling her eyes. "I think rehearsing would've been nice."

"It will look more genuine if you don't know what's coming."

"You're soooooo gonna deserve this one too!"

"Tell me to get out. Stay away. Get the hell out of your face. Make it sound like you're done with me. Forever. You want me out of your life. After that, I'll leave. Within five seconds he'll rush over to see if he can soothe your pain. Play with him. Tell him whatever you wish but get him in that alley. I'll take it from there." He glanced at the youngling. They still had some time. Turning back, he grabbed one of her fries, munching on it.

"I like the first part. What makes ya think he's gonna rush over? I can't believe anyone would be attracted to *this*."

"Different strokes. If you were in a big city... not a chance... but you're in a small town where this," he pointed at her, "is what they see. What they're attracted to. Case in point, Hollis over there."

Shrugging, she chewed on a French Fry. "You should know."

"Give me your keys," he said, holding out his hand. "I need to get in the car."

Unhooking them, she handed them over. "As long as I don't have to cry." Picking up her burger, she took another bite.

"You don't have to cry. Save your tears for the ones who deserve them."

"Good. It's a sign of weakness."

"Not always."

"It's what I was taught. No matter the situation... or the pain... no crying. If I did, I really suffered."

"Wow. You really had it rough. He can't put you under some will draining stare. It takes a good century to develop that skill. Sometimes two. Taking away someone's free will is exhausting. The first time I tried, I slept for two days and we don't need to rest."

"Then how did ya get a loan as Micky Mouse if it takes years?"

He glared. "I meant because of your concrete wall. If I can't get in, then I know he can't either. If that wasn't there... yeah. You'd have to worry."

"Oh. Of course."

"He's still too young to pick up the scent of other vampires. If he could, he would have run out of here in a heartbeat. He isn't that old. Oh, and please don't kill him. This information is vital to the case."

"Buzzkill." She took another bite.

After ten minutes, the other vampire became fidgety. The urge to drink grew stronger as his will grew weaker. It wouldn't be much longer before he targeted someone for a snack. Glancing down, he saw that Dusty was just about finished. Winking, he motioned to her plate. "Showtime." His words were barely above a whisper.

"What?"

"Are you going to eat the entire diner?" His voice boomed loud enough for everyone to hear.

Chapter 23

Her brows furrowed. "Excuse me?" Then she realized it was time for the big performance. Enter Devan Shire. Wife of this asshole in front of her. Thinking about a few of the busybodies in town – who thought they shit roses – she was ready. Her face fell with a serious pout. "You're being mean."

The exchange made Jonas laugh. Her facial expression changed from 'ready to tear him a new one' to tearful sadness in point two seconds. "Jesus. Watching you eat is like watching someone shoving shit into a sewer."

"You can't talk to me like that!"

"See that ring on your finger?" Looking down, he shook his head. "Oy! Did you lose another one? Or... did you take it off, so you could whore around behind my back again!"

She eyed him with hatred. "I'm not whoring around! Took it off to wash my hands. Didn't want it turning my finger green... again."

"Bullshit! Silver doesn't turn. Who this time? The gardener? I see you watching him. That's why he always takes off his shirt. The pool boy. Cliché, but I wouldn't put it past you. Someone new?"

"That's ridiculous! Everyone knows I'm married. Why bother taking off my ring? What's crawled up your ass?" Glancing around, the people in the diner were looking at them. Leaning over, she slapped the table, glaring at him. "Lower your voice. You're making a scene!" Taking a bite out of her burger, she spoke with her mouth full. "Do ya kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"What?! It's proper table manners to swallow your food before speaking. Don't you dare talk about my mother. She's a kind-hearted angel. Not some fat slob like you and your mother!"

"My mother's not fat!" She flung a French Fry in his face. "Stop being so mean!"

"Start eating salads. You're as big as a fucking house!"

She gasped. "Am not! I eat salads."

"Sure. Right before wolfing down a three-course meal! This," he pointed at her plate, "must be the appetizer before you get another entrée." He took a picture. "I'm going to title this, 'My wife. The future heart attack victim' and see how many agree."

Her eyes filled with tears. "John! What the hell is your problem? Stop it! Honey, please. We were having a nice dinner after a fun day. Don't ruin it."

"Nice day? We had to stop every five minutes for you to get a drink, something to eat, go to the bathroom, or rest because your fat ass couldn't keep up! I'm not being mean. You're getting fatter with all that shit. You're going to an early grave!"

She huffed. "I'm not fat! I'm a big-boned woman!"

"Oh, knock it off. You eat like it's your last fucking meal! I should've married your sister. I had the chance, but I blew it! Better late than never."

Eyes opened wide but as not as much as her mouth. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"How dare you bring up that whore!"

"Don't talk about her like that! She's the sweetest – next to my mother – and doesn't deserve to be labeled like trash. You hold that title. Not her." His voice got louder. "She's more of a woman than you are and half your size! She's beautiful. You're... just plain."

"Why are you defending her?"

"She is a great woman. You... not so much. She has the potential to be my ultimate trophy wife. The only potential you have is to eat this diner into bankruptcy."

"That bitch is dumber than a barn door!"

"Maybe so, but she wouldn't eat enough to feed a third world country!"

"Fuck you!" Glaring at him, she picked up the knife, jabbing it in the air toward him. "You're fucking her, aren't you? Aren't you?"

Their voices escalated. All eyes were on them. Hollis started over, but Bobbie-Jo grabbed his arm. "Let folks have their say. If it looks like they're gonna break things, I'll go over."

Jonas smiled. "I'm doing a lot more than just fucking her. Remember those business meetings last month? I spent them with a gorgeous angel who knows how to treat me right! I hated coming home to," he looked her up and down in disgust, "this."

"I knew it!!" Dusty screamed. "That's who you've been banging with your little Vienna sausage!" The people in the diner tried hiding their snickers.

"Oh," he winked at her, "I please her sexy ass multiple times. Yanking her into a closet, behind a fence, the backseat of my car. I'm tired of hiding it. We are done! Divorce time, sweetie. Thank God! I can finally be free to marry the girl of my dreams. Yes, Buttercup, your sister. I'll be proud having *her* on my arm. Ever wonder why I abandon you? Pretending not to know you? Text you to meet me at the car. Outside. Away from prying eyes? Most people believe your drop-dead, gorgeous sister is my wife. The men are beyond jealous. They tell me what a lucky man I am. I don't dare tell them about the nightmare I married who turned into a Butterball turkey before my eyes." That was enough. Dusty stood, balling up her fist. Leaning over the table, she punched him in the face. This haymaker had more behind it than the first. Jonas didn't have to act like he'd been hit. His head snapped as he sprawled back.

"I knew it! Get out of my face! Go find your whore. She'll never be faithful to anyone but herself! Soon as someone better comes along – the limo driver, gardener, pool boy – she'll cheat on you while robbing you blind. She'll keep your money and you'll never know!"

Once he gained control of his thoughts, he sat up, shaking his head. "You fucking bitch!" When he stood, a few of the men around them did too. It was getting out of hand. The boys around here were taught to respect women like they did their own mamas. Turning, he nodded, motioning for them to sit down. "It's okay. I'm leaving." They sat down, but everyone was on high alert, just waiting for him to make the wrong move. Turning back to Dusty, he shook his head. "Fine! We are done." He threw his napkin on the table.

"I don't care! Good! Bye!" Picking up the few fries left, she threw them. "Get away from me!"

"Say goodbye to the nice wardrobe, jewelry collection, the cars. Kiss it all goodbye! Poor little princess will have to work for a living now. Careful you don't break a nail! Gone are those expensive weekly manicure sessions!" Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a fifty and threw it at her. "Eat that, you gold digging twat! That's the last you will receive from me. My attorney will make damn sure of it." After giving a small nod – unnoticeable from any distance – he stormed out of the diner.

Well, it was inevitable. After that performance, she had to cry. The tears streamed down her face. "Bastard! Go see your fucking whore! I hope you both get an STD that kills you!" Her voice carried through the closed door as Jonas flipped her off as he passed by the window before disappearing around her car.

Five. Four. Three. As if on cue, the guy moved quickly to her table. Without being invited, he slid in across from her. He wasn't bad looking. It was just as Jonas told her; they didn't turn ugly people. He brushed his dark hair back as he reached his hand over to hold hers, kissing it lightly. "Are you okay?"

Shaking her head, she pulled her hand back. Grabbing a napkin, she blew her nose, crying uncontrollably. Waving a hand at him, she sniffled. "I'll be okay. I don't know what I saw in that jackass!"

"He was a real jerk. It took all I had not to interfere." Once more, he took her hand in his, softly stroking it.

Keeping up with the charade, she ignored the fact that his hands were like ice. Gasping, she pulled her hand back, covering her face. "Oh my God! You saw that?"

He shrugged. "It was kinda hard to miss. You guys were screaming loud enough to wake the dead."

"Oh, my God! Soooo embarrassing. Now everyone knows what a loser I am."

Reaching up, he again captured her hand, kissing it. "Stop that! You aren't the loser. He is! How could anyone leave you."

"He's screwing my sister! Of all people! I *knew* he was cheating! A woman knows these things!" She whimpered, dabbing her eyes with a napkin. "My very own sister. Slut!" Tears streamed down her face, as her voice broke with emotion. "It's just... wroooooong."

"You deserve more than that. You're much too beautiful to deal with an asshole like him."

Lightly squeezing his hand, she shook her head. "He's right! What am I gonna do? All my stuff. By now he's changed the locks. It's his house. I don't have anything. Should've just shut my mouth. Let him do what he wanted! Now, I'm screwed!"

"No, you're not! I can help."

"How?" Waving her hands in front of her face, she tried to stop crying. "What am I gonna do? He's got the money."

"You don't have any?"

Shaking her head, the tears flowed down her cheeks as her voice broke. "No."

"What about family?"

"I had to choose him or them!" She started crying again. "Now I see why. I'll bet my whole family knew."

"It's okay. I'm here."

"What am I gonna do?"

"Don't cry." Reaching up, he brushed the tears from her cheek.

Pushing into his palm, she looked at him with a sad, but dreamy expression. "But when I'm sad I cry. I can't go home. No friends. No family. He really screwed me!"

He leaned in closer, motioning to the door. "I'll take care of you. You'll never have to worry about anything ever again."

"That's what he said. Now, look!"

"Yes, but I mean it."

Sitting up, she wiped away the tears, looking at him hopefully. "You'd do that for me?"

"I will."

"We didn't have a good marriage. Not like other couples."

"Why did you marry him?"

Shrugging, she looked down at the ground, sighing deeply. "I don't know. He's rich. Seduced me with trips around the world, limo rides, jewelry, clothes, everything that comes with wealth. Cars. Different homes. Out on the yacht. Big fancy dinners meeting famous actors. It's kinda hard to pass up." She started bawling again. "Oh my God! I lost it all. Everything is gone. I'm homeless with nothing! I can't live on the street! I'm too delicaaaaate!"

"I told you, I'm going to help. I'm Donnie. What's your name?"

'Donnie, or Derek... something with a D.'

Tammy Barker! Crying into her hands, until the urge to kill passed, she turned sad eyes in his direction. "Hi, Donnie. I'm Devan."

"We could be D&D; the dynamic duo."

He did not just say that? Ugh.

'Keep in character, Dusty.'

She giggled. Sniffing, she wiped her eyes and nose again. "What can you do? I've lost everything. He's ruined me!"

"I have money and power. I can take you places you never dreamed."

Wiping her eyes, she sent him a dreamy look. "You'd do that for me? Destiny must've put us together. If I could get away from John, my husband. I want him dead. Cheating ass bastard!"

Donnie arched a brow. "I can *definitely* help. Make sure he never bothers you – or anyone – ever again."

Listening outside from the hood of her car, Jonas chuckled. *You're a vampire, ass-face, not a genie.*

Smiling, Dusty giggled. Her table was the highlight of the diner. The whole place froze; all eyes focused on them. Even 'Big Brother After Dark' had lost its interest because of the reality soap opera happening before them.

Donnie rose, stepping over to Dusty. "Come with me. Let's go somewhere more private."

Looking up with a tear-streaked face, she wiped her eyes with the napkin. Standing, she gathered her cigarettes and lighter. "Where are we going?"

"You can crash at my place. It's not far. We'll worry about getting your clothes tomorrow."

"I really appreciate this. Tomorrow, can we get even with John?"

He smiled. "My pleasure."

"Yes! If he dies, while we're still married, I get his fortune!" Pointing to the fifty, she turned to Bobbie-Jo. "I'm so sorry for everything. Keep the change for the ruckus."

Bobbie-Jo smiled, waving a hand at her. Hearing everything that poor girl went through, she felt sorry for her. *Bless her heart.* "Girl, we all been down that road. Thanks for the tip. You take care of yourself now. Get away from that man. Ya don't need that shit."

"I am. Y'all have a good one." Smiling, she waved while walking out the door with Donnie. The diner came alive with chatter as they left.

Chapter 24

Hearing the jingle of the diner's bell, Jonas crouched behind Dusty's Z, smiling, waiting for his opening. Her performance was impressive, but he wondered just how deep it went. Listening to Donnie's seduction brought him back to the present. Turning his head to the side, he stuck his finger in his mouth, as if gagging himself. This wasn't going to be the usual interrogation. It was going to be a learning experience for Dusty, in how to handle vampires, so he couldn't be gentle with the poor boy. Not that being gentle was ever on the table, but he was going to take an unprofessionally, obscene amount of joy with this one. Now, she just had to get him into the alley.

The diner was connected to a row of businesses heading up Buford St. A laundromat, Don Snyder's Insurance Agency, a few trinket stores, antique shops, and a coffee shop/internet café, not unlike the one Jonas frequented back in Chicago. Being well into the early morning hours nothing was open but Bobbie-Jo's. A narrow alley ran between the diner and the next row of buildings, most of which had 'For Rent' signs in their windows; a sad commentary on the times.

Sending a teasing, bashful glance at Donnie, she looked out her long eyelashes. "You're a real prince, Donnie. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Smiling, he shrugged. "Not lately."

"You're gonna hear it all the time from now on. I don't know what it is about you, but just being so close to you... kinda..." she blushed.

Looking on in interest, he nudged her as they walked. "Kinda what? It's not nice to leave me hanging, ya know."

"Turns me on." She giggled, looking in the other direction, bashfully.

Donnie chuckled. "It's part of my charm."

"I mean," she stopped, pushing him into the side of the building, next to the alley. "*Really* turns me on. Like... I can barely keep my hands to myself. What are you doing to me?"

Surprised, he pulled her closer. "Damn. I guess I don't know the strength of my own power."

"I just wanna get freaky with you. Like, right here and now." As if seeing the alley for the first time, she wiggled free from him, trying to pull him in with her. "Let's do it here." She looked around, before smiling at him, stepping away. "Right now."

"*Here?* What's wrong with my place? Come on baby. We can baptize my whole house."

"Too far away." Whimpering, she moved into the alley. "C'mon. Let's live a little bit. I reeeeeeeeeeally want you noooooooooow. C'mon baby. Pleeeeease. Give it to me."

He couldn't help but grin. His eyes trailed over her frame before lighting back on her eyes. She was appealing to the mortal side of him and that was hard to do. "I dunno." His eyes glanced around them. "I'm a little hard to handle in the sack. You up for it?"

Dusty giggled again, running her hands over her body. "I dunno. Come in here and let's see if I am."

This girl was on fire and he loved it. "In the alley?" Narrowing eyes, he glanced around not sure of this idea. The inner vampire in him screamed 'trap' but his downfall was that horny inner human, trying desperately to shove him into the alley. "It's cliché to do it in the alley. That's when a serial killer can sneak up on us."

Unsnapping her jeans, she slowly wiggled her zipper down. "There's no one out here but you and me. If ya want the goods," she stepped back into the shadows. "Come and find me."

His inner battle raged. Sex or food. As he reasoned with himself to make her both, the alarm refused to be silenced. It was adamant that it was a trap, but he didn't see how. They were the only ones out there. "Yeah... but out here?"

"You sound like a choir boy. Are you a goody-goody? I'm horny, Donnie, and it's your fault. Just being this close to you," she moaned, "does strange things to me. I wanna feel you inside me. Make me yours, baby."

"I dunno."

"Whatever. I knew you were too good to be true. I'm gonna please myself and then go find that pencil dick, John. He liked to do it in public. Better luck next time, kid. Go find yourself a little girl. She might be more your speed."

Seth taught him the basics of being a vampire. That human male ego in him outranked all of that right now. It overrode his sense of danger with the fact that he was about to score. "Kid? Oh, you're such a bad girl, Devon. But I do like bad girls. Poor deprived little girl probably never had a good fucking. Get ready, baby." Stopping, he inhaled deeply, eyes growing red, fangs extending. "Mm, you're ovulating. So much sweeter."

Listening, Jonas nodded. She did her part. It didn't matter that it sounded like the worst low budget porn he had the misfortune of ever hearing, he was in the alley. With the change in Donnie's

tone and his persona, it wouldn't be long before the blood rage took over. He would either turn her, kill her, or she would shoot him, bringing unwanted attention to their little ménage à trois. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a purple cloth. Within was a set of gloves. He donned them. Now, it was his turn.

In the blink of an eye, Donnie was impaled through the heart, anchored to the brick wall of the alley by a foot long, four-inch silver spike. The moonlight glanced off casting a shard of white across Donnie's face. Immobilized, he blinked, a screech caught in his throat.

"Yeah, we don't have time for a whole sexual act." He grinned at Dusty. "That had to be the *worst* acting I've ever heard. Good thing I didn't pay to watch. Talk about low budget porn, but you got him in here, so... A for effort."

It took a second to realize what happened when Donnie disappeared. "I told ya we needed to rehearse. No script. Had to wing it. Hell, when I worked undercover, I learned my part first."

Smirking, Jonas flashed his fangs at Donnie. "Where's Seth?"

Looking to Jonas, he blinked. "Seth? Seth who?" He growled at Dusty. "Bitch! I'll rip out your throat. You don't know who you're messing with."

Standing, she shook out her hair, looking down at her skinnier body. "Oh my God! I have missed me so much." Turning to Donnie, she glared. "Screw you, punk! I know exactly who you are. I didn't sucker you into the alley for sex. Ew." Turning to Jonas, she arched a brow. "How come he couldn't tell you were a vampire, sitting and waiting. Can't you guys sense each other with some... I dunno... radar or something?"

"Usually, but younglings are young, dumb, and stupid. It takes about a century to develop the skill. That's why they are so dependent on their sires in the beginning. Hell, my first hundred years, I didn't leave Kanis's side."

Donnie swallowed hard. "Kanis? Wait. That makes you," eyeing him up and down, "Jonas Sparx?"

"At your service."

"What the hell's going on here?!"

Sighing, Jonas took a step closer. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be. Where is Seth?"

He looked between the two of them. "What the fuck are you talking about? This mortal bitch knows about vampires... and lives?! We're brothers. I'll make you a deal. I won't tell anyone, and you can take your little-"

Jonas pushed the spike in, silencing him. "I wouldn't finish that sentence. She's not as nice as I am." He looked over at Dusty. "Vampire Interrogation 101."

"Must've missed that course at the academy. Out on assignment, I guess." Dusty sighed. "More note taking? I really hate taking notes."

"Academy?" Donnie narrowed his eyes at Dusty. "I recognize you! The bitch at the kiddie yard! The skinny slut we tore up. That was a tasty piece of ass. Finger-Lickin' good. And that fat ass pig who got in my grill. Yeah, Sergeant Charles Thomas. A little too greasy for my taste, but a meal is a meal."

Dusty's eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare talk about them like that!" Growling, she tightened her fists next to her.

'Keep calm, Dusty. He's trying to make you angry. Do not give into it.'

"Oh?" Donnie tried ignoring the pain from the spike. "Reach that pretty little hand of yours in my jacket pocket. I took a souvenir from the meal."

Glaring at Donnie, she reached in. Her fingers ran over a badge and she pulled it out. Sergeant Charles F. Thomas. "He didn't deserve that."

Jonas pushed the spike in more making Donnie scream again. The silver seeped into his blood, eating him from the inside out. "What... the fuck... do... you... want?" He choked, gasping as if each word made the damage to his body accelerate.

Laughing, Jonas patted Donnie's face. "No, no, no. You aren't playing right. You see," balling up his fist, he blasted him across the face, causing Donnie to yell out again.

Dusty smirked. "Now, Jonas. Though I am enjoying this – a little too much – ya gotta tell him the rules if ya want him to play right."

He snapped his fingers. "I *knew* I was forgetting something." Grabbing Donnie's face, he pinched his cheeks. "I ask the questions. You answer. Got it?" Grabbing the spike, he gave it a twist, sending Donnie's body into agony. "Where is Seth?"

"I don't know who you're talking about!" he cried in pain.

"Wrong answer. Every time you give me some bullshit," Jonas punched him in the left temple, leaving a burning scar. "I hit you." Turning to Dusty, he showed her his hands. "Leather gloves with the outer fingers lined in silver. A friend made them five years ago. I can have him make you a pair as well. That way when you hit, you'll *really* do damage."

"Yes! Perfect! Please do," she told him, turning back to Donnie.

Making a mental note to stop giving her things that hurt, he turned back to Donnie. "You know who I mean. Tall. Blond. Tattoos. About... oh... I'd say three thousand years old. Cocky attitude. Reeceal nasty temper, too. He has fangs like yours." Squinting, Jonas reached into Donnie's mouth, yanking one out by the root, causing Donnie to howl as he looked it over.

Dusty winced. "Owwwww! That looked like it hurt. Might wanna tell the man what he wants to know. He's enjoying this way too much." She kept peeking around the corner, making sure no one was getting curious. *Police business. On your way. Nothing to see here.*

Jonas examined the fang while clapping a hand over Donnie's mouth. "My bad. Seth's fangs are far bigger than yours... and... well... you know what they say about performance issues." Shrugging, he handed it to Dusty. "We can bag that as evidence or you can turn it into a necklace. Like shark's teeth."

Pulling out a baggie, she put the tooth in. "Ew." Good thing she carried supplies with her. "Give up the location and we'll leave ya alone."

With a tooth missing, his words came out garbled. "Look, man, he'll kill me! You don't know what he's capable of."

Jonas nodded. "Yes, I do," he said, cracking his knuckles. "He'll kill you, but," giving the spike another twist, he watched as Donnie's eyes practically flew out of his skull. "At least he'll be quick about it."

"All right!" He wailed. "He's holed up in an old shut down coalmine, okay?"

Smiling, Jonas nodded. "That's better. See, you're finally getting the hang of this game. Aren't we having fun? I know I am! Now, *why* is he here?"

Dusty glanced around. "If ya could speed this along."

Donnie blinked at Jonas as if he had three heads. "How the hell should I—"

"Donnie, this is gonna hurt you a *lot* more than me, but..." He reached for the spike again.

"Okay, okay! No more, please!"

Jonas paused. "Answer this last question and I'll set you free."

Donnie began laughing hysterically. "It's the Bloodstone Prophecy, man. He's gonna fulfill it. We're gonna rule the world!"

His eyes narrowed. "I don't like that answer, Donnie. That's a fairy tale." He moved to twist the spike again.

Donnie's eyes grew wide. "No, no, I swear! It's the truth! Why would I lie about that? He's doing it, man!"

Jonas slowly brought his hand back down. "No." He looked at Dusty.

In the short time she knew him – strange how it seemed longer – she had not seen fear in his eyes until now. "What's the Bloodstone prophecy?" She watched as he vanished into the shadows. Blinking, she turned back to Donnie, wondering what the hell she was supposed to do with him. "What's the Bloodstone prophecy?"

Donnie hollered after Jonas, ignoring Dusty. "Hey! I thought you were gonna set me free? Fucking liar!"

Glaring at Donnie, she grabbed the spike, driving it further in him. "I asked you a fucking question. What is the Bloodstone prophecy?!"

When Jonas came back into the light, he was holding his father's gleaming sword. "I am going to set you free just as I promised." He looked down at his own reflection in the steel.

Donnie screamed like a little girl. "Oh, God!"

Seeing the weapon, her eyes widened, quickly moving away from Donnie. "Uh-oh. This ain't gonna be pretty."

Jonas looked up at Donnie, his face unreadable. Swinging the blade, he cleaved the youngling in half from the center of his head to his groin. Blood spurted across the alley, landing on Jonas, the ground, and the wall. "There *is* no God."

Donnie's face went blank. The half of his body that wasn't staked to the wall, slowly slid away, falling with a sick thud to the ground. In a moment, both halves erupted into flames and then quickly turned to ash.

"Whoa! You said we had to burn their bodies. You didn't say they would explode on their own!"

"When you slice a vampire in half – which isn't easy to do – yes, they erupt into flames. Don't ask me why. We haven't figured that one out yet either. No one wants to be the laboratory rat."

"Good to know."

Jonas reached up, pulling the spike from the wall as the pile of cinders flew away on the wind. "If you thought we had a problem before..." He looked up at the sky. "It just got a *lot* worse."

Chapter 25

Glancing to the ground, his words replayed in her mind. "*People are dying around you, Miss Garner, and more will because you don't just have a vampire problem here, you have the vampire problem to end all vampire problems!*" Looking back at him, she cleared her throat. "How can it be worse than 'vampire problem to end all vampire problems'? I mean... that sounds bad enough."

Handing her the sword, he shook his head. "We need to get back to my room."

The sword was clean, dry, without a spot of blood on it. Holding it in her hands like a pro, she continued glaring at him. "What's the Bloodstone Prophecy?"

Using the purple material, he pulled off the gloves, folding them in the cloth before shoving them in his back pocket. "I'm not sure why Seth is here, but he has this crazy notion about a fairytale. He's lost his mind which makes him even more dangerous." Turning, he headed for the car. "I need to do some research and make a few calls."

As he walked away, she stood perfectly still. All this nonsense was heaped on her lap and no one gave her the owner's manual, or even stereo instructions on what it meant. She wasn't taking another step until he answered her question.

It only took a few seconds. Stopping, he sighed deeply before spinning around. The glare told him she wasn't moving. "Why are you just standing there? We don't have time for this." Seeing her with the sword, brought back that flash card image like a neon sign. It sent a shiver down his spine. The red cross of The Knights Templar. Narrowing his eyes, he stopped just out of range. "You look good wielding steel. Any of your ancestors' knights, by any chance? Maybe a warlord?"

His hesitation made her curious, but she wasn't leaving until he answered. "No clue. Never met any. Now, answer my damn question."

Leaning against the brick wall, he rubbed at his temple. "Okay. Just like mortals, vampires have... fairytales as well. One of the oldest is the Bloodstone. It has been passed down since vampires first walked the Earth. Over the years, it's been embellished – adding or subtracting details – to make it sound better or worse than it actually is. I don't think anyone knows the original legend. Some of the old ancients spent their entire existence looking for it."

Arching a brow, she shifted her weight. "Looking for a myth? The Bloodstone?"

"Yeah. It's pretty much a dead tale now among Deva, Bacchus, and I figured Seth. The years have finally made him insane. It would be like you looking for Cinderella. It sheds new light on this mystery. We need to do some research, so... can we go, please?"

Giving him a deadpan glare, she held out her hand. "You, my dear, still have my keys."

"I knew that." Tossing them over, he watched her catch them with one hand. Looking at the blade, he arched a brow. That wouldn't be good if someone saw her leaving the alley carrying a 500-year-old sword. *One-Adam-Twelve. One-Adam-Twelve. See the man on the corner of Buford and Pine. Report of a female carrying a broadsword. Proceed with caution.* "Uh... maybe I should take that back." Moving closer, he held out his hand. If she was going to kill him, she would have by now. He couldn't get the picture of The Knights Templar out of his head. It was very strong when he looked at her.

Without a second thought, she handed it over. "Good idea. It's not every day you see a sword like that. It might draw attention." Walking toward the exit, she nodded. "Before we do that, I gotta pick up Hooch. Poor baby's been alone all this time. He's probably starving."

"Hooch?"

"My dog." A rush of air almost knocked her down. Jonas was gone. Turning back, she noticed him standing at the car, leaning against it without the sword. Opening the driver's side door, she slid into the seat. "Everyone is always in a hurry."

Laughing, he opened the door, sliding in. "If you're going to take part in my world, you need to be quicker."

"I'll pass."

"Maybe one day you'll change your mind."

"Not likely. I enjoy getting tan, smelling flowers in a garden in the summer, and everything else that comes with it."

"You do make a very alluring mortal. I've never known anyone quite like you."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." She could see how women were taken by his charm. He was beyond handsome, knew all the right words, and sex appeal oozed out of him. Good thing she wasn't a normal woman.

"Hooch. Interesting name. Is it from the movie?"

"Yes. I never saw it. A friend of mine picked the name. I chose 'Sir Licks A Lot' but he didn't like it. Threw 'Hooch' at me. It was perfect."

"Great movie. You should watch it."

"No time. I barely sleep, much less wasting time watching pretend. That irritating voice would tell me to do something else."

'Yes, I would.'

She rolled her eyes. The rest of the trip was silent. Before long, she was pulling into a driveway of a small, single family ranch, tan siding with brown shutters and trim. A small Maple tree sat off to the side in a well-manicured front yard. "This is my home."

"Nice place."

"Thanks."

Following behind her, he paused at the doorframe. "May I come in?"

Turning, she arched a brow at his hesitation. "Ya can't enter without my permission?"

"I can... unless a witch put a spell on it." He put his foot inside the door. "I'm just not rude. I wait to be invited in."

"I thought it was a given, but yes, please, come in."

The inside was clean and tidy like the outside. Nothing showed she lived there except for folders on the dining room table. The Barker Case. She even took work home. He noticed a murder board there also. "Nice house, but you work waaay too much. You have to take a break, you know."

"I'm rarely here, Jonas. A few hours at night." The kitchen door led to the fenced-in backyard. Opening it, she was knocked back, grabbing the wall for support as the dog raced in.

Hooch, waiting by the door, ran through the house, instantly standing guard in front of Jonas. Ears pinned back, in launch mode, snapping at him, he snarled, warning him not to move.

Shocked, Dusty rushed to Hooch. He never treated anyone like this. Gasping, she grabbed his collar, pulling him back. "Oh my God! What has gotten into you, Hooch! Stop it!" The dog refused to budge as she tried pulling on him. "I don't know what's wrong-"

"No!" Jonas put up his hand, stopping her. "Don't scold him. Leave him be."

"What? No! I don't want my dog attacking guests in my hou-"

"He won't do this to anyone but a vampire."

Realizing Hooch was protecting her, she released him. Once more, he stood between the two, ready to take Jonas's head off if he moved wrong. "Oh. Wow!"

Nodding, Jonas looked at him. "He knows what I am. Good. Once he realizes I mean you no harm, he will back down." Slowly, he brought his hand down for Hooch to sniff. The dog snapped at first, giving a warning nip, before sniffing. "A dog sniffs to determine many things. Friend. Enemy. Male. Female. Human. Supernatural beings. When they know you won't hurt their person, then it's their way of saying, 'hello'. Barking is their way of communicating. As is snarling."

After sniffing Jonas, Hooch's ears slowly stood tall and his stance relaxed. He was back to the friendly dog. Putting his head down, he headbutted Jonas, wanting to be petted.

Laughing, he leaned down, giving him a good belly rub, speaking in baby talk. "You're such a good boy. Yes, you are!" Looking up at her, he smiled. "He knows who will hurt you and who's safe. He'll protect you with his life, should the need arise."

Looking down at Hooch, she sighed. "I hope it doesn't come to that. I've grown quite fond of him."

Giving Hooch a final scratching, he stood. "He's very friendly when he gets to know you. Is he well trained?"

Giving a soft whistle, Hooch was up and out the door as she held it open for Jonas. "Yes. I show him once and he's got it."

"Good. You need that."

Closing and locking the door, she nodded. "He's a good boy." Walking to the car, she opened the door, pushing the seat forward. "He's my only family. I'd kill someone if they hurt my boy." She pointed inside the car.

Hooch immediately hopped in. Bending down, he sniffed the sword, running along the length. Picking up the scent of the deceased vampire, he growled. Turning, he settled down, sticking his head between the two seats.

Seeing her face soften as Hooch settled, Jonas smiled. "Yes, I see how much the two of you care for each other. It's touching."

Pushing the seat back, she hopped in, giving Hooch a pet on the head. "So... back to the hotel?"

Buckling his seat belt, he nodded. "Yes. I need access to the archives." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his phone. After punching a number, he put it on speakerphone.

"Okay." Grabbing a cigarette, she lit it before putting the car in drive, sliding onto the main road. Being Monday, after three in the morning, there wasn't any traffic, not that it would matter.

"Hello, sugar!" Amelia's excited sexy voice carried over the speaker. There was a second of silence. "Jonas. Darling. Am I on speakerphone?"

"Yes. Problem?"

"That depends on who else is there. Some things are not for just *anyone* to hear."

"Introductions are in order. Dusty, Amelia. She's the archive keeper of the vampires. Amelia, Dusty. She's my partner."

Dusty instantly disliked the woman. "Well, hey there... *sugar*... how ya doing?"

Feeling a little left out, Hooch barked from the backseat.

"Oh. I'm so sorry, boy." Reaching over, Jonas rubbed his head. "And this handsome fella is Hooch."

Dead silence filled the car for fifteen seconds. "Jonas, what are you doing? This won't end well for your friend. Think about this," Amelia told him.

"Things changed. If Kanis has a problem with it, he can deal with me. Send everything on the Bloodstone Prophecy to my email. Pronto."

"The Bloodstone... Wait. You told her about that? Sugar, that's a fairytale."

"Since it's just a fairytale, send it."

"I can, but tell me why?"

"Light reading."

Laughing nervously, Amelia cleared her throat. "Light? Jonas, there are over a thousand pages. It'll take me—"

"Not the bullshit. I want the original scrolls before someone turned it into a B-rated horror flick."

More silence. "Fine, but our history isn't meant for your friend. I'll talk to—"

"If you tell *anyone*," tightening his jaw, Jonas shook his head, "Kanis and I will have a talk about... Miami... three years ago... and what really happened. Now, send me the files intact."

"Jonas! You promised to never speak of that!"

"Test me. Send the files immediately. Good night, Amelia."

"Jonas that—"

Ending the call, he shoved the phone back into his pocket. "She's a pain in the ass. Monster slut. But no one knows more about our history than she does."

Turning the corner at fifty sent him slamming into his door. Hooch barely moved. He was used to it. "She sounds like a whore."

Recovering from the g-force body slam, he straightened. "You are *seriously* going to wreck one day."

Shrugging, she looked at him. "What are *you* worried about? It's not like you're gonna die."

"While I can't die, per se, I can lose limbs. I've grown quite fond of my appendages. We've been through a lot together in five hundred years."

"We should talk to those other vamps. They might be able to help."

Confused, he turned to her with furrowed brows. "What other vamps?" As she drifted around the corner, taking it too sharp, it slammed him into his door again. Two parked cars were about to get sideswiped or lose a mirror. Avoiding them like a pro, he knew one day she was going to miss her mark, causing a major accident.

"The other two you mentioned. You called them elders. Unless there's some pact ya don't go against each other?"

'Pinball Wizard' from 'The Who' popped into his head because he felt like a silver ball, pinging, and ponging off every surface in her car. He wouldn't be surprised to see a digital counter appear as she racked up points to a new high score. "You mean... Deva and Bacchus?"

"Yes. They might be able to help."

"Ancients. They're powerful. Arrogant. But not forward thinking. They wouldn't care." Cracking his neck, he thought about her question. "Bacchus is as big a myth as the Bloodstone Prophecy. The oldest. Some say only one generation removed from Cain himself if you buy that crap, which I don't."

She looked at him. "What do ya mean *myth*? If you don't think them or the prophecy is real, then what the hell are we doing? Are you sending me on a wild goose chase? We've got to catch a killer before he kills again!"

"Who knows what's true. I don't believe in fairytales, Dusty. That's what they are. Seth apparently does. That makes him public enemy number one. He has to be stopped, no matter his reasons."

"What's her name. Is she a myth too?"

Giving her a confused glance, it took a minute to figure out who 'she' might be. "Deva? No. She's real. Not sure she would help us stop Seth. They had a thing, but it ended badly... or so I heard." Shrugging, he glanced out the window. "Then again, if it ended badly, she might want to get even. I've heard tales of how cruel she can be. I'd rather not—"

"There's no harm in asking. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Especially a powerful vampire." Dusty reminded him, taking another corner like she was at the speedway.

"True. When Kanis finds out I changed my assignment, he'll be livid. If I go to Deva, there will be hell to pay. They don't send one another Christmas cards... if you get my meaning."

"Why are ya in trouble with Kanis?"

"The main rule is to keep mortals from finding out about us. It's like an amendment to your constitution, we don't break it. Punishable by death. No doubt Amelia has filled him in by now."

"Well then... you're already in trouble with the threat of death. At least make it worthwhile."

"I can deal with Kanis. I've handled him before. But Deva?" He blew out a breath. "I've heard things about her. If she found out that we were partners... and you know everything... you'll be a solo act again. That is if she doesn't turn you and keep as a pet."

Dusty scoffed, quite offended. "I am *nobody's* pet."

"Some say her power is magical."

"And? It's her boy making this mess. When the truth about these 'animal attacks' comes out, then what? People will kill off every one of you. Even her. It will be a war no one wants. It's in her best interest to talk to us."

"Eh. She may not see it that way. They don't care about mortals. You're like cattle in the fields."

Angrily, she turned the corner again. Sliding into the motel parking lot, spraying gravel, she grabbed the front spot. "I ain't no dang burn cattle. I don't care how damn old and powerful she is."

He was thankful to have survived another bout of *Dusty's Ride of Doom*. *You must be this tall to ride. Sorry, no cameras*. He unbuckled his seat belt, stepping out of the vehicle. "Your mental wall is useless against ancients. Deva would crack it like a raw egg, leaving you a blithering idiot. If you were lucky."

Opening the door, she stepped out, motioning for Hooch to exit. He wandered over to the grass to relieve himself. She looked over at Jonas. "I'm not delicate, Jonas. No one could've handled a hint of what I dealt with and survived. Stop thinking I can't handle something."

Walking over, he looked down at her, cupping her chin in his hand. "Death might not bother you, because I feel you have no quarrel with it. However, I would take great offense to your demise." The last time he was that open with another person was his wife.

Pushing him away, she shrugged. "When death is ready, it will come. We all die eventually. Well... my kind, anyway." Nodding to the hotel, she looked back at him. "Now, what are we gonna find?"

Unlocking the door, he motioned her inside. "Answers."

Chapter 26

Flicking the cigarette away, she walked past him. "Hm. I hope so." Glancing around the room, it was still a mess. Hooch trotted in, investigating every corner and piece of clothing on the floor. "This place is a playground for Hooch. He's gonna get hair all over your clothes. Ya know... we could always get what ya need and go back to my place. It's cleaner."

Glancing around at the mess, he shook his head. "One second."

She blinked, and clothes were put away, the bed made, every item put back in place. "Damn!"

"Better?"

Looking around, she nodded, but poor Hooch looked confused. "Much."

"No mortal has *ever* been able to block me. You do it without thought. How did you create such a powerful barrier? It's an endless blacked-out bulletproof glass. There isn't a weak spot anywhere. Trust me. I've looked."

As she sat down, Hooch laid at her feet. Absently she stroked his head while yawning. She felt exhausted. Then again, she's been nonstop for two days straight. "Oh. That. I went through mental training as well. He told me to put up a wall that would not crumble, burn, or be penetrated in any manner. I put up a bulletproof, burn-proof, crumble-proof, shatter-proof, Teflon, Plexiglas

in my mind. It stopped all outside interference." *Except for that damn voice.* "I had to make sure to close gaps, spaces, tiny little holes. Talk about draining? It gave me a hell of a headache."

Seeing the yawn, he got up and started a pot of coffee. "Why did he make you go through that?"

"It was important no one got in my head. He brought in a mind reader to make sure."

Arching a brow, he added water to the coffee maker. "An actual mind reader?"

"Yes."

"That's not normal."

"To me it was. When the mind reader came, it was the worst."

"Why?"

"My uncle told me what to think. I had to concentrate, trying to keep the man out. If he figured out what it was, I was punished severely."

Taking a seat, his eyes narrowed. "Punished *how*?"

She winced in memory. "Running ten miles within an hour and a half. Hardcore. No stopping, drinking water, nothing. He rode beside me in the car making sure I didn't hesitate for a second. I was already exhausted from mental training. It only took a few tries before I perfected that wall."

"Damn. Hard road for a kid."

"It made me who I am."

"A damn good detective." Grabbing the laptop, he hopped on the bed, patting the spot beside him. "C'mon, Dusty. Let's see what Amelia sent. We probably won't understand a thing."

Climbing on the bed, she put the ashtray on the nightstand. Hooch followed, laying at her side. "What are we looking for?"

"Something very old," he said, typing in his email password.

Kicking off her boots, she sat Indian style. Lighting a cigarette, she leaned over, resting elbows on thighs. "Something very old? The language back then was a bunch of diagrams and pictures, right?"

"Most of it was Sumerian. They didn't have Arial or Times New Roman."

"They should have. It would make our job easier."

Once the email opened, he blinked at the size. "This will take a few minutes to open. I'll fill you in on the fairytale. At least what I know of it."

Nodding, she looked at him. "Not too long ago, a detective you know thought vamps were mosquitoes. Here you are... not a mosquito. So, there might be some truth in your 'fairytales'."

"Noted." Leaning back against the wall, the computer on his lap, he set his hands behind his head. "You know the Bible, thick book with lots of stories and warnings?"

His description made her laugh as she hopped up and fixed a cup of coffee. "I don't think I've ever heard it described quite like that before. But yes. I may have read it a time or two." More like 200,000. "Part of my training was to read it before bed. A few chapters with specific verses. Then I got tested the next morning on what I read and its meaning."

"Well, remember the story of Cain and Abel?"

She absently kissed her necklace before sending it back between her breasts. "Yep!"

"Cain and Abel both made sacrifices to God. Abel sacrificed animals. Cain burned vegetables. Apparently, the old man liked a bit of meat, showing favor to Abel, but ignored Cain's offering. Cain got jealous, then angry, and whacked his brother with a rock. The first sin of murder. God cursed Cain, marking him. He could never die, making his life a living hell."

Laughing softly, she shook her head, swallowing a sip of strong coffee. Now, she knew what battery acid tasted like. "No, no, no. Wrong. It's not that God prefers meat."

A brow lifted. "Oh? I didn't know you were there. Please enlighten me to what *really* happened."

"Cain was born a twin."

Jonas tilted his head. "I did not know that."

"They were both born with twin sisters. Cain and Calamine. Abel and Awan. Ya know how the world was populated. Right? I'm not gonna shock you with that, am I?"

Giving her his full attention, he smiled. "You just might."

"God created Adam and Eve and 'no' other person. He said, 'Go forth and be fruitful. Multiply.' How do ya think that one man and one woman could create a world of people?" Staring, she waited for him to catch what she was throwing.

"Since becoming a vampire, I side with Darwin. But now that you bring it up, how did they?"

"Incest. Cain was supposed to get Awan. Abel was supposed to get Calamine. It was incestuous to lay with your own twin. Everything is identical, even the blood flowing through their veins. Abel wanted Awan. The two brothers argued continuously. At the dinner table. Doing chores. The two squabbled. Tired of the fussing and fighting, Adam said, 'go and make a sacrifice to God. Whichever one he takes, that will be the one to get Awan.' Well, Deuteronomy twenty-six verse two states, 'Take some of the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the Lord your God is giving you and put them in a basket.' Genesis four verse three states, 'In the course of time, Cain brought an offering.' Genesis four verse four states, 'Abel too brought from the firstborn of his sheep'. *That* was why God accepted his. Abel obeyed the scripture. Cain hesitated, then after deciding he had enough, offered that. Such an attitude betrays a lack of faith. Adam got Awan, regardless of twin status. Cain was furious. Rightly so. By the laws, Awan was supposed to be his. The serpent showed Cain how to kill an animal with a rock. Enraged, Cain argued with Abel again. In the heat of an argument, he smashed the rock upside his brother's head like he did with the animal. Doing this without the devil's help – even though I think he helped plenty – showed that man had sin without needing any temptation." Glancing over, she smiled. "Are ya with me so far?"

"So, let me get this straight," he replied, connecting the dots. "Cain killed Abel because God liked Abel's sacrifice better, but the reason they sacrificed was that they wanted ass from their twin sister?"

"She wasn't *Cain's* twin. Abel didn't *just* want ass, he wanted to marry her. They fell in love with the same sister. Imagine how Calamine felt."

"She probably smelled like sheep."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ya know... for someone who doesn't believe in the Bible, the devil, God, or any of those 'myths' as you call them, you are the spawn of evil. A man who feeds on people. That is evil. Where did Darwin say 'you' came from?" She was a firm believer in the Bible and a little annoyed at him making light about it.

He gave her a knowing smile. "Darwin was one of us."

"Makes sense." Her brow arched, giving him a deadpan stare. "Darwin was a vampire?"

"Was. Past tense. Got staked, beheaded, and then turned to ash, by some guy named John Winchester in the early eighties. Too bad, too. He was damn fun to be around."

Dusty just stared at him. "Uh-huh. Anyway, 'that' is why he killed his brother, not 'just' because God chose his sacrifice, but because of what it meant when he did. He was jealous. Sent him into a murderous rage. Because of the improper behavior – everyone would realize we're all

related – it was stricken from the Bible. It was okay to sleep with your brother and sister to populate the world... twice... but when that was no longer necessary, it was just... gross... and illegal." She pointed to the laptop. "What does the prophecy have to do with that?"

"It speaks of the stone used to kill Abel. Do you go to church?"

"Used to. Don't need a middleman to talk to God."

"God is a comedian," he replied, quoting Voltaire, "playing to an audience too afraid to laugh." He didn't care to debate God, or what he may, or may not be. If God existed and the Bible was his word, then he and all like him were damned from the moment they were brought over. It was the curse of Cain handed down by that same God.

"Ecclesiastes three verse one to four. 'For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.' There is a time to laugh and no one is afraid to."

"Thank you very much, Pete Seeger. I honored my mother and my father just as the book commands. And this is my reward? As far as I'm concerned, and all apologies to Billy Joel, but I'd much rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints." Glancing at the progress bar, he turned back to her. "It's at fifty percent. Okay, so legend says, Cain is the father of all vampires."

She took another gulp of coffee. It was strong, but it was waking her up at the same time. "You're kidding! Cain – the guy who killed his brother with a dang burn rock – is the father of all vamps? Well, that makes sense. Evil makes evil, but I don't remember that in my Bible reading."

"Didn't fit the party, so they left it out."

"So... Seth is related to Cain?"

He nodded. "Yes. *All* vampires are related to Cain. He was the first, numero uno honcho if you will. Now, the stone used was supposedly broken into four pieces with a demonic inscription burned into each one by Satan himself."

"Whoa! I can see why they left this part out. It would read like a flipping horror novel."

"These are just myths from my world. You have to believe this crap."

"Some of us do."

"The pieces were scattered around the world, so no one could fulfill the prophecy until the time was right. Now, as for the prophecy, it says some crap about a descendant of Cain finding the pieces, putting them together, and reciting the incantation. That only he can read whatever demon script is there, or some such twaddle."

"A descendant of Cain? Seth is a descendant." She looked at him. "So are you."

"Whatever. As I understand it, there's a piece missing. A small bit containing Abel's blood. Supposedly, the vampire who possesses the stone will not only be unstoppable but able to reproduce."

"Vampires can't have kids?"

"We shoot blanks."

After taking a drag off her cigarette, she blinked. "Why would a vamp want kids? Wouldn't he or she be worried they'd eat 'em? Who would he get pregnant? Please tell me we're not gonna have some player – undead – Romeo running around knocking up girls."

"Umm..." The computer dinged letting him know the file was complete. *Saved by the bell.* He sat up, punching 'view', turning it so she could see. "That," he said, watching the screen populate with jpegs of ancient texts and drawings, "is the million-dollar question."

"Hope the answer isn't as costly. I don't have that much in savings."

He chuckled, glancing at her. "That is if you believe all this crap. I don't believe a word in our folklore or yours."

"At one time my folklore *was* yours."

"I was raised to believe. I read the Bible, cover to cover, prayed before each meal, and went to bed with a prayer. It took five-hundred-years, but I lost enough faith that mine's about empty."

"You can always get it back. You just need to believe."

He rolled his eyes, pointing to the screen. "Here we go."

She rolled her eyes in return. "So hardheaded."

He increased the screen's size. "It's in Latin."

She gave him a blank stare. "I hope you can translate. My uncle was about to teach me but died before he could start."

Frowning, Jonas tilted his head. "That's odd."

"What?"

"Hear and obey. She will come who is of clean blood and she will be marked as the chosen one. She will offer herself to the master willingly, and without regret, and he will take her to his bed. She will be the mother of damnation, and her spawn who have shunned the light of God, will now walk in it and bathe in the blood of man." Glancing up, his eyes narrowed. "What do you make of that?"

Listening, her face took on a puzzled expression. "Let's dissect it. Seth is looking for this bloodstone, so he can knock someone up. Whoever this 'mother' person is... being of clean blood. Hmm, are they talking about a nun?"

"Now *that* would be a real twist."

"A sadistic one at that. How many people have no blood on their hands? Someone holy. An important chosen one. Like... if the Pope were female, she would be a shoe-in."

"I think the Pope is safe."

Taking another gulp of the mud in her cup, she grimaced at the taste. "I'll make the next pot. Now... that last part references vampires. Spawn who have shunned the light of God. Seth and Mother's children will be able to walk in the sun. That won't be good for my kind."

"No, it won't."

"We have to figure out who she is... this mother or whatever... provided our translation is right. We have to keep her away from Seth. Any clue other than clean blood?"

"I really hate these damn cryptic writings," he grumbled, his frustration surfacing. "Just come out and say, 'Hey. You're looking for a woman named Mary Jane, carrying a sign that says, 'Hey it's me. Bite me. Bite me.' Make it easier.'"

"Mary Jane. Cute. I wonder how they used to speak to each other. Their language was a bunch of pictures. Did they say things like, 'bird over frostbitten sun and snake crossed over stick' to mean come to dinner? It's confusing. Then again, they wouldn't understand us either. Especially our slang."

"True. Crazy white cracker might throw them off. Let's see." He studied the scroll further. Confused, he shook his head. "What the...?"

"What now?"

He grabbed a pen and paper from the nightstand, writing down the translation. "In the crest of times new birth, she will be born within the dragon's seventh cycle. From the new world, she will come forth, born in the shadow of the King's Palace. Her purpose will remain hidden from her until the son of Cain restores the cursed stone. She will assume the guise of another to escape death and vanish into obscure toil. Her given name she will hide from the prying eyes of oppression. She

is destined, yet she will ride with her champion unless he is seduced by a daughter of the cursed son."

"Oh. Well, that clears it all up! Not! Does this have an owner's manual? It's like stereo instructions. Confusing."

"Your sarcasm isn't helping, but I know someone who can." Snatching his phone, he punched a number.

Chapter 27

Dusty rolled her eyes. "I hope we don't have to trust... *Amelia*."

"You almost sound jealous— Garrick." He smiled at Dusty. "It's Jonas. I'm going to send you a file in Latin. I need you to help me decode this crap."

"At least it wasn't the eternal slut."

He couldn't help but smirk, shouldering the phone while typing in Garrick's email, sending him a copy. "It's big. Sending now." He waited with the phone cradled against his ear. "Yeah?" Grabbing the paper and pen, he started writing. Just like before, a page was finished in less than a second. "Okay, got that. Now, what the hell does it mean?"

Taking one last drag, she put out the cigarette. Reaching down, she stroked Hooch's ears. He didn't acknowledge the hand, just laid there happily at her side. Suddenly remembering something important, she hopped up, throwing open the door, and racing out to the car. He was right beside her. Opening the trunk, she pulled out his water and food bowl. Back inside, she filled them, setting both down by the front door. Hooch happily helped himself. She rejoined Jonas on the bed. Glancing over at the paper, none of it made sense. Not that she could read it. To be so old, the man should have perfect penmanship, not chicken scratch.

He went line by line, crossing out certain words, replacing them with others. Once he was finished, he stared hard at the sheet. "I still don't get it... Yeah, I did that but... Oh! Okay, I see it now! Thanks, Garrick. I owe you a beer. Did you get them out?" He paused. "Great! I owe you a case... You too. Bye." He slid the phone back in his pocket. "Damn!"

Looking over, she arched a brow. "Good or bad?"

"Okay. 'In the crest of new birth', represents two days before the New Year. So, we're looking at December thirtieth."

"Do ya know how many people are born on that day? I'm close. December thirty-first. Ten minutes after midnight."

"We can scratch you off the list then." He nudged her teasingly.

"A woman born on the thirtieth of December? Do we at least know what year? Country? I can hack into any system, but I still need that."

"'Within the Dragon's seventh cycle'. Chinese zodiac. The seventh time the year of the dragon came around would've been nineteen-eighty-eight."

"So... a woman born on December thirtieth, nineteen-eighty-eight?"

"Exactly."

"That narrows it down. Now, where?"

"'From the new world means the United States'. *That* much I knew."

"So much for narrowing it down," she muttered.

"'In the shadow of the King's Palace'. The United States had no king, per se, but these things are always obscure. Meant to confuse, so wrong people don't understand."

"Problem with that, neither do the right people!"

He smirked. "That's why I have Garrick. The only thing he could figure was the shadow of the King's Palace could mean she was born close to Graceland."

"Graceland? Ya mean they knew of *Elvis*?"

His lip snarled in true 'King' fashion. "Uh, baby... everybody knows who the king is. Thank you. Thank you verra much." Winking, he continued. "So... in Memphis Tennessee or maybe Arkansas as that would explain the shadow reference, because the sun rises in the east, and Arkansas is west of Tennessee, so it sits in the shadow so to speak."

"Okay, now we're narrowing it down again."

He went back to reading. "'Her purpose will remain hidden from her', obviously means she has *no* idea what she's destined for."

"Good thing. Can ya imagine having that talk with your little girl?"

"Yeah, no shit! Talk about nightmares. 'Until the son of Cain restores the cursed stone' means until Seth has all the pieces, this woman won't know her part. 'She will assume the guise of another to escape death'. Maybe she's on the run? Took the identity of another?" Once more he read from the page. "'And vanish into obscure toil' could mean her job doesn't attract attention."

"Escape death. On the run. I hope it's not some death row escapee or some shit. Then again, that would go against no blood on her hands, which is hard for me to comprehend. We all have blood on our hands." She winced. "This woman sounds like she's living in hell."

Confused, he glanced up from the screen. "It doesn't say anything about blood on her hands."

Arching a brow, she scrunched up her face. "Woman has clean blood means she hasn't sinned. When ya sin, ya get a mark against your soul and have virtual blood on your hands. Not literally, but figuratively."

"Point taken. 'Her given name she will hide from the prying eyes of oppression' could mean she's changed her name. Hiding from someone powerful. They could be out to kill her."

Clicking her tongue against the top of her mouth, she nodded. "Okay, now *that* I can relate to. Not sure if they'd kill me or make me go back to work. The jury's out on that one."

"You fit the bill for everything except the birthday and having blood on your hands. Can't be a CIA assassin and not have blood on your hands. The chosen one would be born before midnight."

Snapping her fingers, she looked forlorn. "Damn the luck! I've always dreamed about being the mother to the creation of evil that takes over the world."

Turning the page, he pointed. "This last bit... 'She is destined, yet she will ride with her champion unless he is seduced by a daughter of the cursed son'."

"Sounds like a princess and porn star."

He laughed. "*That's* what you got out of it?"

"I dated a guy who tried to get me to watch porn. Looked pretty cheesy, but it sounds like one of 'em. I could only stomach five minutes of it."

"You don't watch porn either?"

Grimacing, she shook her head. "Um. Ew. No."

"Wow! We have to catch you up. What kind of private eye doesn't watch porn?"

"This one," she said, rolling her eyes. Chugging down the rest of the dark goo, she set the empty cup on the stand. Pushing the laptop off his leg, down to the end of the bed, she sprawled out on her belly. "We might as well get comfy." Her feet gently wiggled back and forth in the air as she rested on her elbows. Patting beside her, she looked over her shoulder. "C'mon. Don't get shy now."

"I doubt we're looking for a porn star." He took up the position next to her, sans the wiggling feet. "Or a princess. Luckily, Seth isn't looking for her. According to this, until he gets the stone together, none of it matters, so that will be his focus. Whoever she is, she's safe for a while."

"Good. It'll give us more time to track her down. Meanwhile, we'll use my hacking skills to find the bitch who fits that bill." Wincing, she looked at the screen. "I might have to peek around the big government computer – don't ask, it's technical."

"This final line has me confused. Apparently, she travels with her 'champion', as it calls him. If this guy is still in the picture when she's called, the prophecy could be in trouble unless he gives in to temptation with a female vampire." His lips pursed. "If that happens, we're screwed, and Seth gets a shitload of cards on Father's Day."

"This 'champion' is gonna be tempted by a female vamp? Nothing like stacking the odds against us. If they're as easy to ignore as Donnie was..."

Glancing over, he shook his head. "Only reason you were able to resist was that wall in your mind. A normal woman wouldn't have stood a chance. Female vampires can be even more *seductive*." He closed his eyes, putting his head down. "I told you these things were obscure."

Ignoring his tone which begged for an explanation, she shook her head. "That's an understatement. So, what do we have?"

Sitting back up, he pulled out the pad again, looking it over. "We need to find a woman who turns twenty-seven this December thirtieth. Born either in Tennessee, close to Graceland or just over the border in Arkansas. She's changed her name, hiding from powerful people, has no clue who she is, with a menial job. Someone close to her, friend, or possibly a fiancé is always around. If this person is seduced by a female vampire," he turned to look at her, "which is definitely going to happen. If a female vampire seduces a mortal, he's going to give in, no matter how strong he thinks he is." Again, he tossed the pad aside, laying back down beside her. "Anyone you know?"

"Nope. Doesn't ring a bell. If Seth isn't gonna hook up with this babe of all babes until he connects all the dots, then we've got time. Does he even know where all the dots are?"

"It says the stone was broken into four pieces, spread throughout the world. They could be anywhere, but I still can't figure out why he," a flash of insight jarred him to click back to the file on the Cider Lake victims. Sitting up, he grabbed the laptop, pulling it closer. His fingers flew over the keyboard as he assembled the numbers connected with the case.

Slightly alarmed, she sat up. "What's wrong?"

"The sixth month," he said, punching the numbers into the special algorithm he had installed on his system nine months ago. "Six victims. The year twenty-fourteen. Twenty minus fourteen equals six." Clicking another tab, brought up a map of Cider Lake. "Okay. Where were all the bodies found again? Pinpoint them on this map."

Blinking, she pulled the laptop over, marking the sections with the electronic push pins. "One was here. And here. Then over here." Continuing, she got to the last one. "And then this one. Tammy's. Why?"

Pulling it back over, he drew a virtual line through the points. "I hoped I was wrong but look!"

Glancing over, she noticed the pentagram. "Please tell me that's a coincidence." From every point, a perfect circle ran around the star in the center of the map. "What does it mean?"

His head snapped in her direction. "Six victims in the sixth month in a year that equals six by subtracting the two numbers from each other." Turning back to the computer, he brought up the scrolls again. "Six. Six. *Six!*"

"What?" Looking at the computer, she gasped. "Holy shit balls! Ya mean..." She didn't finish the sentence. Just the thought, running through her mind, sent a full-body shiver down her spine. His dumbass might not believe in the Bible, but she did. This was frightening.

Turning to her, his green eyes suddenly filled with life as he continued reading the ancient scrolls. "And so, shall it be the final book of insight that the prophecy will begin when thirteen-fifteen-eighteen is fulfilled."

"Um." Not understanding the meaning, she continued staring at him in bewilderment.

"The final book of insight. Revelations thirteen, verses fifteen to eighteen."

Gasping, she shook her head. She knew the Bible cover to cover. Now, she understood. He was right. It was worse than they thought. "No!"

The two spoke at the same time, reciting it word for word. "Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is six hundred threescore and six."

"Son of a bitch! Seth kickstarted the prophecy," he said, pointing to another passage. "Listen to this. Unto he who is to father the demise of man will be shown the first step, for it dwells in the lake of fermented temptations, held within the new world."

"Hm. Sounds like another damn riddle."

"This damn thing is telling him right where the first stone is!" Pointing to the very center of the pentagram, he looked over at her. "Look what's at the center of this star. Cider Lake itself."

"Oh, my freaking Lord! No way!"

"The lake of fermented temptations is the first clue. Temptations referring to the apple Eve offered Adam. Fermented apples make some of the best cider you've ever had."

She blinked. "Holy jumping crawdad dicks! You can't be serious!"

They said it together, "Cider Lake!"

Her eyes grew big as saucers. "Holy shit! Are you telling me the first piece is here? How do we know he hasn't found it?"

"Two things," he said, typing on his laptop. "One, if he had it, he wouldn't still be here. Donnie said he's holed up in an old coal mine and well... after what I put him through, I believe him."

"Yeah. It didn't sound like he was lying. Bless his heart. What the hell is he doing in some old, dusty coal mine? That doesn't make sense, but whatever."

"Point two," he hit enter, bringing up the Wikipedia on Cider Lake, and smiled as his eyes scanned the lake's physical dimensions. "It's a big-ass Lake. Not really deep, about forty feet at its deepest—"

"That sounds pretty deep to me."

"But it's over three-thousand acres of water, swampland, and trees. It could be anywhere!"

"Holy cripp-crap! If it's that damn big, and he hasn't found it with all his power, how the hell are *we* gonna? Does it give a cheat sheet? Maybe narrow it down just a little bit?"

Picking up his phone, he called Garrick again. "Yeah, it's me... Great! I should get them by tomorrow afternoon. Thanks! I've got a hypothetical question for you."

She went back to laying on her belly with her feet wiggling above her butt. "Hey, buddy." Her hand draped gently over to play with Hooch's head while he slept. "You're such a good boy." His tail wagged slightly before he yawned happily.

"Okay. With the Bloodstone Prophecy, let's say someone managed to kick start it in play and found out the first stone was here in Cider Lake. I mean *in* Cider Lake... Yes. I know it's a big

lake. That's my question. How could anyone find it without spending a year going over every square foot? I mean, this thing could be..." his brow rose as he listened.

"Anywhere," she said, finishing his sentence.

"Seriously?" He blew out a long breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I hate vampires."

"Imagine how *I* feel."

"No, not you, Garrick. You're one of the good ones. Could I find it the same way?" He shook his head. "I didn't think so. Okay, thanks for your help." Ending the call, he turned to Dusty. With her feet wiggling, legs bent at a forty-five-degree angle, it accentuated her curves. Jonas blinked away a stray naughty thought.

She looked over curiously. "What now?"

"The first piece," the image of her smiling beside him in a white lace teddy, faded, "is like... best way to explain is like a game of hot or cold. Because he's an ancient, the closer he gets to it, the hotter he'll feel."

"So... like heat flashes?"

"Garrick said it's more like a buzzing, growing louder as he gets closer, fading as he moves away."

"Why won't it work for you?"

"I'm not ancient. It seems I'm not old after all." He winked.

Scoffing, she rolled her eyes. "Old enough. So, great-great-great-grandpa, maybe now you're ready to call the others? It can't hurt to see if they'll help. What do we have to lose?"

"Like I said, Bacchus is a myth. I have no clue how to contact a myth. Deva, on the other hand," he said, letting out a slow breath.

"Stop saying that."

Arching a brow, he looked at her, curiously. "What?"

"Stop telling me this or that is a myth. Remember, *you* were my myth. Ya had to blow your brains out for me to believe."

Smiling he tapped his temple with his forefinger. "My brains are still intact, thank you very much!"

"It was still a myth and yet as real as you and me."

"Point taken."

"What about Deva?"

"She lives in Arizona."

Whistling softly, she scoffed. "Creeping Babcock! If vampires don't like the sun, why the hell would she live in the hottest place in the world?"

I need to start writing down all these fictional words she uses. "I don't know. She owns land out there. Most of it nothing but raw desert. We can't stop Seth from getting the first piece, but maybe," he said, face grimacing. "From what I've heard, Deva enjoys activities that favor the more... um... base drives of our nature."

"She believes in drinking blood."

"Yes, but the ancients drink vampire blood."

"Not good for you."

Turning his head, he looked back up and sighed. "Not really, but it doesn't look like I have a choice, so... we'll go with your idea."

"Which?"

"Calling Deva, but I have to wait until my Hemosynth – the pill that keeps me from being a monster – gets here. I hope she'll see me."

"No. You're food to her. You walk in and it's walking buffet time. I should go."

"We've gone over this. That's not an option. I–"

"–would be a walking buffet."

"Maybe not."

She scoffed. "Maybe. Then again, rumors are half true and blown out of proportion. Maybe she's not as bad as they let on."

"Only one way to find out." Pulling out his phone, he went through his list of contacts, until hers popped up unexpectedly. *Hm. I don't remember having her number.* Putting the phone to his ear, he shrugged. "Maybe she's–"

"LaDevia Enterprises, this is Clarisse. How may I direct your call?" A woman's voice interrupted him.

Chapter 28

This surreal scene made him smile. Not only did vampires exist, but they ran legitimate businesses, complete with a full staff. *What will Dusty think of this?* "Yes," he replied, assuming a very professional tone. "This is Mister Jonas Sparx, and I was wondering if–"

"Mr. Sparx? One moment, please. Your call has been expected. I'll put you through."

When the phone went into transfer mode, he glanced over at Dusty, giving her a 'Well, aren't I important?' look while he waited. "They've been expecting my call."

"Told ya so. Should've called her a long time ago."

"Hello, Jonas. I've been waiting for your call," Deva said sweetly into the phone.

He heard rumors that Deva's voice could stiffen a eunuch. He didn't want to tell Dusty they were true. "You have?" he said, shifting on the bed.

"Glad to see you finally grew balls."

"Well I," he stammered, not quite sure what to say to that.

"It's about the Bloodstone Prophecy, correct?"

"Word travels fast."

"I thought so. I have what you need, but you have to come here. The sooner the better," she told him.

"So, you know what's going on?"

"Darling, I always know."

"Care to fill in the rest of the adventuring party?"

"Not over the phone. When can I expect you?"

Winching, he glanced at his watch. "To Arizona? Eight hours. You travel by jet, correct?"

"Yes. I have a company jet."

"If you sent it, there wouldn't be any flight delays or customs to worry about. You'd know the moment I touched down."

"Jetting across the country brings unwanted attention."

Letting out a long sigh, he nodded. "Okay. I think one leaves in about five hours or so, could be longer. I'll have to double check. There most likely will be flight delays. Possible cancellations. Can't be sure the plane won't get hijacked. Never know nowadays. They're having bad weather in–"

"I'll send the jet." She groaned, losing the sweet, seductive part of her tone. "When you arrive, we will get started."

He smiled. "Sounds good."

"This is of the utmost importance. Trust me when I say you don't want to waste one minute of idle chit-chat. Do not bring the mortal." It wasn't said with malice, but it was clearly not open to negotiation. "When can you be ready?"

His brow furrowed that Deva even knew of Dusty. "I can be ready and at the airport within the hour." He looked at his suitcase. It would mean missing his delivery, but he still had one more pill. Surely Deva had a supply.

"Good. I will have my pilot there to meet you. If you need anything once you're here, I'll be sure to accommodate you." She didn't elaborate.

"I'll be there. Oh, and Deva? I'm forever in your debt for helping. I don't think we'd be able to succeed without your assistance." It was rare that an ancient agreed to speak with one such as Jonas. He was a lone wolf. It was a great honor. Acknowledging that might go a long way with her.

"No, you wouldn't," she replied. "Do you need special provisions? Blackened windows, empty airport, nighttime flight?"

"No. The sun doesn't burn me but thanks for asking."

The frustration over the phone sounded as if she blew in his ear. "I wasn't talking about the sun. How will you explain your absence?"

"No one will miss me being gone. My partner could use a break. She's had quite the cram session."

"Your pet is your concern. For her sake, don't make it mine. The jet will be ready in one hour. Don't be late." She ended the call.

Chapter 29

As the phone went silent, he blinked. "Well. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

Arching a brow, she stared at him. The expression of mixed emotions; part, 'you lyin' sack of monkey shit' mixed with, 'imagine that? She spoke to ya'. "So much for ancients not bothering to talk to ya. Question, Jonas. Why did ya have her number?"

"Answer. Kanis must've had it." He wiggled the phone before slipping it into his pocket. "He gave it to me with numbers in the contacts."

Kanis... the one who doesn't send her a Christmas card? Suuuure. "Convenient."

"As much as I enjoy being in bed with you," he said, winking, nudging her. "Looks like I'm going on a trip."

"You mean *we're* going on a trip. Partner."

This isn't going to end well. "Yeah, about that... you can't come."

"Excuse me? Not even my boss tells me what I can and can't do. He offers suggestions. You said, and I quote," her voice raised an octave, not flattering at all, "*what I know, you'll know. You'll be right beside me the whole step of the way.*" Talking normal again, she jumped off the bed, glaring, pointing a finger at him. "So, don't feed me any bullshit! Partners do things together. That's the *only* reason I've been glued to your dumbass since ya got to town!"

Hooch stood by her side, looking around in confusion. He could tell she was angry, but not sure why.

If they weren't dealing with Deva, he would take her, but the instructions were clear. No arguing the matter. "Circumstances changed." He slid off the bed. "Whatever Deva tells me, I'll pass on to you. Please spare me the 'I'm a bad-ass, nobody scares me' bit. I saw your reaction when those Feds showed up." Packing up the suitcase, he zipped it closed. Turning, he faced her. "Now, I'd appreciate a ride to the airport."

"Hm. Is that so? First, I was shocked. The man I used to work with showed up here. I made sure *no* one knew I was alive. Shock. Surprise. All give the same impression as fear. It's a good thing I was shocked, or I would've shot 'em both on the spot and left you to deal with the mess. Second, you *will* live to regret this moment." Grabbing her cigarettes and lighter, she headed to the door. Opening it, she pointed. "Hooch. Car."

Wagging his tail, he ran out of the room to the car.

Then to Jonas. "If you want a ride, move your ass. This ain't no damn taxi." Turning, she followed Hooch.

He locked the door behind him. "There comes a point when regrets fall away. Threats from mortals become laughable. Do me a favor and don't try to find Seth on your own. I don't want to attend a funeral when I get back or find out you've joined 'Club Un-Dead'." When she opened the door, Hooch hopped in. As he put his suitcase on the seat, Hooch snarled, still unsure why Dusty was angry. "Watch out for her. She's more vulnerable than she thinks." He slid into the passenger seat.

She pulled out onto the road. "Don't worry about me becoming one of," turning, she glared, "*you*. Laughable?" Her eyes moved back to the street, jacking the gears into place. "Yeah. I'd imagine a vampire doesn't worry about a normal mortal who doesn't know how to kill ya. When you're working with this pissed off mortal... who you're partnered with to save the world... things could get... Oh, why ruin the surprise. You'll see. What does the stone look like? Rock? Glowing? Does it look like the others?" Her anger made the ride worse.

Bouncing from side-to-side, he stared out the window. "Hell, if I know. I wasn't around back then. As for killing us... well... knowing how, and actually doing it are far different. No one will just stand there and let it happen." He turned to face her. "Not even me."

"Sparx, your underestimation thrills me." Turning the corner, she stomped on the accelerator, weaving in and out of the morning traffic. If people were stopped, she zipped down the shoulder. "You forget what I used to do for a living. 'If I wanted ya dead, you'd already be in the ground. I have to keep you around... for a little while at least." She continued driving like the car was in flames.

'And if he wanted you dead, you wouldn't have survived long enough to even think you were hurt. Remember that. Now, stop this pointless argument.'

"Shut the Hell up! No one asked for your two cents. You've been quiet all this time, why break the record?! Just shut... the fuck... up!"

A brow rose as Jonas slowly turned his head. "I didn't say a God-damn word!" *Oh great. Now, she's hearing voices... and she thought I needed help?* "We can stop at the local Gas-N-Go and pick up some aluminum foil. I hear it works wonders to keep aliens out of your head."

'You shut up too!' sounded in Jonas's head.

"Nope. Wouldn't work!"

Jonas blinked. "Did... you hear that?"

"Aw, lookie there. Sounds like you need aluminum foil too." Rolling her eyes, she didn't say another word.

Chapter 30

He barely got his suitcase out of the backseat before Dusty floored it. Entering the terminal, he caught the attention of the burly security guard who directed him to Gate 7-A. Once seated on the plane, he got comfortable.

The interior reeked of subdued opulence. Italian marble counters gleamed as if just polished. Four white leather seats – jutting out from the sides as if floating on air – with two tables set between them, adorned with chrome-rimmed drink holders. Small screen monitors recessed into the walls of the plane; a central hub for meetings. Recently vacuumed beige carpeting ran the entire length and width of the floor. He chose a seat in the rear of the plane.

Glancing out the window, he wondered if Dusty would be watching him leave. He scolded himself for thinking in that vein. *After that fight, she's probably halfway back to the office by now.*

Before long, they were in the air.

"Mister Sparx? Would you like a beverage?" The cart – pushed by a beautiful woman – showed the usual, including a bottle of wine with Deva's face on the label.

Is there anything she doesn't have her hand in? He smiled, shaking his head. "No thank you."

Setting the tray aside, she leaned over him. Opening the first buttons on her shirt, she pulled her collar aside. "Snack?" she purred, drawing the golden locks away from her throat.

Sighing, he stared at two small holes. Blood dolls were becoming popular again. It was better than sex for a human. For vampires, it meant a willing meal. Many were old school, preferring to hunt, causing fear before marking them. Luckily, he was into the sixth hour of Hemosynth, which made refusing the open invitation easier. "I've already eaten."

Pouting, she straightened as if he slapped her. Refusals were not her strong point with those gravity-defying, hospital-issued big-uns. Mortal and immortal found her enticing. "Let me know if you change your mind," she pointed, "I'll be over there." After mentally stripping him, she pushed the service trolley back to the galley.

Closing his eyes, he shut out the world. Vampires didn't sleep but went into a state of hibernation for short periods. They didn't dream. Or did they? Suddenly, he was alone in a room with four bare white walls, no windows, no door, and silence. "Hello?" His voice echoed back.

"Hello, Jonas Sparx. Welcome!"

Spinning around, he came face-to-face with a man in a gray robe, with a cowl over his head, framing his face. For a moment, Jonas thought he was staring in a mirror. "Who are you?"

Smiling, the man removed the cowl. "I am Bacchus."

Jonas blinked. He looked like Jonas. The same neatly trimmed facial hair, but his eyes were haunting. Silver. Like a mirror. "Okay. I'm dreaming about a myth. I've gone insane."

"You are neither insane nor dreaming. I can assure you, I am *no* myth," Bacchus replied. "This is how I communicate. It is a secure internet connection. No hackers allowed."

Jonas laughed. "All righty then. I'll play along."

Bacchus frowned, silver eyes narrowed. "My time is important, Jonas Sparx. I would appreciate you not wasting it with immature humor."

A lump formed in his throat. "Forgive me. I meant no disrespect. It's just... well... what are you doing here?"

Bacchus smiled, waving off the apology. "You are young still. Understandable. I have something to show you that will offer a deeper understanding, and appreciation of the gravity of the situation. First, let me give you a bit of insight."

Jonas sighed. *If only I had a notepad.*

"You will not need a notebook, Jonas. You will retain all I tell you and all you see, down to the slightest detail. Shall we begin?"

Nodding, he started to envy Dusty's mental wall. Apparently, Bacchus could read minds, even in a dreamlike state.

"In the beginning, there was darkness," Bacchus began. "Never forget that *it* came first. You think you know the rest of the story, but you do not. There is a saying among humans, 'history is written by the winners', and so it was with the Bible as well."

"Winners?"

"Those in charge who sought to reimagine what happened to suit their own purposes. One stricken from the good book is how vampires came into being. Shall I tell it? It is the least I can do."

"Please."

"When Cain's offering was refused, and Abel's accepted, the older son was filled with envy. He became morose, jealous, and spiteful. The fact that he killed his brother with a stone is well known. Those who set words to parchment felt it important to keep that as a lesson to man about such sins. They removed what happened next."

Jonas listened, watching his face as he spoke, hypnotized by those silver eyes.

"Satan saw Abel's murder and was surprised. Cain acted without any encouragement from the fallen angel. He realized sin was already there, buried within the heart of mankind. He found a crack in God's plan to set humans above all, save himself. He sent the demoness, Lilith, to Cain to console him. Offer a way to ease the anger in his soul. As Cain huddled around a small fire, she came to him. Let us watch what happened from that point. Shall we?"

"Watch?" Bacchus stepped aside as the room turned into something Jonas could only compare to a Holodeck from Star Trek. "Where are we?"

"Do not be alarmed," Bacchus pointed to a man crouched by a fire. "This is a memory in our blood. We are watching a long-dead past. No one will see or hear us. Think of 'A Christmas Carol', if you will."

Jonas turned. A woman more beautiful than he'd ever seen approached the man. Her face held an odd familiarity.

She stood before the man. Her eyes were like fire, smoldering embers. "Why do you weep, son of Adam?"

Cain looked up with fear as he reared back upon a rock. "Who are you that you should come upon me as a thief in the night?" His voice rattled with emotion. "I have no gold, no possessions, all things have been taken from me. I am—"

"I know of your deeds," she looked down at the fire, passing her hand through as if it were air. "I know of your pain. I *too* was cast aside." More quickly than Cain could react, she moved to kneel before him, tracing his jawline with a cold finger. "I am Lilith." Pride tinted her voice.

Cain recoiled at her touch. "I know you! You cannot hurt me, demoness. For I am cursed. None may kill me, lest they incur God's wrath."

Moving closer, her crimson lips just a breath away from his, she whispered. "Your curse is revealed to me by his mark," trailing her cold finger down his bare chest. "I am not here to cause you further suffering, but to offer you a way to avenge yourself on his children." Smiling, she brushed her lips over his. "Your father is the seed from which the rise of man will come." Her hand reached down, caressing his expanding hunger. "What I bring is the promise of eternal life to you *and* your heirs."

Cain's breathing grew ragged. "I... I will have no heirs. I am to sire no offspring. I am to be forever alone."

"Love me," she whispered. "And you will become sire to an army unlike any the world will ever see. I will show you the way to create children and they will be stronger than those of your

father. You will be as a God." Lilith gave Cain no time to answer as she pushed him down and straddled his waist.

Lost in the heat of longing, he did as she demanded. She favored him with all manner of lewdness and perversions. At the point where a man could no longer stem the tide of his passion, she grabbed his head. Jerking it aside, she buried her face into his neck as he filled her with his passionate release. When she lifted her head, her lips were stained with Cain's blood and a twisted smile.

The world dissolved around him as his old life faded. He was stricken with such pleasure that he could not speak, only to find it replaced by pain that coursed through his body like lava, tainting his blood. His scream echoed in the night as he felt an urge within him growing stronger. Finally, as the pain subsided, he felt nothing. No pain. No suffering. He felt free from the curse God afflicted upon him.

"Now Cain," her words were but a whisper as she slipped off him, standing to one side. "See the world for what it truly is."

Rising unsteadily, he looked around in wonder. He could hear everything, smell scents that only animals could, his vision seemed limitless. Gazing into the distance, he saw the fading embers of a campfire. And there was blood. He heard it flowing through the body of a wandering sheep and felt his own heart race and his hunger grow.

"Take it," she pointed, "and know the glory of the blood rage."

Cain descended upon the helpless lamb, sinking a pair of razor-sharp teeth deep into its neck. The more the beast struggled, the stronger his grip became until he heard the animal's neck snap in half. Draining the sheep of its blood, he stood facing Lilith, wiping the red liquid from his jaw. At first, he felt strong, happy with what he did. Then his face clouded as he angrily turned on her. "Is *this* my lot now? To feed on sheep, cattle, and goat? For if it is I surely—"

She placed a finger over his lips. "You will sip the sweetest nectar of all. Man's. This is how you will be fruitful and multiply. Your sons and daughters will one day outnumber those of your father's and then you will take your rightful place as a God." Her tongue swept over his mouth, licking his lips clean. "The stone you used to take the life of your brother," standing back, she held out her hand. "You carry it still?"

Nodding, he reached into his satchel on the ground. "Yes, as a reminder of my sin. Why do you need it?" he asked, removing the bloodied stone from its animal hide pouch, setting it in her hand.

Taking it, there was a moment of silence as she examined the bloodstained tip before smiling. "You shall see." Placing the stone on a nearby boulder, she stepped back, raising both arms into the air. "Tarik fusai n'yalgak!"

His eyes widened. The ground beneath the boulder pulsed an odd shade of blue-green as four demons ascended from the depths. They immediately set to work on the killing stone, each inscribing a portion of words Cain had never seen before. When they were done, they bowed to Lilith then disappeared back into the ground.

Again, she lifted her arms. "Kuye'a epsipas gal tr'dende kothos," she whispered, pointing to the stone. "Et em confudit margos, Fulmon!"

He stepped back as the sky roared with fury. A single red bolt struck the stone, splitting it into four pieces. Arcing around, it concentrated its full power on the blood-stained center. In a moment, it was done. The stone, now broken, lay there smoldering from the magical heat which ruptured it. In the middle shimmered a red gem, which pulsed as if alive. "What purpose will that serve?" He watched her collecting the pieces, setting them in his pouch.

"The future. Now, hear me well, son of darkness. Remember, so you may empower your progeny and teach them." Setting the pouch around Cain's shoulder, her palm gently caressed his face, burning her words into his mind. "You are vampire," she began, her voice hypnotic. "Dark powers will you and your heirs possess. The sons of man will flee from your wrath and you will be nourished by their blood. Many will you kill, but many more will you sire, and your numbers will increase. In time, the sons of man will know your weaknesses for they are as follows... you must remain in the shadow of night's protective embrace. The day is man's only refuge from your justice for it will burn and consume you. Silver will cause pain and suffering, yet it will not kill you. If your head is cleaved from your body, you will die."

"And what of my powers?"

"They will vary." Searching his eyes, her own turned a shade of deep gold. "Yet you will all be endowed with certain common skills. Speed. Strength. Agility, as well as the ability to rob most humans of their will and bend them to yours."

His brow lifted. "Most?"

Lilith nodded. Her jet-black hair gleamed in the moonlight. "Some will be able to resist, but they will be few. The other powers you will come to know in time." Placing a hand on the satchel, her eyes held his. "My moment here wanes. I must be swift. There will come a time when the scales are tipped in man's favor when your heirs are few. It is then that the pieces of this stone must be rejoined, and the incantations etched into their surfaces read. Only one of sufficient years will have the power to do this. When that is done, this," holding up the crimson gem, "will call one who will be the mother of those who may walk in the light of day. Your numbers will surge, and the sons of man will be vanquished. The pieces are to be held in your keeping and I will see to the gem's—"

Her instructions were silenced by a horrific roar of thunder and both found themselves surrounded by beings that Cain had never laid eyes on before. Bathed in shimmering light, six figures, each holding a weapon at the ready, blocked any avenue of escape. "Behold! The glory of the Lord!" one said, pointing a gleaming sword at Lilith. "The intentions of my one-time brother shall not bear fruit for he has sent us to prevent—"

"Siet relgr acht satanas vers ekess spol wer torkei di ithquent spical de svaklar astahii confna!" Lilith spat out.

One by one, the warriors of the Lord were rebuffed, vanishing as swiftly as they appeared, leaving only one. He held the sword at Lilith. "Demoness," he yelled. "Your unseemly incantations are of no use on me, for I am—"

"Dey wer kornari di uoinota si jaecr sva ethex vur soncig wux ekess ehis!!" Cain bellowed, stepping forward.

The angel turned to Cain, his mouth agape as he began to fade as well. Dropping his weapon, he reached out, seizing the gem from Lilith's hand just as he too vanished.

"Noooooooooooo!" Lilith screamed as she tried to get it back, but it was too late. Knowing more would come, she spun around to Cain. "Take his sword!" she commanded. "Bury it in the deepest water you can find and take the stones. Scatter them throughout the land where no mortal can find them. Instruct your heirs to keep them hidden. Now go!" She pointed to the vast expanse of land open before them. "Fulfill your destiny!"

Chapter 31

The images faded. Once again, Jonas stood in an empty room with Bacchus. "So, what happened to the stones?"

"Millennia passed. The stones were vagabonds, being hidden, moved, and hidden again. Now they rest where they do, awaiting the time when they will be called into service."

"What about the gem?"

"Knowing the stone would be useless without the gem, it was guarded. An angel, dissatisfied with man's arrogance, flung it from heaven in hopes it would be found and the prophecy fulfilled. It was discovered in Lisbon by Andre' de Jardiner, a Knight Templar during the second Crusade. He did not know of its value or history, but he realized it held some sort of significance from the way it was heavily guarded. The Muslims in Lisbon had jewels and riches fit for several kings. Those were easily plundered and added to the Knight's coffers. Spoils of war. This small gem was protected as if it were the key to the mysteries of life itself. Andre' claimed an angel came in a dream, telling him to keep it within his lineage, protect it with his life. Never let it go. He vowed to keep it safe. He was certain one day its *true* purpose would come to light."

Jonas rubbed at his temple. *How can a dream give me a headache?*

"There you have it, Jonas. The how in the question of how we came to be, and what you and your partner are facing. Do you not just want to go back to Chicago? Enjoy the good life? You know you will be fine. After all," he smiled, clapping Jonas on the back. It was the first warm gesture he had shown. "You are on the winning team, so to speak."

Jonas winced at the back slap. "You seem pretty sure Seth will emerge the victor. Why?"

Bacchus pondered for a moment then nodded. "I do not gamble, Jonas, but if I did, I would put the odds at ninety-percent in Seth's favor."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a betting man. Besides, there's more at stake than just me."

Bacchus gave him a knowing smile. "So, turn her."

"Beg pardon?" Jonas replied, not quite believing he heard that right.

"Bring her over," he said as if he were ordering a beer. "She becomes one of us, problem solved."

"In five hundred years, I haven't turned anyone. Not one. I sure as hell don't intend to start now, especially with her. I wouldn't condemn someone to this... this never-ending life."

Bacchus regarded him for a moment, setting the cowl back up over his head. "Better put your seat belt on Jonas." He was gone without so much as a handshake, good luck, or even, man you are so screwed.

The soft dinging of the seat belts on sign shook Jonas from his vision. "God, I hate vampires," he mumbled, buckling his lap belt.

As the jet taxied to a stop, a man ushered him off the flight. Grabbing his bag, he practically threw him into the waiting limo. Many people in the terminal tried to get a look at which superstar was being hustled off the plane. After all, it was only the wealthy that got that kind of service. His luggage was put in the trunk and they were on their way.

Jonas tried breaking the ice. "Sorry about the short notice." The smoked glass barrier, between driver and passenger, rose; ending the conversation. "Your mother wears Army boots," he added, settling in for the hour drive.

"My mother was a whore in France during the reign of Napoleon," the bland retort sounded over the limo's intercom.

That doesn't surprise me. The solitude gave him time to think about what Bacchus had shown him. If it was true, he would have to reassess his cynical view of God. He once honored and believed in God but wondered how he allowed his world to crumble away with one horrible act. What of the Bloodstone Prophecy? It appeared that Seth was not insane, but determined to

bring about an apocalypse, which would make the one described in Revelations seem like a Sunday drive.

He was pulled from his thoughts by the sight of a castle looming ahead, a half mile up the road. The single-spired tower reached for the sky and the shimmer of water surrounded the entire building. *A castle. She has a fucking castle in the middle of nowhere and a moat. So much for not wanting to be noticed.*

The driver pulled up, parking in front of twin iron doors. As Jonas stepped out of the vehicle, he noticed the moat filled with red-bellied Piranha, enjoying an afternoon snack of some unrecognizable animal. "Security?" he asked, as the burly man passed by, carrying his bag.

"Pets."

The doors opened to a red carpet with walls filled with majestic design. Things he hadn't seen in quite some time. The body-builder limo driver ushered him up the stairs to his room. The wall-to-wall carpeting surrounded a king-size canopy bed. Beautiful tapestries surrounded it for warmth and privacy. It reminded him of his youth. If the tapestries were drawn closed, it was like a large 'do not disturb' sign. Now, the tapestries were for show but could provide warmth and stealth if necessary. These were priceless, collected through the centuries.

The furniture consisted of a dresser, desk, and comfortable armchair close to the bed. A fifty-inch flat screen TV – with every cable channel offered – was anchored to the wall. The bathroom – gold faucets, marble sinks, granite shower – was larger than his Chicago office.

"This will be your room. Her Majesty will call for you when she's ready. Her instructions to you... do not take it." With that, he bowed before walking out, locking the door behind him.

So much for being a guest. He glanced at his watch. Six in the morning. It would be eleven hours before bad things started. If he disobeyed her he would be introduced to the 'pets', swimming outside.

Flopping his suitcase on the bed, he unzipped it. Pulling out the case, he retrieved his pill bottle. Uncapping it, he dumped the red tablet onto his palm. Knowing he was being watched, he gave the room the once-over while smiling. She did a great job of hiding the security cameras. Standing in the middle of the room, he turned so anyone watching could see.

"I don't know why you locked me in, or why you won't permit me to retain my sanity," he said, not using an offensive tone. "But if this is a test," holding up the pill, he crushed it between his fingers, brushing the residue off on his pants. "I pass." A deep sigh escaped. It had been decades since he completely lost control. He didn't relish the thought of going through that again. After arranging his few clothes in the closet, he stepped into the bathroom. "The lady knows how to live."

It was a far cry from his small apartment in Chicago with its occasional broken-down boiler, noisy neighbors, and nineteen-inch television complete with rabbit ears. Leaving the bathroom, he walked over to the window, staring out at the bright Arizona sun. Shaking his head, he removed his shoes. Drawing back the tapestry, he laid on the bed, staring up at the canopy.

The hours ticked away before his door opened. Queen Deva LaDevia entered wearing leather pants and a long sweater. Men fought wars to possess that body. Long blond hair traveled halfway down her back. Admiral-blue eyes shined. At one time they were jade green. The power of the vampiric blood changed them. "Jonas. Good to finally meet you."

Whereas Bacchus used his full name, she was less formal. "You as well."

Turning, she walked from the room, motioning him to follow. "I've been reading about you," glancing over her shoulder, "and feel as if I know you personally. You're about to go through a training regime unlike *any* you have experienced. I do hope you're up to the task."

Following her, he had a hard time keeping his eyes off those leather pants. He was a man after all, and his mind began to paint a picture of – *Training regime?* The look in her eyes sent that thought running for the hills. "If I'm not," he tried to recover his composure, "then I have a feeling that all this – Seth, stones, new vampire generations talk – won't matter much to me."

Spinning around, she grabbed him by the throat, slamming him into the wall, holding him there. "Figure it out here and now! Are you strong enough? If so we continue. If not, I'm *not* wasting my time, energy, or resources on a coward. Yes or no?"

One nod of his head was all he could manage, but the look in his eyes said it all. He would see this to the end and stop Seth or die trying.

Holding him a moment more, she stared into his mind. Seeing the nod, she dropped him, continuing to walk as he stumbled to catch up. "Good. As of now, you do not take that synthetic poison again. You'll learn how to control the bloodlust without it. I'll teach you to harness your untapped power, bending it to your will as easily as mortals breathe. Once you're strong enough, then, and *only* then, you may return to your pet. You'll need her. When the time is right, she'll fuel you with the power to defeat Seth and Mother. There's a reason she's part of this."

"She'll fuel me? Pardon the ignorance, but I don't get that." Kicking Hemosynth cold turkey bothered him, but not as much as her calling it poison.

"You're not meant to... yet. When it is time, you'll know." Walking through a steel door, she descended a long, narrow set of stone stairs.

Following her, he chuckled. "Dungeon. Nice touch." The concrete walls were lined with torches every fifteen feet.

"You are weak, Jonas. That pill is your crutch. Like all crutches, it has side effects. One, it suppresses your *true* potential. This will be your new home until you're strong enough, and we flush that garbage from your system."

Weak? Seeing the medieval cell, he felt uneasy. *A little more than I bargained for.* The bed, desk, a dresser filled with clothes, offered all the comforts of home. It even came with a shower, toilet, and sink. "It allows me to walk in the sun." Irritation edged his voice. "Unless I'm mistaken, Seth can't do that."

Her eyes narrowed. "You are mistaken, Jonas, about a *great* deal. You truly believe that poison is the only thing that allows you to walk in the sunlight? I'm amazed you've lived this long. Kanis kept you on a short leash. What have you been doing the past five hundred years? Certainly not learning about your kind."

His jaw tightened. "I didn't ask to be like this."

Her eyes flashed. "*None* of us did. That's no excuse for being lazy and ignorant." Her hand motioned to the cell. "Step into your new room."

He stepped into his new quarters. "Looks like I've been downgraded."

"Seth *can* walk in the daylight, Jonas. I created the formula. Garrick tweaked it for their purpose. How do you think I know about your pet? *I* am not the one stalking her."

Narrowing his eyes, he cocked his head to the side. *He's stalking her? And she's alone looking for that damn stone?!* He swallowed the lump in his throat. "That's not general knowledge. I was told neither of you could. Somebody's been spreading lies." *I wonder why Bacchus never mentioned that?* Even though he wanted to ask, he felt the conversation between him and the mythical ancient had taken place in confidence.

Reaching over, she pulled the bars closed behind him. "There's an intercom on the wall. You need something, push the button. I will be the only one you see until you leave this cell."

Sitting on the cold floor, he crossed his legs Indian style. "What happens when my Hemosynth wears off? Buzz for room service?"

"See the flask," pointing at the desk, "over there? When you start losing control, have a sip, not the whole thing. If you wait too long and I have to intervene... your pet will know Seth innnnntimately and you will leave this world for good. Understand?"

The thought of Dusty in anyone's hands sent a cold chill through his body, but Seth getting her, turned his blood to ice. He glanced at it. "I don't get a hint what's inside?"

Arching a brow, she moved just out of his sight, reemerging with a wooden chair. "Let me answer another of your questions." Planting her rear on the top of the chair, she rested her foot on the seat. A vial appeared in her hand. "This is the mixture that allows us to walk in the daylight and control the bloodlust. It contains a certain amount of Belladonna."

"Belladonna? That's powerful medicine. Poison to mortals."

"But not to us. Just one drop of blood in Belladonna and a few other natural herbs will keep you golden for twenty-four hours. It's like mortals needing a cup of coffee. The difference... *you* need a cup to stay sane."

He nodded, eyeing her curiously. "Do you use blood dolls?"

Unsure of the sudden change in conversation, she grimaced. "Such needy creatures are destroyed. They aren't mortals and unworthy to be vampires." Brows furrowed as her lips straight-lined. "Why?"

"The stewardess. Somebody's using her. She all but begged me to have a taste. I refrained. Haven't had human blood in twenty years."

Looking up at the camera, she growled. "Put the girl in my quarters. Find out who is using her. Burn their headless corpses together after draining. Store the blood for future use. Waste not, want not."

Jonas blinked. "I didn't mean to—"

"Blood Dolls. Ridiculous notion. As if any self-respecting vampire would touch such a loathsome creature. If I need mortal blood, for whatever purpose, I have a donation program. No need to kill off your food source."

Jonas nodded. The local vampire communities in Chicago called them Blood-N-Go stations. Some used hospitals, blood banks, most had a way around the pipelines. "I used hospitals before Garrick came up with Hemosynth."

"It goes much further."

"What do you mean?"

"The best surgeons in the world use vampire blood. They've even put it in pills."

A brow rose. "You're kidding."

"I don't joke around."

"How?"

"Years back, a vampire had a run-in with a hunter using silver. Weakened, she stumbled into a doctor's office. The good doc realized his patient wasn't human, saw how fast our blood healed most injuries, struck up a deal. Blood for blood."

Standing, he narrowed his eyes. "A mortal who knows of us is as good as dead."

"Then why is your pet still alive?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he had no answer. "Still, vampire law—"

"Please!" She waved him to silence. "Vampire law. Vampire rules. You'll learn lessons while you're here. Never forget lesson one. Survive."

"And this doctor?"

"Last I heard he was still working on a cure for AIDS and cancer."

"I guess we better hope nothing happens to him."

"Them, Jonas. There are many, but it's only the best we target with a compelling offer. It's like having the devil grant you your fondest wish without demanding your soul in return. They get the glory of finding a cure, we get the blood, and someone else heals. Everyone wins."

His eyes grew red. "I wasn't aware of any of this."

"That's because they didn't want you to know. Can't be controlled *if* you knew."

"They?"

Sighing deeply, she shook her head. "You can't be this stupid. Open your eyes, Jonas."

At first, he didn't understand. A moment passed before the puzzle pieces fell into place. His blood boiled. "Kanis. Amelia. Garrick. I will *rip* out their hearts—"

"Patience, Jonas. Focus on finding the stones and stopping Seth. The rest will wait." Her laughter echoed.

"What's so funny?"

"You were stupid enough to believe Seth couldn't walk in the daylight? He's one of the oldest vampires."

"When you're told so many lies..."

Her eyes went cold. "You had half a millennium to question those lies and didn't. *You* shoulder part of the blame for your ignorance. That's your second lesson. Own your mistakes. Make sure they never happen again."

Looking around the cell, his eyes returned to their usual green. "I've been told there are only three ancients left. You, Seth, and one named Bacchus. I know Seth. I put him in Torpor fifty years ago. I've now met you. Do you know Bacchus?"

"Ancient? Darling, I'm *only* seven-hundred-years old. My sire was third-generation. When I killed him, I took his power. I'm not as old as the others in years, but my powers are equal." Winking, she waved a finger at him. "Don't get any ideas. I've *long* since lost my humanity. I won't hesitate to kill you or your pet. I'd make you kill her then lock you up, surrounded by her pictures."

"I don't doubt it."

An odd expression took over her facial features. "You don't know what's in it, do you?"

"The Hemosynth?"

Once more, she laughed, shaking her head. "Oh, Kanis and Garrick really do like making you their bitch."

"What are you talking about? I'm not anyone's bitch."

"As long as you take it, you are."

"What's in it?"

"A drop of human blood, but the real ass kicker is Meth. They add—"

"Meth? Methamphetamine?"

"Yes, Jonas. Meth. Do you even remember true bloodlust?"

His eyes narrowed. "Yes. I hope to never feel it again."

"You don't suffer from the symptoms *because* you've been taking human blood. Garrick added just enough Meth to trigger withdrawal if you don't stick to the recommended schedule. That euphoric feeling has nothing to do with the bloodlust. Animal. Human. Sea creature. The victim doesn't matter. You want blood, but it doesn't make you high. The *Hemosynth* gets you high. Vampires can get hooked on drugs. It won't kill us. Though, you may wish for death before your system clears out. You'll be here for at least a week, maybe longer."

A week? "Why so long?"

"When you have total control over the bloodlust, I'll walk you out the door. I sent a few of my best to watch out for your pet. You are fighting for the vampires. She is fighting for the mortals. Seth is the challenger."

Anger. Betrayal. Resentment. All those emotions piled into his mind at Deva's words. "I've been played!" He growled, as his jaw tightened, and teeth clenched.

"It's the only way sires keep you in check."

Looking up at her, his eyes shifted back to the deep crimson shade of his true nature. "What I feel when the drug wears off isn't blood rage, as Kanis said, but *withdrawal*?"

"Now, you're getting it. Being on the Meth as long as you have, you've grown accustomed to the feeling. You associate it with bloodlust, but it's not. It's a junkie needing a fix."

"That son-of-a-bitch!" He slammed his hand into the stone wall. Small bits of crumbled rock drifted to the floor as he whirled back, glaring at her. "He turned me into a fucking junkie!"

"Welcome to your rehab."

He was so consumed with rage that the statement about killing her sire didn't register until he thought about killing Kanis. Walking up to the bars, he grabbed them, immediately regretting the decision as his palms began to smoke. "Fuck me!" he barked, pulling his hands away. They were scorched but quickly began to heal. "Silver bars?" Each one was spaced evenly, eight inches apart. "You could've warned me." *I hate vampires.*

"Lesson three. Pay attention to your surroundings."

Shaking his hands, he understood the legends claiming men killed each other for her favor. Careful not to touch the bars again, he moved closer. "You killed your sire?"

"Yes."

"How are you still here?" The fact that she was only two hundred years older wasn't lost on him. She shouldn't be that much stronger.

"You want to know how I killed my sire and gained so much power? What your sire doesn't want you to know?"

"I do. Now more than ever."

"I'll tell you the story legends speak of with venom. Sip on the flask before the withdrawal starts affecting you. The vampire blood and Belladonna will help." Once more getting comfortable, she waited for him to comply.

"I need to test my resolve," staring at the liquid nirvana, "to see how much of my own will I have left." The first signs started. His flesh tingled. His senses began to overlap. Soon he would start to experience a general lack of focus.

"As long as you don't lose control. I would hate to see that pretty mortal of yours become Seth's pet. He talks about her. Thinks she's pretty. Would make a good vampire. How she'd be one of his favorites. At the top. Next to him in bed." She shrugged. "You know how Seth is. He likes his toys close."

His eyes snapped to the flask. "That's one toy he's never going to get. Not as long as immortal blood runs through my veins."

Shaking her head, she laughed softly. "Your weakness shows. He will use it against you."

"Since when has caring become a sign of weakness? How can you be sure he'd use it against me?"

Her eyes bore into his. "Because *I* would. The difference is Seth likes to play games. I don't." Shaking her head once more, she laughed harder. "Usually, our death is because of a mortal? Ridiculous. She should be food, not a romantic interest. Out of all the females, why on earth would

a male vampire look to a human female for a love interest? For a second time." She looked at him, waiting for an answer.

His eyes darted to the left. "Immortal females can leave you broken worse than mortals." Returning his attention to her, he smirked. "I've known female vampires who fell in love with mortal males. Who can answer why? Maybe pining for what we can never be."

Watching him, she weighed his answer. Shrugging, she removed an empty vial from her pocket. Holding it to her wrist, she used her thumbnail, slicing a thin line. The dark blood seeped into the vial before the wound closed. Standing, she moved to the bars, sliding it between them. "Drink this after sipping from the flask. It will allow you to see how I gained my power."

"How do I know this isn't what you want me to see?" He eyed the small glass container.

"The blood doesn't lie."

Reaching out, he took the vial, sitting back down. Holding it up to the light, he swirled it, sloshing from side to side, then saluted her. "May we get what we want and avoid what we deserve."

"Brace yourself. You're in for a bumpy road."

A medium swig from the flask was enough to take the edge off. The effect was immediate, far faster than the Hemosynth. Jonas stared in disbelief. There was no euphoria, just a feeling of clarity. Setting the flask aside, he looked at the vial. Her blood had to be powerful, merged with her sire. Taking a deep breath, he downed the contents in one swallow.

It tasted delicious. The sweetest blood he ever had. He could get used to it. Putting the vial down, he rested hands on thighs, wondering if it was going to be like Bacchus and the dream. His senses exploded as time seemed to crawl. For a moment, he knew everything. As if he could will himself through the bars without injury. Slowly his surroundings faded. He felt himself being pulled to another place... another time.

Chapter 32

Brimstone Kingdom, Cornwall, England 1311

Deva LaDevia was twenty-years-old when she first laid eyes on Lord Drake Emrys, yet she had reigned as queen for ten of them. Seasoned in the ways of strategy and hardened by the rigors of leading her knights into battle, her advisors all agreed that it was time for her to marry a strong man and produce an heir. She wasn't ready.

Her parents' untimely death thrust her into queen-ship at a time in her childhood when she should have been out chasing butterflies in the garden. The rest of England was controlled by King Edward II, but her kingdom was hidden away from prying eyes, or so she thought. Enemies plotted, positioning knights into Brimstone's service. When the time was right, they stormed the castle late one night. The servants rushed her through the underground labyrinth, protecting their future queen by order of the king. The royal couple was killed that night, the kingdom burned to the ground.

The child, barely educated in the ways of the world, was now to be the queen of a destroyed kingdom. After a few years, she rebuilt her army. Her kingdom took pride in avenging her parent's death. They defeated the enemy, with her leading the troops, despite the arguments of the council. The spies were held in one room, awaiting the young queen's entrance. They groveled for mercy. One by one, she brought their family members in, making them watch as they were beheaded; young and old alike, leaving none for chance. After they were all dead, the spies joined them; pulled apart on the racks.

Word got around that Queen Deva wasn't to be trifled with. This was an aphrodisiac. A powerful young lady with a crown and a kingdom. Knights, Lords, and Barons alike, all schemed

for her hand and her kingdom. There wasn't a man among them worthy of her attention until the evening Lord Drake Emrys cast his spell on her heart.

Large for his time, Drake towered over most at the Queen's Summer gala, making his way through the receiving line of bowing men and blushing ladies. Haunting blue eyes, set in a face seemingly molded by the ancient gods, settled on the young queen as he kissed the golden ring on her right hand.

"Lord Emrys," she said as he straightened. "You honor this court with a rare appearance. We thank you."

"The honor is mine alone, your Majesty," he replied, capturing her eyes in his.

A hush fell over the throng. Deva hated to be addressed in such fashion. Her quick temper had sent more than one nobleman to the dungeon for violating that rule. Crinkling her nose in disgust, she waved a hand, unable to tear her eyes from his handsome face. "As his Lordship is new to Court, we will forgive his transgression... this once. Please, call me Deva." Murmurs rose but were silenced with a raise of her hand. "Lord Emrys will be my consort for the evening," she commanded.

To the dismay of the gentlemen vying for such favor, her word was law. Collectively, they sighed. After dispersing, each captured a hand of an unclaimed maiden. Deva looked over to her minstrels. On cue, they filled the castle's great hall with music, and court broke into dance.

Drake escorted Deva across the gilded marble floor. "I fear I have made several enemies this night." He took her into his arms. "However, fear not, sweet Deva, for I am accustomed to the hatred of men. They always want what I have and I always get what I want."

"Perhaps," she hooked her arm into his as they danced, "but not everything is as it appears. You would be surprised if you saw me in the morning." She giggled at the thought.

His eyes never left hers. "One filled with such beauty and desire could never look less than an angel sent from heaven."

"Oh, how you flatter."

Her schedule was hectic, but it didn't stop erotic images and thoughts of Lord Emrys from invading her mind. She ignored how when he visited, people went missing and the animals behaved oddly. The only thing on her mind was dragging this handsome man into the royal bedchamber. Something always pulled her back from those plans. A voice in her head told her he was bad news, reminding her she was queen, above that nonsense.

Drake arranged late-night meetings, using 'court business' as an excuse to see her. His advances grew bolder with each one, moving from gentle caresses to lewd suggestions, earning him a playful slap across the face. One such meeting, they were alone in the garden under a glaring moon. He shifted closer, taking her in his arms. "Come away with me. I promise you riches beyond your wildest dreams."

"I cannot. I was born to this legacy. I will serve Brimstone until my dying day. It is my home. I feel close to my parents here. I will fulfill my father's wishes."

He brought his face to her throat. "Be mine and you will never die, know pain, sickness, or fear, for the rest of eternity."

Feeling a gentle scrape on her throat, she pushed him away, eyes widened. "So, *you* have been terrorizing my kingdom! What a fool I have been! I thought you different, but you are not. You will leave this court. Never return. If you do, I will set you to the rack. Is that clear?"

An amused smile formed as he crossed one leg over the other, regarding her. "You have a will unlike any mortal I have ever known, Deva LaDevia. I will enjoy our centuries together."

"I will never-" Before another word, he was upon her, fangs slicing deep into her neck. Her screams turned to moans, groans, then obvious sounds of pleasure. She could no longer deny her lust for the man as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Shortly after, there were more screams. This time of pain and anguish... then silence.

Chapter 33

Sussex, England 1700

Drake tried hiding his curse from the locals by taking a mortal wife. Rachel Tenney Emrys was the most beautiful woman in the land, next to Deva, with long, black hair. Her lavender eyes reminded Deva of her mother's flower garden in Brimstone. Deva found mortals only necessary for food. Rachel was different. The two were Drake's prisoners. One from love, the other from lust.

When Drake first brought her home, he tried being gentle with her. Spoiling her with trinkets, tenderly caressing her skin, he sought a fire within her. None of it mattered. No one satisfied him like Deva. The kindness didn't last. Being mortal, Rachel did not heal quickly from his violent temper. Many nights, Deva questioned why he kept her around. He hadn't turned her, which would cure the injuries he caused. He didn't love her, yet, continued using her as a servant, not the lady of the house, only parading her around for the populace.

Many times, he beat her black and blue. Normally, she healed. This time, the damage was more than Deva could fix. A broken leg, with her feeling nothing from the waist down. Fractured arm hanging with bone showing and Rachel screaming whenever it was moved.

Deva looked down at her, stroking her hair. "Heaven to Betsy, girl, what was it you did this time?"

"We were speaking of children. He pondered if I wished for any. Truthfully, I did answer. I have dreamed that someday I would be granted a child. To be a mother was always my wish. His eyes grew red as the fire. He accused me of being with another. Deva, never have I even *glanced* at another since giving myself to him. I would never. I *could* never. I love him... even after all he does to me," she whispered, sobbing. He was not home, but she feared he would return and finish the job.

"I know."

"Even after he does vile things, my love does not fade. Even now, crumpled on the floor, unable to move of my own accord, I cannot bear him ill will. Why does he treat me so?" She cried softly. "Loving him is a crime against God that I have been made to suffer. He beats me but seeks you to sooth his lustful urges. He loves you."

Nodding, she looked down at her. "I get a few good whacks. Worse than you will ever see. He knows *I* am not fragile. I feel less pain from his inflictions." Looking over Rachel's broken body, Deva closed her eyes and sighed. When she opened them, they had shifted from green to crimson. "Rachel, I vowed to God and myself that I would never turn another into this monstrosity. If you so choose, I can stop your pain. You will become as I. You will have no more suffering. His beatings will no longer harm you. Command me and be free of pain."

"I cannot. I long to bathe in the sunlight and feel God's warmth upon my flesh. I would not be able to bare being afraid of the day's light." She winced. "Please, Deva. Take the pain from my heart. I cannot live another day in such misery. End my suffering. End my life. I no longer wish to be a prisoner. Not of the heart, or of the home."

Deva looked down at her in shock, running a cold cloth over her head. "Rachel, I do not make friends willingly. They hold no interest for me. I am immortal. Others will leave this world

in timely fashions. I will not. Please, do not ask the one thing I cannot do. I cannot lose my *only* friend."

She clutched at her with her good hand, wincing as she moved. "I beseech you. Have mercy. If you have a love for me in your heart, do not make me suffer any longer. You are a sister to me. I do not wish for death. However, we both know I cannot live like this. He will not change. He does not want to love, but his heart has forsaken him and his desires. All those different women, he is seeking another to do what you do for him. The thing he will never realize is that his love for you is more powerful than his lust for others."

"Poppycock! He knows how frail your bones are. He did this knowing your body could not handle his rage. I *will* make him suffer."

"No. Deva, I beg you. Do not anger him. I forgive his anger and his rage. Please. End my life. I cannot live another day in this misery. My undying love forces me to stay, but my body is weak."

Deva smiled. "It is not the worst thing being immortal. We can plan his demise together."

She laughed, but then winced, choking on her own blood. Shaking her head, she felt it seeping out of her mouth as her insides contracted. "He did not want me to have a child or be tempted for something I can never have. Deva, I can feel it inside. He's broken me. There's too much damage. If I am able to mend, I will be bound to a bed or chair. That is no life. Please, Deva. I beg of you. Do not make me suffer. End my life. Free me from this prison so I can be at peace."

Without saying another word, she twisted her neck. Snapping her spine, she watched as the veil of death covered her eyes. Deva looked down at her as the last blood tear – she would ever shed – rolled down her cheek.

Drake knew the moment he returned what had happened. Deva stood before him, a look of defiance and contempt on her face. He beat her with a whip, tossing her around the room. It didn't matter who angered him, she paid the price. She was the only one to quench the burning when lust drove him mad. Her touch was enough to stoke a fire that no other could extinguish. That had saved her life in the last three-hundred-eighty-nine years. He collected many women through the centuries, using them in different ways, trying to find another who could free him of his sexual slave, but only Deva soothed him.

This time his rage was different. Usually, the sound of her voice was enough to curb that fury, turning it into something else, quickly forgetting what sparked his temper. Not this day. He wanted to kill her. Flinging her from his sight with a swipe of his hand, he slammed her into the wall, laughing as she bounced to the floor.

Deva was used to it. The bruises and marks would fade, but not his rage. It was worth it. He could no longer harm Rachel. This time though, Deva finally had enough and fought back. All the rage residing within her for what he did to Rachel, filled her with a fire never felt before. He made her take the life of her only friend, to free her from his sadistic torture. Now, he was going to pay.

Deva LaDevia, Queen of Brimstone and war strategist extraordinaire, formulated a plan. Backing away, she drew him into the trophy room where the heads of his latest animal victims adorned every wall. Deva knew his prize possession hung over the doorframe. Rachel commissioned a local woodcarver to create a jousting lance from rock maple. It was the last gift she presented to him. When he lunged, Deva vaulted over his head. Grabbing it as she landed, she readied the weapon.

Spinning to attack, his eyes widened as the lance impaled him through the heart, the tip digging into the limestone wall. He hung unable to move anything save his mouth. "You, ungrateful

cunt! After all I have given you. The gift of eternal life. The power over nature. You would do this to me?" His words sputtered as his rage built. "Release me, and I will be merciful." Twin orbs of fury glared at her. "I will kill you swiftly."

His words made her laugh. "Gifts? You cursed me with a life that I never asked for. Power over nature? I must remain indoors save the sun burn me to blackened ash. Kill me? You? The depraved, sick, old man, unable to move, withering away on a stick? Rattling on about things that he cannot do." Shaking her head, she turned to the door. "You have taken so much from me. I will take my leave."

Straining against the wood's effect, he could muster only a spoken threat. "Run away! Yes, flee. Wherever you go, I will find you. We are bound by blood, my pet. Never forget that." Coughing, a trickle of dark blood seeped from the corner of his lips. "Go! Enjoy what little time you have. When I find you, I will make you suffer a thousand years before ending your miserable life. I will start with Chey."

Hearing his words, she stopped short, turning to face him, arching a brow. "You will not touch her! Pet? I was your desire. Possession. Treasure. Now, I will be your killer and take back what you took long ago. Your blood will tell me where you have hidden her."

"Stop!" he commanded. He knew the look of final death in her eyes. "You cannot kill your sire. If you do, *you* will become the hunted. *All* vampires will seek you out and make you suffer."

Pausing, she calmly smiled. "At least it will be entertaining." Pouncing, she sent those ivory points straight into his vein.

His scream soon turned into a lewd groan. It was erotic at first.

Desire crept through her, causing her to moan as well. Sharing blood was very sensual until the euphoria faded. While drinking, she injected her venom, silencing him. When finished, she left him hanging like wet clothing on a line.

Suddenly, she was overcome with a power so strong, it sent her to the floor in spasms. He was one of the oldest vampires. From birth to rebirth, she was flooded with his memories. With that came the names of each of his children. After the potent flood washed over her, she grinned. He was still in there somewhere. She could feel it.

"Her love for you was undeniable." Pushing off the floor, she steadied herself from the dizzying effect. Gripping his slacked jaw, she stored his memories for later use. "I adored you. Once upon a time, I would have moved the stars had you so asked. You destroyed that by crushing my soul in your hand. You take what you wish. No matter the ownership. The women you collect, using for your lustful needs. Killing. Forcing me to clean up your mess. Now, I loathe you."

All he could do was watch her with a mix of fear and defiance.

"Vampire laws have been broken. I will take my punishment *if* I am caught. You brought this upon yourself. This was not to be my destiny. I did not choose this life. You forced it upon me. Because of your rage, I was coerced to take the life of my friend, my sister. Now, I have my soul back."

Opening his mouth to speak, no words came out.

Placing a finger to his lips, she shushed him. "Shh. I know the words you wish to say. 'You shall perish for this crime. You will not get far'." Rolling her eyes, she licked his blood from her lips. "Mm, tasty. I wonder if your children are as delicious."

His eyes grew wide.

Nodding, she smirked. "Yes, Darling, I will add them to my collection. I will give them your regards while ripping off their heads. Vampire blood tastes better. Gives me power. You

neglected to tell me that little detail. I wonder what else you hid from me. I'll find out, once I go through *all* your memories."

Once her speech was complete, she took his sword, cleaving his head. Pulling the lance from the wall, she caught his body. Thrusting a hand into his chest, she removed his heart. Taking a bite, she enjoyed the rush, draining the organ before tossing his head into the fireplace. She watched it burn while eating what was left of his heart.

Grabbing the lamp oil, she slowly ran it up and down his body before snapping her fingers. His body ignited, and she slipped out of the house. Soon, the entire household was in flames. Her job wasn't finished. In the memories, she found the location of the person he took from her. The blood told her of all his lies. Now, she knew the truth. She was the hunter. One by one she found them, draining each, taking their power. She obtained their memories, adding it to the list of the others. Some she hunted, others she left alone.

The image began to fade, first losing color, then definition as Jonas was drawn back to the present.

Chapter 34

Brimstone, Arizona 2014

Regaining his bearings, Jonas gained a deeper appreciation for what made Deva who she was. "We can kill our sire without fear of reprisal?" In his mind, he plotted the slow, painful demise of Kanis.

"Yes... and no. You can kill Kanis and won't drop dead from it. It doesn't matter whether your sire is alive or not, you will still be. That was spread through vampire lore to keep younglings in line, protecting their sire at all costs. He has a thousand years on you and Kanis isn't insane. He won't make a mistake the way Drake did. I could kill him, but I'm not a mercenary."

"And the no part?"

"*Without* fear of reprisal," she repeated. "When you kill Kanis, and you will, his children will take it personally. They'll hunt you, relentlessly. I killed most of Drake's children. You should be prepared to do the same."

"Most?"

Her lips compressed into a thin line. "Some I allowed living with a simple understanding. If I catch a hint of breath about them coming, I will destroy them. They wanted the same as I. His death. There is a handful that I was unable to find, but I will. I have all the time in the world."

You won't if I don't stop Seth. "Maybe they're already dead."

"No. If they were, I'd know it."

"How?"

"All in good time. You worry about getting clean. The withdrawal won't last as long as it would on a human. A full-blown mortal junkie would suffer for months. Yours as little as a week. Concentrate on that for now. When your mind, body, and soul are clean, that's when the real fun begins. On that note..."

"Oh, joy. Define 'real fun'."

Hopping off the chair, she set it aside. "Relax. Watch TV. When you feel anxious, sip from the flask. Once the flask is empty, buzz and I'll bring you more. It's going to help, but you must fight the withdrawal. It's drug-related. All the blood in the world isn't going to help, but it will ease your symptoms. You were chosen for a reason, Jonas. Accept it." Turning, she ascended the stairs.

Setting aside his plans for Kanis, he grabbed the remote and flopped on the bed. "Seriously? Blackula?" Shaking his head, he surfed through the channels. "CNN? Nope. Lifetime Network?"

Gonna hurl. History Channel Pawn Stars? What the fuck does a pawn shop have to do with history?" Glancing down at the remote, he spoke to it as if it would answer. "Got any porn in there?" Silence. Rolling his eyes, he found a smooth Jazz station, tossing the unsociable little clicker aside. Closing his eyes, he allowed the wail of Coltrane's Sax to fill the empty spaces in his mind while he waited for the inevitable.

Chapter 35

In the week since Jonas left, Dusty kept herself busy with a new missing person's report. It was less time to think about Jonas. She would never admit it, but his lack of communication aggravated her a bit more each day.

After a restless night dreaming of Jonas as an all-you-can-eat buffet, she was back at the office. While on her second cup, she picked up the file Bob sent over yesterday. Cathy Walters. A routine missing person's case, yet something nagged at her. Maybe it was because of Tammy Barker. Seth. Vampire.

Picking up her phone, she noticed no new emails, phone calls, or texts, so she tossed it back down on her desk. Spinning around, she faced the back wall. "I hate vampires," she mumbled.

"Me too," the sexy southern baritone echoed through the small office.

Surprised, she jumped back to the present. Hearing that voice brought out an instant smile. By the time she spun around to face him, it was replaced with her poker face. "Oh?"

"Since they started sparkling." Deputy Travis Knight, of the Gibson County Sheriff's Department, leaned in her doorway, all six-foot-two of him blocking out the morning sun. A few stray beams danced over his light brown hair, giving him an angelic glimmer. Powerful arms crossed over a chest, straining to escape the skintight denim shirt. Black stretch Dockers hugged legs that any NFL fullback would die for, his I.D. hanging from the right pocket. One alligator-booted foot crossed over the other, as a pair of hazel-green eyes looked her over.

She made no attempt to hide the approval. "You're out of uniform, Deputy."

"Well then, maybe ya ought to arrest me." He held out his wrists. "Just don't beat me none, else I'll have to file a police brutality report... or not."

Soon after moving to Cider Lake and changing her name, she happened upon Deputy Travis Knight. They saw each other over a stretch of time. One or the other would give fresh eyes to an unsolvable case and the inevitable happened. Skyrockets in flight! The two always fell into bed. The man was gifted, and Dusty allowed herself a slight grin. It unavoidably ended with her sneaking out to get home to Hooch. The murders and missing persons kept her busy. Before long they drifted apart. She was already married to her job, it was cruel to string him along for the satisfaction value.

She rolled her eyes. "I could arrest you for impersonating a comedian, too." Jumping up, she launched into his arms. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she planted kisses over his face, only grazing his lips for a peck. She was too busy to break furniture, though he looked good enough to make time.

"Help. Help. I'm bein' abused. Somebody call a cop," he whispered, holding her against him. Stepping in, he closed the door.

"What are ya doing here?"

"Horoscope said I'd get lucky if I visited a friend. Since ya ain't calling me back or answering emails..." a megawatt smile formed, nuzzling her neck, lips teasing her earlobe. "Might be somethin' to those dang burned things after all." As he was about to commit a misdemeanor, the

scent of fresh coffee grabbed him. Walking back to the kitchen, he grinned. "Caffeine before love, darlin'."

Laughing, she wiggled free. "You're such a nut-ball!" Once her feet hit the floor, she plopped down on the table. "Seriously, what brings ya this way?"

"The onliest reason to get outta bed in the mornin'. Sex." Winking, he pulled his personalized mug from the cabinet, filling it to the brim with the dark liquid. "I figured the only way to talk to ya is come and see ya, so... here I am!" Sipping, his eyes closed. "Mmm-mmm! I swear woman, ya make the best dang coffee this side of the Rockies." Cradling the steaming cup, his eyes sparkled. "I know yer busy. Do what ya gotta. I'll be quite as a church mouse on Sunday. Won't even know I'm here."

"I doubt that." Laughing, she walked back to her desk. Bob faxed over a file marked 'imperative' on the cover letter. It was his way of prioritizing her workload. Most of the time, she ignored his meddling. With Travis there, it was hard keeping her mind on work. Her eyes traveled on their own, watching his smooth, rehearsed-like dance steps in motion. The way his shoes clopped, dragging his heel first, like tap dancing. He was hot, but people were dying, and she couldn't tell him anything about the case. Pulling up the sheet, she half-assed perused it, while checking him out. He did things to her that had to be illegal. Good thing he couldn't read thoughts.

"So, what's this here talk about vampires?" Setting his ass on the counter, his legs dangled as he brought the cup to his lips again.

Dusty could see him from her chair. She admired the way his upper body formed a V-shape into his jeans. He was the right amount of muscle with the perfect frame. Not too skinny, and not fat. His question threw her off-guard. Slamming back to reality face-first, she blinked. "Vampires?" She looked confused, before lighting up, snapping her fingers. "Oh, that. I was doing research. Hit a wrong key. Watched part of this stupid movie. Before I realized it was fiction, I got pulled into watching the whole thing. Some kid in high school. It sucked. So, what's new?"

Hopping off the counter, he walked to her desk, setting one well-formed ass cheek on the corner. "Oh no, you don't! We gonna discuss this! Little Miss 'I don't watch TV or movies' watched a movie? A vampire movie? Gimme a sec." Setting his mug down, he reached into his pocket, took out his phone, and brought it to his lips. "Recording. I witnessed a true miracle of the Lord. Today, Dusty Eliza Garner admitted to watchin' a movie. A *vampire* movie. Sweet Jesus, the rapture is soon to follow." Laughing, he put the phone back, gathered up his coffee and sipped. "And she probly picked the worst one ever made. Whenever you're ready, I can reacquaint you with some good porn. Don't hate it all based on one!"

Laughing, she playfully slapped his thigh. She held up the file, reading it over. "I find it highly suspicious ya come to visit when my partner is outta town. If ya came all this way to get laid, I'm gonna shoot your balls off starting with the left one. Got too much work to do."

Dropping the cup in front of his junk, he backed up. "Now wait a dang burn minute! I happen to be very attached to my," the reality of what she said jolted him. "Partner?" Standing, in front of her desk, he rested his knuckles on it. "Who the hell are ya, and what did ya do with Dusty?"

Before she could respond, her phone rang. She clicked the Bluetooth. "Garner." Grabbing a pen, she jotted down an address. "Uh-huh... Yep... I was just looking at it... Right... Ew... Got it. I'll let ya know." Standing, she grabbed her keys and cigarettes.

"What's up?"

"You heard about Cathy Walters?"

"Only on every news station from here to Texarkana."

"They found her car." Grabbing her jacket, she snatched up her thermos. Turning, she flashed a wink. "C'mon. We can check it out together."

"Ain't gotta ask me twice!" Dashing into the kitchen, he poured his coffee into a thermos. Grinning like a kid at Christmas, he smiled at her. "Your new partner ain't gonna have a conniption?"

"Naw." He was vamping it up, hobnobbing with the 'ancients'. "We have an understanding." She winked. "I'm driving."

"Oh, Lord. I meant to get my will updated." He crossed himself. "Damn the luck!"

Chapter 36

The bubble gum machines, set at full disco, could be seen from a distance. It looked like kids in the woods having fun with a light show. The police cars – some marked, others not – parked willy-nilly along the road and up in the grass. In their hurry, they boxed in cars, giving the impression of a vehicular obstacle course. When it was time to leave, they were going to have a traffic jam of their own.

'Calling all cars. Calling all cars. Get out the fucking way!'

The chaotic crime scene looked like a world-class circus setting up. News trucks with painted station logos extended antennas high for satellite feeds. Reporters descended like vultures with outstretched, hideous wings. People ran back and forth under the police tape, some with badges, others without. A few took pictures or video on their phones. Police cars, people standing around, and Cathy Walter's family added to the chaos while talking to reporters. One sobbing woman stomped her feet like a five-year-old, threatening legal action at the officer keeping her back.

"What the...? This's your crime scene?" Glancing around at the madness, Travis's brow knitted. "I'll bet ya Charlie could get these people to move back. Poor bastard. What a hell of a way to go."

Small town gossip was the worst. She heard things about him at the funeral. Busybodies retelling countless news stories. The media had grown more into gossip mongers than fact tellers. She wasn't sure what to believe. "Yeah. This is just a clusterfuck of madness." Parking away from the steel contraption of law enforcement, she got out, making a beeline for the crime scene. Approaching the back of the car, she took out a pair of booties and gloves. Glancing him up and down, she handed him a set as well. "If I ever find a man who shows up prepared, I'll marry him."

His brows arched. "What the Sam Hills does that mean?"

"Let's just get this scene—" She froze. The blood spray across the windshield and hood gave meaning to the woman's outburst if she saw it. "Gray. 2012 Ford Taurus. Cider Lake registered Tennessee tags: C87-67B. It's Cathy's car. Well, screw me sideways ten times running."

Glancing around, Travis whispered behind her. "Never at a crime scene, but definitely later." Looking over, he whistled low. "Holy shit balls! Looks like maybe ya got a bear 'round here."

"What makes ya say that?"

"Only thing I know could send blood flying like that, a swipe of a bear claw. Unless Freddie Kruger's running loose. If that's the case, I'm outta here. Taking you and Hooch with me!"

Freddie Kruger? Knowing him, it had to do with some movie. "Travis, the last time somebody made a tasteless joke at my crime scene, I decked him. Unless ya wanna make it two for two, help me process this. What do those deputy eyes of yours see other than a bear attack?"

Looking over the car, he sighed. "Ford. It died on her. She went walking off to get help."

It was well cared for, sporting brand new tires. No sign of a struggle. Other than the blood spray, it looked abandoned. The sunroof was closed. The doors were locked. "What else?" She peered through the passenger's side window.

"She abandoned it. Doors are locked. Makes the most sense. If someone took her, they wouldn't worry 'bout locking the doors."

"All you see is an abandoned car? It did stall on her. Pity... considering it's been in for repairs recently."

Furrowing his brows, he looked closer. He checked underneath, giving the car the once over. He could be searching for a bomb. Standing, he brushed off his hands. Moving to the front, he continued his surveillance. "Okay hotshot. How do ya know it's been in the shop?"

Pointing inside the window, she looked up at him. "The repair order on the passenger seat." She pointed to the back. "Her cell phone tossed back in frustration."

Walking around, he peeked in. Receipt and a brand-new iPhone 6. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"That tells it all. Either her phone died, or she didn't have a signal. Still... nobody abandons their phone even if the battery dies."

"Got that right! Damn things cost so much ya need a small loan!"

Walking out to the road, she looked down one side then the other. "Let's say I'm right. She's on a back road. In Hicksville. Nothing around for miles. It's raining. What's she gonna do?"

Looking at the vehicle, the road, the sky, he shrugged. "I'd take out my cell and call someone. Maybe that stupid mechanic to come get my ass."

"Okay." Taking out her cell phone, she held it up. Shaking her head, she put it back in the case. "Nope. No service." Looking around, she noticed a path through the woods.

"Hmm." Rubbing his chin, he followed her line of sight. "No phone. No car. No lights. No houses. No people. Damn. I'd feel all alone in the world. 'Specially on this road."

Before Dusty could add observations, everyone rushed up the path, into the woods. Feeling a sinking in her gut, she fell in line behind them. The woods opened to a small clearing. Gasps and retching sounds greeted them. The female body was torn to pieces. The missing head made it harder to identify. The blood-soaked clothing told Dusty she was still alive when the attack started. Bone showed through the gouges in her chest and legs.

Travis leaned in, so she could hear. "Whoa! Make that a mess of wolves to go with that bear. Locals can handle this. Can we go back now?"

"Stay here. Ask questions. Look for a sign. Tracks. Something. I'll be back in a few."

He blinked. "What kinda questions? I'm not a tracker! That might work for boy scouts, but I wasn't one. Too weird, hanging out with a bunch of dudes."

Rolling her eyes, she walked away, shooting a glance over her shoulder. "You're the deputy. Think of something."

When she was out of sight, Travis ran over to speak to the M.E. about another case.

...

From the top of Redder's Hill, just east of the yellow taped-off area, he was watching the whole thing, fifty feet up on a branch.

Seth.

It was all he'd ever used or needed. Much as the single name fad in popular music had produced 'Prince', so the name 'Seth' was just as quickly recognized in vampire circles the world over. Just that one-word-syllable caused fear in every immortal.

Jonas left town, leaving that delicious mortal alone. *Bad, bad, Jonas*. It was time for a bit of fun. Unfortunately for Cathy Walters, her mechanic wasn't very good. Watching the scene – that

a concerned citizen tipped the police about – he waited. She didn't disappoint. That Z came flying in like it had wings. He took note of the good-looking chap with her, filing his name away for future entertainment purposes; Travis Knight.

Everyone was so preoccupied with the headless corpse that they missed him placing a dark green sack – with the yellow sticky note – on the hood of Dusty's car. No one saw him walking away singing to himself. "I'm your boogie man... that's what I am... I'm here to do... whatever I can... be it early mornin'... late afternoon... or at midnight... it's never too soon."

...

Did Seth kill Cathy out of revenge for Donnie? *Where the hell is Jonas?* Taking out her phone, Dusty tried calling. It took a few attempts, but she finally found a hint of a signal. It went straight to his voice mail. "Sparx! Garner. Not even sure ya made it, but," stumbling over a stick, "whatever. We got some crinkled-up shit. It's Seth. He's onto the fact that I'm," she caught sight of the bag. "What the dripping fudgesicles?" Ending the call, she walked to her car.

The need for a cigarette turned nerves over the coals, but footsteps slowed as she spied the green bag. Scanning the area for onlookers, she crept closer. There was something ominous about it. Warning sirens sounded off in her mind.

Tag, you're it.

Love, Seth

Her eyes widened as she snatched the memo note, shoving it into her pocket. Looking around, she made sure no one saw her breaking the law. No one stood out like a sore thumb. Seth would. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. She knew what was in the bag; Cathy's head. "Asshole," she said, in a low voice.

"Who ya talking to?" The M.E. popped down to retrieve a few things.

Good timing. "Hey, Willie. Strangest thing. A bag on top of my car. Not sure what it is, but... crime scene and all... can you clear it, so I can get outta here?"

He arched a brow, pointing. "Where'd that come from?"

"No clue. After seeing the corpse, I needed a cigarette."

"Ya oughta stop smoking."

"So you tell me every time I see ya."

He chuckled. "And I'll keep harping till ya do." Pulling on a fresh set of gloves, he walked over. Looking at the bag from all angles, he pulled down the top. Wincing, he nodded. "It's her head... or somebody's head."

"It's Cathy Walters."

"How do ya know?"

"Unless ya got more corpses showing up headless." Also, the note, but he didn't need to know about that.

"Hey! I thought Y'all took off," hollered Travis. Seeing the bag, he stopped short. "Say, what's that?"

Seth knew Travis was with her. Closing her eyes, she swallowed hard. Travis would never understand. Turning, she pushed him back a step or two. "It's now a crime scene. It's the missing head. Psychopath sending me a message. Not surprised since it's my case and all. I'm gonna be tied up for a while." She shook her head, placing a finger to his lips. "I know I promised you dinner and all but," she pointed to the car. "I'm not gonna be able to get away." Waving an officer over, she smiled back at Travis. "That officer will take ya back. Get your car, go home, and I'll call ya later."

"I don't–"

"Yeah, yeah. Just go home."

The officer rushed over. "What's up?"

"Officer," she glanced at his shield, "Henry. Do me a huge favor? Drive Deputy Knight to the Sweetheart Detective Agency and provide him with a police escort out of town."

"Sure."

"Now just a dang burn minute!" Travis said. "You may be purty, but you sure as hell ain't got no jurisdiction over *me*."

Leaning in, she kissed him like the love stories boast about. That passionate embrace of two people who couldn't stand to be away from each other. Pulling back, she bit his bottom lip. "Traaaaaaavis, sweetie, if I could, I would make sure our plans went uninterrupted. I'm investigating another murder case. It's no longer a missing person. I know you've got state-wide authority and all, but *Sheriff* Tomlin owes me a huge favor for helping on the Monroe case. Don't make me call it in."

That was hitting below the belt. The sheriff and he weren't on speaking terms. Two could play that game. Travis's jaw steeled. "Tell me ya love me."

She stepped back, white as a ghost. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Right here. In front of these witnesses. If you don't, call Tomlin and whoever else. I don't hear it, I don't go nowhere."

All those within earshot looked over. Willie and Officer Henry smiled, crossing arms over chests. It was a small town. Everyone knew the two of them were sweet on each other. Now, they waited to hear it.

Groaning, she finally blurted it out in a whispered sigh. "I love you."

"I'm sorry." Travis cupped a hand over his ear. "I don't believe Hooch could o' heard that."

Willie shook his head, looking over at Officer Henry. "Did you catch it?"

Henry nodded, leaning in close to Willie. "I think she burped."

Travis grinned. "Once more... with feeling."

Taking a step forward, she grabbed his shirt collar, pulling him closer. "I love you!" she said, louder.

Beaming, Travis kissed her cheek. "I love you, too." Straightening, he looked at Officer Henry. "Well, ya heard the lady. Let's vamoose!"

Officer Henry nodded. "Yes, sir! Let's get ya back so I can escort you outta here."

Travis laughed, his voice trailing off. "I know how to get home."

Telling him those three words made her sick. He always gave her a mild case of heartburn. Once they were out of sight, she walked over to Willie. The cops were going over her car. "How long is this gonna take?"

"Maybe an hour. Something tells me ain't nothing on this car that ain't yours."

Nodding, she spun around, taking a seat on a log. It wasn't until her fourth cigarette, that she calmed down. She hated lying but Travis gave her no other option.

'Are you sure it was a lie?'

I said shut up!

A few days ago, she attended Charlie's funeral of four yellow-stained teeth. The thought of attending Travis's funeral gave her bitter stomach and a few tears. Blinking, she lit another cigarette. Pushing away thoughts of a lifelong commitment to Travis, she focused on Jonas. *What the hell is that asshole doing while I'm knee-deep in bloody bodies?*

Chapter 37

Brimstone, Arizona

Deva stayed away for days. Her Bluetooth allowed her to listen to Jonas while running her grand conglomerate. Frantic beeping and hurled curses indicated he was getting filled with bloodlust. How convenient the next lesson was spotted by security cameras.

"Kanis's dogs," her head of security remarked.

Deva smiled. "Took long enough."

"I'll send out—"

"No." She headed for the door. "These two are mine. Make sure there aren't any more trespassers."

"And if we find any?"

Stopping at the door, a thoughtful look crossed her face. "Lock them in the training room."

Silas Thorne stood next to his longtime partner, Caspian, overlooking the countryside. Over nine-hundred-years ago, the two led marauders through English villages, plundering and killing with impunity. Kanis found them near death. They served their sire with unquestioning loyalty, until now. There wasn't a vampire living who didn't know of Deva.

Dark eyes scanned the vast expanse of desert. "Do you see any way in?"

"No." Silas shook his head. "It'd be easier to get into Fort Knox."

"We're too far away. We need to get closer."

"How the fuck do we get closer without her knowing we're here?"

Silas sighed. "One of us needs to distract them. Kanis wants answers, Caspian. Do you want to tell him we failed?"

"No, but why doesn't Kanis come here himself? He is more powerful and acts afraid. I'm not saying I'm fearful, but, I like my head attached."

"Do you *really* think Kanis is afraid of her?"

Caspian rolled his eyes. "Why else would he send us, instead of coming himself?"

"Because we're the best. We can sneak up on—"

"You two couldn't sneak up on a rotting corpse in the ground for decades." Deva cackled.

Spinning around, Silas's eyes widened. "What the...?! Caspian, can you move?"

Caspian tried. "Not a finger!"

"Oh, my. I wasn't expecting company. Pity. I would've planned a grand ball. Oh well. I will have to make do with those in-house. Good evening, gentlemen. Beautiful weather for a stroll. I'm sure introductions aren't in order but just in case, I can't be rude." She chuckled. "I'm *that* Deva. I've been called many things in seven-hundred-years, but Deva will do."

"Seven-hundred-years?" Silas creased his brow. "You're not an Ancient! You're younger than *we* are."

Rolling her eyes, she waved a dismissive hand. "Age is just a number, darling."

Silas fought against invisible chains. "Why can't we move?"

"Witch!" Caspian said.

Deva snapped her fingers a little too excited. "Yes! That's one. Very good! I'd give you a cookie, but—"

"Enough with the games," Silas said. "Just kill us and be done with it."

"Kill you?" Deva shook her head. "That's not part of the plan." She touched their faces, smiling fondly. "Such handsome boys. Such is life, or, would that be considered death?"

"Release us!" Caspian screamed.

"You can't do this!" Silas said, tone threatening. "Kanis will destroy you—"

"Kanis is a dead man walking, clueless to the danger." Winking, she smiled. "But I do thank you for confirming he sent you. I suspected as much."

Caspian growled. "That's all you get."

Patting his cheek, she smiled. "Kanis sent you here because his lap dog told him he lost contact with the two idiots he sent, yes?"

Both remained silent.

She nodded. "Your job is to see what Jonas Sparx is doing."

Nothing.

Shaking her head, she sighed loudly. "I hoped we could talk this out without involving anyone else. Since you won't talk to me, let's see if you'll talk to *him*."

Silas snorted. "Who? Jonas? A mere youngling compared to us."

Deva winked. "I do love confidence. Let's see if you keep it." With a gesture of her hand, the trio was outside of Jonas's cell.

"How did you do that?" Silas looked around in horror. "Vampires don't have those abilities!"

"I am truly amazed at the stupidity of vampires." Turning to the cell, an evil smirk danced on her lips. "Jonas, wake up. You have company. Up for a visit, lovey?"

From the far end of the pitch-black room, a pair of blood-red eyes glared. His voice, usually a smooth cross between Morgan Freeman and Sam Elliot was in shreds. "Your chosen warrior is a fucked-up mess!"

"You're not *my* chosen warrior. You were chosen by powers far greater than your small brain can comprehend. In the end, only you can do what needs to be done. I have something that might make you feel better."

Rising unsteadily, he made his way to the cell door. He'd torn his clothing off unable to bear anything on his skin. He paused, sniffing at the scent. "Kanis," he sneered, clenching his fists.

"Very good, Jonas." She gave him a golf clap. "You're further along than I anticipated, so much the better."

Caspian smirked. "Kanis is concerned with this? A youngling could dispatch this broken-down fool."

"I'll make you a deal. I'll put you in with that 'broken-down' fool. If you win, I'll let you both go." She glanced at Jonas.

Giving a nod, he backed into the darkness.

"Phht!" Caspian watched Jonas vanish. "Agreed. And if I lose?"

"Then all your problems will be over."

After a nod, Caspian found himself inside the cell. No longer bound, he was able to move freely. Sneering, his eyes roamed the interior. Not seeing Jonas, he frowned. "Come on out, Sparx. I have a message from your sire."

The ringing of glass bouncing off metal echoed, followed by Jonas's raspy voice. "Caspian... come out to play-i-ay."

"Show yourself! How do you know—"

Jonas's mouth wrapped around Caspian's throat. Fangs delivered the poisoned bite, as he drank deeply. Feeling power course through him, he read his blood. This was different from his vision with Bacchus or seeing into Deva's past. It was like being inside Caspian.

Kanis, Garrick, Amelia, and Silas assembled beneath the 'Christ the Redeemer' statue in Rio De Janeiro. Jonas could feel the wind slashing at his face.

"Find Jonas," Kanis eyed Silas then Caspian. "Report back."

Silas nodded. "And if he is with Deva."

"Find out her plans."

Caspian stepped forward. "What if he is trouble?"

Kanis's eyes narrowed, grabbing Caspian by the throat. "He is not to be harmed unless Deva has polluted his mind with lies." Releasing Caspian, he shoved him to the ground. "Understood?"

Both men nodded, as Silas helped his partner up. "So, what if she has?" he asked.

Kanis's eyes clouded. "Then kill him," he answered, a hint of regret tinting his reply. "But under no circumstances approach Deva. She will swat you like flies."

Amelia pouted. "I wanted to fuck him first."

A powerful backhand sent the vampire archivist into dreamland. "Not in this place!" Kanis bellowed.

Garrick knelt, his brow creased. "Bloody 'ell, Kanis! What was that for?"

"I will not tolerate insolence in this place," he replied, turning to the statue. Its arms spread wide as if to comfort the whole world. "This ground is sacred. Here is a direct link to God. Trust me. You do not want Him poking his nose around down here. Now, gather her so we may leave." Turning to Caspian and Silas, his dark eyes glared. "Why are you still here? Go, before I toss you back into the sea!"

With that, the image faded. Jonas shook uncontrollably. "I understand." His eyes rested on Deva. "I want more!" Bone breaking and muscle tearing were followed by a dull thud when Caspian's body hit the ground. The cell grew silent. His head rolled to the cell door, sounding like a flat tire.

Silas's eyes widened, when he found himself in the same death chamber, facing his executioner. "No! Please!" he begged. "I don't want to die. I... I have information."

Jonas lifted his blood-soaked face and grinned, Caspian's rich blood dripping from his fangs. "I know. Thank you." He dispatched Silas with ease, draining him before ripping his heart from his chest, making a meal of the quivering muscle. Tearing his head from his limp body, tossing it over to Caspian's, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Give Kanis my regards."

Within seconds, two security guards came around the corner. They stood at her side awaiting orders.

"Sloppy, Jonas." Opening the door, she shook her head. "Effective, but sloppy." Her men took away the two bodies. She pointed. "End of the hall. Janitor closet. Clean up your mess."

Grabbing his head, he sank to his knees, howling. "Jesus Christ!" Wincing, he curled in a ball, pain rifling through his body. When it calmed, he looked up. "What was that?"

"Power. You're not used to vampire blood. It has more oomph than mortals. The more you consume, the less you feel the effects. Just the benefits." Once more, she pointed.

Feeling more focused, he grabbed the mop, filling the pail from the old well pump. "Is it always this way?"

Her brows furrowed. "What way?"

"How will I know which skills I took?"

"Patience, Jonas. The only manual is through experience. You could get any number."

"Such as?"

"You might not realize it, but... you're invisible."

"Invisibility?" Glancing down, Jonas saw his hands and body. "Are you sure? I can see me." Walking to the mirrored dresser, his jaw dropped. He had no reflection. "I'll be damned! So *that's* where this myth comes from!" His form reappeared. "Um, that didn't last long."

"In the beginning, they'll only manifest when your emotions are high. That's when you find out what powers you have. It takes time. When you really need them, they will be there. With practice, you'll be able to call on them as needed. You have powers of your own. You haven't tapped into them. That poison Kanis keeps you on suppresses your natural abilities."

He went back to cleaning. "So, it's not like I get a memo with a list or an email saying, 'Congratulations, Jonas Sparx! You've earned the following skill and a *brand-new car!*'"

"No. Some of mine took years before they manifested."

A case of modesty struck when he realized he was nude, covered in blood. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on a shower and clothing. Opening them, he looked down. *No such luck, Sparx.* "So much for the Clean-and-go skill." After returning the mop, he walked back to the cell. He reached out, touching the silver bars. The sizzling made him pull back quickly. "Well, no such luck there, either."

Crossing arms over her chest, she shook her head. "You're like a child with a new toy."

"Can't blame a guy for trying." Feeling giddy, he pointed at the torches, wiggling his fingers. Nothing happened. "No fire. All right. Your way. Your schedule. I'll bust my ass, so I can get back to Cider Lake."

"And your pet."

No comment. His mind ventured into the 'Dusty' area, but he didn't stay. He needed to focus. "Game on. Let's do this."

"Good. When you start training, your powers will reveal themselves." Grabbing the bars, she closed the door. Silver didn't bother her. "There's a way to avoid the burn. You'll learn when the time is right."

'Pleased to meet you, hope you guessed my name.' He completely forgot about his phone. In all that time, he could've called Dusty. He should have. It was a lifetime ago. Shrugging, he walked to the dresser. Picking it up, he noticed a missed call and voicemail from Dusty.

Deva watched him.

For a moment, he thought of shooting off a text. Glancing at Deva, he thought better of it. Sighing, he walked over, handing it to her. "She's going to be pissed, but I need to focus. I'll deal with the fallout when I get back."

She slipped it into her pocket. "Good choice."

Fatigue flooded through him. "I'm exhausted. I need a nap. Is that normal?" *Normal. Now that's a loaded word.*

Seeing he was about to fall, she opened the door, catching him just in time. Picking him up, she laid him on the cot, running gentle fingers down his bare ass. "You could've warned me." Leaving, she pulled the door closed. He wasn't out of danger yet and still needed containing. Sniffing the air, she smiled. "Oh goodie. More company." She blinked out of sight.

Weariness. Jonas was hard pressed to remember the last time it fell over him. Maybe a good rejuvenating rest, with no dreams of vampires, prophecies, or pissed off partners, was just what the doctor ordered.

Chapter 38

Jonas found himself seated in a comfortable Queen Anne chair with a steaming cup of tea on the table at his side. *This is different.* The room was done in a period piece from the late 1700s.

Tapestries hung from taupe-colored walls, surrounded by bawdy paintings of half-nude women in various prone positions. The strains of a harpsichord played while roast, fresh bread, and wine teased his sense of smell.

"Hello, Jonas."

So much for that rejuvenating rest.

"The tea is delicious." Bacchus sipped from a cup, identical to the one beside Jonas. "Masala Chi."

Lifting the delicate cup to his lips, Jonas sipped. "I agree," he set it back onto the matching saucer. "However, Masala Chi didn't come into its own until the 1800s. We're in... what?" He glanced around. "1760?"

Bacchus sipped again before smiling. "1762 to be precise. Good observational skills. I suppose in your line of work those come in handy."

Shrugging, Jonas glanced out the window facing him, watching a white horse gallop by. "Visions contain messages. Sometimes hidden in images, sounds, and even tastes. I suppose I'll have to analyze this when I wake up. It should prove entertaining. At least as entertaining as Deva has been."

Bacchus's smile waned. "Do not treat Deva lightly. She may have obtained her power in ways the vampire community frowns upon, but she still has them, and they are quite formidable."

Jonas nodded. "I've noticed. She's willing to help, but I have to wonder... what's her endgame?"

He shrugged. "You are the investigator. I am just a *myth* here to help with your training."

Jonas gave him a puzzled look. "I don't see how you—"

"Let me worry about the *how*," Bacchus interrupted. "You worry about learning everything Deva teaches and provides to you. She was chosen for a reason. God works in mysterious ways. There is a purpose for everything. You are now part of it." Smiling, he took another sip before setting it aside. "Shall we begin?"

Turning, he gave him his undivided attention once more. "Begin what?"

"Gaining wisdom. There are approximately forty-two individual powers or skills which a vampire might possess. There could be more or less, depending on the vampire, but usually, that is the limit. These are in addition to the speed, sight, hearing, and strength we all share. Most are gifted with two extra aptitudes, such as temporal manipulation, which you were fortunate enough to be granted, and targeted erasure, your basic endowment of forgetfulness."

Jonas's brow rose. "How do you know what I have?"

"That is irrelevant. There are four ways to acquire vampiric skills. Take them as Deva did. Develop them as Seth did. Be born with them as I was."

Jonas tilted his head. "You said four."

"Yes. The fourth is extremely rare. It is not often done. That is to have them gifted. Willingly. The only one of those methods that will put you in bad standing with other vampires is taking them."

"And yet Deva walks with immunity."

"Yes," Bacchus answered. "For two reasons. She was reborn out of lust. Drake sought her as his concubine for all time but mistreated her when he realized how willful she was. There are situations where taking the life of one's sire becomes necessary for the good of all. There was a time when Deva's heart sang with humanity. She made certain that Drake would never spread his filthy lust to another. She did the vampiric community a favor with that one."

"I saw that. I thought she killed him because he threatened to make her suffer for a thousand years?"

Bacchus smiled. "Well, there was that too."

"And the second reason?"

He laughed before leaning in a bit, eyeing Jonas curiously. "You met her. Do you know anyone who could stand against her?"

"You."

Bacchus shook his head. "I have no quarrel with Deva. I am quite fond of her."

"Seth then," he swiftly replied. "Especially if he finds all the pieces and fulfills the prophecy."

Bacchus countered with a dismissive wave. "Seth is no more than an unbalanced lunatic with delusions of grandeur. Powerful yes, but unhinged. Deva is not. She would tear him to pieces and not even break a fingernail."

"She's *that* powerful?"

"Jonas, Jonas," Bacchus shook his head, twin orbs of silver gleaming in the room's light. "This is not about who has more abilities, or who lived the longest. She is only two hundred years older than you. It is not her power that makes her dangerous. It is her intelligence. Do you think you will defeat Seth by being stronger, faster, or having more power? If you do, then he has already won."

"I don't understand."

"That much is apparent," Bacchus replied, his patience waning. Rising, he closed the distance between them, motioning for Jonas to get up.

The scene changed to a sterile white room. "I knew I should've taken the damn blue pill."

"This is not 'The Matrix'," Bacchus scolded. "I am not Morpheus. You are not Neo. Do you think that you were chosen to save humanity? No. Your destiny is to save us! Mankind has its own hero to see its continuation."

His eyes narrowed. "Dusty."

Nodding, Bacchus smiled. "As I said... wisdom. Pretend I am Seth. Attack me."

"Are you sure this isn't 'The Matrix'," he quirked a brow. That little quip earned him a front row seat on his backside without Bacchus lifting a finger. "How the hell did you do that?" Slowly standing, he smoothed out his pants.

"Do you think Seth will be satisfied with knocking you down?"

"Probably not." He sent a spinning sidekick to Bacchus's face that connected with air. Jonas turned to find himself face-to-face with Seth.

"You missed, son," Seth's rough baritone goaded him. "My turn." The ancient's fist connected with his ribs, sending him flying against the rear wall, landing with a thud. "I gotta say, Sparx," Seth approached as he struggled to rise. "I'm fucking glad it's you. I like you. Always have. You remind me," reaching down, he grabbed him by the collar – lifting him as easily as Deva had – with that psychotic sneer of his, "of me!" Grinning, he threw him into the opposite wall like a discarded child's toy. "Only less intelligent. I do like ya boy, but I can't let that get in the way of finding my one true love, so... I'm gonna have to kill ya. No hard feelings. Unfortunately, I'm gonna have to take your pet with me. She seems like she'd be a good play toy."

As Seth advanced, Jonas heard Bacchus's easy tenor in his mind. "That is merely his physical strength, Jonas. How will you fight such a monster?"

Using the wall as support, Jonas – crippled with pain but enraged – rose, glaring at Seth. The pain didn't last long.

"Aww now, see what I mean?" Seth said, with admiration. "Choosing to die on his feet, like a true warrior. I'll make this quick, son." He was almost upon Jonas when he halted, his eyes narrowing. "What the...?"

Jonas's eyes had shifted from their customary green to a pupil-less, glass-like sheen. "Ini wer iejir di hesi opsola si meage wux ekess pok!"

Seth froze. Unable to move, he glared.

Walking over, Jonas placed a hand on Seth's head. "Qe gethrisja de tenpiswo!"

The ancient Vampire dissolved into nothingness.

His eyes returned to normal as Jonas fell to his knees, breathless and shaking.

"How did you do that?" Bacchus said from behind him. "You should not have any inkling of those words, let alone be able to successfully use them."

Jonas shook his head. "I don't know. They just came out. I don't even know what I said."

"Basically," he explained, folding his hands behind him. "You told him to freeze, then he gone. That is not a literal translation, but you get the gist. That language has not been spoken for many ages."

"I remember hearing Lilith speak something like that. Maybe I subconsciously repeated it."

"No," Bacchus replied, laughing. "What Lilith and Cain spoke was different." Offering no further explanation, he pursed his lips, regarding him in silence. "Keep it to yourself. No one must know, for it is the rarest, most sought-after gift. If it becomes known that you possess it, there will be no place safe."

"All right."

Bacchus produced a wine glass from thin air, extended one fang – something Jonas had never seen any of them do – and drained a few drops of venom into the clear glass. It flowed down the inside like melting ice cream. Bringing his wrist up, he pierced the flesh and set the opening over the rim of the goblet. It filled about a quarter of the way before the wound healed. He swirled the mixture before handing it to Jonas. "As I said, the fourth way is rare. Consider this my donation to the cause."

Jonas took the glass, eyeing it carefully. "What will I gain from it?" Raising it to his lips, tilting his head back, he drained it in one swallow.

"Whatever the powers that be feel you need." He smiled as Jonas handed him back the empty glass. "Now, it is time for me to leave, Jonas Sparx, and for you to fulfill your destiny if you so choose."

He frowned. "Didn't think I had a choice. I was chosen."

"You have been chosen for a long time, but do you believe free will is exclusive to humans?"

He could feel himself ascending from dreamland but had one more question. "You said there were forty-two powers. How many do you have?"

Bacchus turned and winked. "More."

As the figure faded and the dream ended, he opened his eyes to familiar surroundings. "Well, that was different." He sat up in bed.

More. Jonas pondered Bacchus's parting words, as they rang in his head like so many church bells. If the ancient vampire had every skill their kind could acquire and then some, what did that mixture give him? *Whatever the powers that be feel you need.*

He could turn invisible, but it was a random power. Trying to remember the words that stopped Seth proved fruitless. It sounded like gibberish.

Was it a dream? A vision of hopeful wishes, or did it really happen on some other plane of existence? Did he face Seth? Was the glass of Bacchus's go-go juice nothing more than a mirage? He had to know. He needed to test himself. What was it that Deva and Bacchus said? He wouldn't be able to control his new powers – let alone be able to call them at will – for some time.

We'll see about that. He looked around his cell. Finding a cornerstone, jutting from the far west wall, he grabbed what he could of it. His teeth clenched as he pulled with all his strength.

It mocked his effort.

"Fuck!"

Trying again with no better result, he punched the unyielding stone. Spinning around, hands on his hips, he looked up at the ceiling. He recalled how Seth tossed him around. Bacchus said physical strength wouldn't be enough. There had to be a way to summon more. It might not defeat him, but Jonas wanted to give that arrogant son-of-a-bitch a decent ass whipping before killing him.

Closing his eyes, he recalled an old 'Kung Fu' movie scene, master training a student. "Real emotional content," the man chided the young disciple. "Not anger. Now, try again. This time with feeling!"

Taking a deep breath, he grabbed the stone again. He imagined his hand and the rock as one. Instead of allowing anger to block the flow, he accepted the rock. It vibrated. A small bang turned it to dust in his hand. Grinning, he brushed the cinders away. Hearing Deva approach, he turned and waited for her.

Chapter 39

Deva entered, dressed in black leather with red seams, carrying a similar outfit. Opening the door, she tossed it on the bed, followed by a pair of boots. "You need to get dressed."

Still naked, he glanced at the outfit. "Yeah, I'm not really into the whole–"

"Blood doesn't stain leather. Vampire blood is the worst. I've had to burn very expensive outfits. Your wallet will thank me later, not to mention awkward moments explaining the 'red stains'. The arena is ready for your training. You're going to be a busy boy. There are a lot of new... friends... waiting."

Pulling on the leather pants, his eyes narrowed. "Something tells me they'll be anything but friendly."

She held out a flask. "Drink."

Looking at her hand, he fastened his pants. "What is it?"

"Venom-laced vampire blood."

Déjà vu. "Never heard of it."

Arching a brow, she stared hard before slowly nodding. "It allows me to give you power through my venom. It's frowned upon by laws. Cheating. You didn't earn it."

"I'm starting to have very little respect for our... laws."

"Join the club."

Taking the flask, he shook it. It was different than Bacchus's mixture; dark but a shade lighter. "Yours, I assume?"

"One-part venom, three parts blood. It has to be just right, or you'll get sick. You won't die, but you'll wish you had."

"Vampires don't get sick."

"Off an ill-mixed, vampire-powered drink? Oh, *yes* you can. You'll be immobilized. Hallucinating. Possibly bleed yourself dry to get it out of your system. You won't be worth a damn for at least two days."

Sounds a lot like what I just went through. "How does it work?"

Staring at him in disbelief, she couldn't hide the annoyance on her face. "The blood acts like a chaser. The venom pulls in some of my power."

Nodding, he sat down on the bed. "Which ones?"

"It's a crap shoot. It's like making you a copy of files in my computer, but not naming them. You don't know *what's* in a certain file until you open it. Or in this case, experience it. Once you know what it is, and can control it, you can label it and have instant access."

Reaching down, he grabbed one of the boots. "How do I do that?"

"Time and patience. Not to mention good old-fashioned trial and error."

Dropping his foot, stomping to make sure it was on, he glanced up. "So, a random drawing? Sounds like a blind lottery."

Shrugging, she watched him. "I suppose."

He reached for the other boot. "How many are there?"

"Rumor claims forty-two, but I know better. It's different for each of us. If you steal them from numerous vamps, you obtain their power. My sire was," she waved a hand, "not important. He was a very magical human before he was reborn. Because of that, I have more than most. Now, where they came from, I can only guess."

"What do you mean?"

"Most vampires don't actually go after others and confiscate their power. I have taken from more than two thousand."

"Two *thousand*?"

"Could be more. I lost track after two hundred years. That number wasn't important. Just kept multiplying. I've used more than forty-two in my life. Either that or my sire had more than even I dreamed."

Astonished at the number of vampires she dispatched, he whistled. "You're like some modern-day vampire killer." Pulling at the other boot, he stomped it on the ground.

"Not exactly. I was hunted relentlessly. I enjoyed the game. After I took out so many, the hunt slowed to a trickle." Cracking her neck, she sent him a warning glare. "Now, I only kill those who attack me and threaten my happy home. I will be the one to tie up loose ends – the chosen warrior and his pet – should he prove unworthy."

He nodded. "You only kill out of necessity."

"After this is over, you will kill Kanis. He must not learn of anything before then. Speaking of which, Kanis cannot know we're onto his part in this. Neither he nor Seth understands. That gives us the edge. We need to keep it that way."

How do you know that? "If he tries getting in my head–"

"When you leave here, you'll be armed with the ability to mislead your sire. My home is well protected by me as well as a friend. Between the two of us, we're able to keep out nosy vampires."

"I thought you didn't have friends?"

"Back to your original question. 'I am not a normal vampire. Neither is Bacchus.'" She eyed him with one of those 'I know more than you think I do' glares. "Those forty-two are for vampires who don't go around sucking them out of others. There are many more than that. No one knows all

the magic each of you has. Some powers are too weak to use in battle. Lighting a candle with your mind. Talking to animals and insects. Not beneficial in training."

"True. I don't see those being useful."

"I know what you need to defeat Seth. You'll continue draining vampires to get stronger."

"Won't that make me vampire enemy number two since most still follow laws about killing our own kind."

"Did I say kill?" Waving a hand, she shook her head. "Jonas, you have to start thinking outside the box."

His brow rose. "Meaning?"

"Suicide is horrible for vampires." Her finger gently tapped her temple. "Mind control is a terrible thing to waste."

"One of your powers?"

"Yes." Her voice lowered to a seductive whisper. "I could reach into your mind. Make you smash the mirror and slit your throat with one of the pieces. You'd know exactly what you were doing, feeling your immortal life flowing away to nothingness."

"So, the older the vampire, the more powerful their abilities?"

"In most cases. I am one of the exceptions. When I experienced the power surge from drinking vampire blood, I fed on it exclusively. Last time I had human blood was right after killing Rachel, three-hundred-fourteen years ago. A drunk hunting party in the woods. I was angry. It happened quicker than they could blink. Shortly after, Drake returned, and well... you saw what happened there. Thanks to the faction hunting me, I have a large supply. Good thing blood can be frozen. If you need a recharge, I can ship to you."

He made a mental note to ask about the 'selective memories'. "You haven't fed off a mortal in over three hundred years?"

"No need. After tasting vampire blood, why would I ever use a helpless mortal? No challenge. A vampire knows I'm hunting, tries like hell to get away. Vampires made me stronger. Faster. Powerful. What do you get from mortals?"

"I felt stronger after feeding."

"Vampires gain no power from mortals. They want to forget the pain. The guilt. The loneliness. Realizing they are nothing but coldblooded killers who need mortals – a step above rats – to survive. They blindly follow their sires on a merry-go-round to nowhere. I was on that damn ride for four hundred years." Crossing arms over her chest, she shook her head. "What happens when you feed? You get all their memories. Failures. Pious guilt. The over-exaggerated compassion. When you get over that feeling of uselessness, you have to go through it all again. God has a wicked sense of humor. The one thing you need to survive will drive you bat-shit crazy."

"God didn't make us," Jonas said, his eyes narrowing. "Cain did."

Blue eyes darkened. "Who made Cain? Enough talk. Time to see what you're made of. I have a few... subjects... for you to spar." They began walking. "They're stronger, but I'll make sure they stay in line. The goal is for you to drain their blood, steal their power, and kill them."

"No training wheels first?"

"I am your training wheels. It's a good thing one of us took the time to learn. I know what my powers are. I'll teach you the tricks of the trade. How to creep into your soul, so to speak, and find what you have."

"When I drank your blood, I saw everything except you attacking the hunting party. Will you teach me how to keep memories from being read?"

Pausing, she stared at him. "When a director makes a movie, he edits out all the unimportant things due to time restraints. It is the same with blood. It takes time, but yes, you can edit what is given. It is not lying. It is taking out things that do not matter. What lesson would you gain in me killing from anger? Nothing. It was unnecessary. Every day, you will learn something new. By the end of the week, you'll know enough and have control, so I can send you back to your pet. You'll even be able to give your sire false truths. Then the search can continue."

"I look forward to the challenge."

"You say that now."

A circular dungeon area, containing six cages lined with silver bars were equally spaced around the room. Each contained a vampire staring at him with a murderous glare. The center looked like an uneven dance floor of marble tiles. Each one jutted out at an odd angle, assuring no level footing. A domed ceiling rose high, adorned with crimson stains.

Deva led the way. Dressed in the leather outfit, she gave 'Catwoman' a run for her money. It wasn't her looks that drew all eyes in her direction. It was her power. That was more enticing than the natural, seductive sway of hips. The angry vampires still had enough sense to afford her the respect she deserved. Walking to the center of the arena, the rough terrain did not bother her. Anyone else, walking in high-heeled leather boots, might have an issue.

Jonas paid her wiggles and shimmies no mind. His attention was on the contents of each shining cage. Silver. He could smell it now, which would help immensely. Already stronger, Seth was in for an unwelcome surprise.

"Until you are strong enough, I will be binding your opponents. We can't have our warrior killed during training. You were chosen for a reason. These men are your enemy. They do not want you to succeed. They were sent to kill you. And you would not believe the thoughts about your pet. I must meet this woman. See what is so special." Shaking off the thought, she turned to Jonas. "You are to immobilize then drain them. Take their magic, energy, and strength. When you finish, burn them to ashes." Turning to face him again, she smiled.

Anger crept into his mind, thinking that these worthless pieces of un-dead scum were having *any* thoughts about Dusty, let alone lewd ones. *Does the entire vampire community know about her?* Glancing at the hapless immortals awaiting their turn, he sighed. These six might feel privileged to offer their lives for the cause – if they knew of it. "One night only," he said, cracking his neck. "Everything must go."

With a swipe of her hand, the first cage opened. The vampire within sat on his haunches, refusing to exit. "Harness your skill. Look into your blood and find what you need. Force him out."

Force him out? How the hell am I supposed to do that? Searching his memories, trying to recall how he first used any skill after being turned, proved unsuccessful. *Well, I suppose I'll just have to piss him off.* Walking to the reluctant vampire's cage, Jonas examined the creature. Silver hair sprouted wildly from his large head. Perhaps a Viking at one time, such was his build. "I know you don't want to do this. We all have a part to play. Mine is to learn and gather as much power as possible, so I can defeat Seth. Yours is to die by my hands. So, let's get to this, shall we?" He held his hand out with a slight bow, not taking his eyes off him. "I believe this dance is mine? I hope you don't mind." Looking around, he turned back whispering, "I prefer to lead."

Deva laughed. "Well, that's one way."

The smart-ass comments enraged the prisoner. Flying from his cage, he grabbed Jonas by the throat, hurling him across the room.

Jonas felt his back hit the cold rock. He didn't have time for a thought before he was hoisted up by the waist of his leather pants.

"*This* is the chosen one?" He flung him to the opposite wall. "Not impressed."

Deva shrugged. "It's early yet."

Before hitting, Jonas closed his eyes. Calming, he searched for the ability to break his flight. It came. He hit the stone gently as if bumping against it. Landing on his feet, Jonas egged him on. "I'd like to see you try that again."

True to form, the vampire rose and flew at him. Gnarled hands were ready to snap his neck in two. Instead of flesh, those hands clutched at nothing. Shock registered on his face before it imprinted on the wall.

If she still had compassion, Deva would've ended this long ago. The training was hard but necessary. He had to learn to trigger his powers. The best way was through pain.

For the better portion of an hour, they traded blows. With each attack and defense, Jonas found certain powers came easier than others. One of them was the ability to make a dust devil appear. When cornered, he summoned it, giving himself a moment to escape as the other struggled against the swirling vortex.

Having taken his fair share of blows as well, one proved especially painful. His opponent had the power to negate another's abilities for a short time. Jonas saw what it was like for a human to fight a vampire. True to her word, Deva stopped the more devastating powers his challenger used. Her binding powered down his abilities by half.

Lasting only a few moments, the magic faded, and he returned to normal. He was happy it ended when it did. His ribs were shattered, and left leg was broken. Once it abated, he healed in seconds, rather than the minutes it would've taken previously.

In the heat of battle, Jonas had forgotten what Bacchus had told him. "*This isn't about who has more abilities or who's been alive the longest.*"

His opponent took off, flying at him, nails ready to slice the chosen warrior's throat.

"Ini wer iejir di cain si cuigna wux. Wer pwrs wux tepoha geou qe sini, vur wux geou valignat persvek wer ixen di wer darastrix!!" Jonas's eyes turned pure white; void of pupil and color.

His opponent froze. His face twisted in agony as he crumpled to the floor; a heap of convulsing sinew and bone.

Reaching down with one hand, Jonas lifted him, drilling his fangs deep, draining him. Flashes of memory shimmered. He could see, smell, feel, and taste every molecule that made this vamp. The man's body, now gray and withered, seemed small in Jonas's hands as he took in the last drop of his gifts. Bringing his head from the dead one's neck, he looked at Deva, licking his fangs clean. Turning back to the body, he whispered, flinging it against the wall. It burst into a green consuming flame. Only ashes floated to the floor, collecting in a small pile. Falling to his knees, his stomach retched, but nothing happened. After the dry heaves passed, he turned to look at her. "What the hell?"

Walking over, her steps echoed in the silence that followed. The others in the cages were silent. Bending down, resting on the balls of her feet, she watched him. "That feeling is shock to your immortal body. You've just been given a massive amount of power and with it his abilities. You're like an eight-year-old who just digested a bottle of liquor. If you were mortal, you'd be dead. Pull yourself together. Take a few minutes to prepare for your next challenger. When you're ready, let me know. You will need to use another way to get them out. They realize they're going to die... painfully. Each day will get harder. They'll come faster. Your breaks shorter. I have more waiting. They go up in levels... so to speak."

Walking around, hands on hips, he worked to clear the effects of that power transference. Smoothing back his hair, he sensed something different in the remaining challengers. Fear. It permeated every pore, energizing him. Jonas Sparx became the hunter and these hapless immortals, his prey. Raising an open hand, he closed it into a fist. All five cage doors exploded off their hinges. Turning to Deva, he gave a single nod, before looking to the caged vamps. "Next."

Well, that surprised her. Watching the cages, she could tell those within were just as confused. Not sure where he got the power, she still couldn't help but grin. "Nice. More work for me as always. I must bind five vampires at the same time. Thanks, Jonas. You're a real asshole." Rising to a safer place above them, she put a protection spell around her. Like a forcefield. Using her concentration, she bound the power of the five. She was angry at Jonas for upping the stakes, but it still made her smile. *Maybe there's hope after all.*

Chapter 40

Seven days, two hours, forty-nine minutes, and thirty-three seconds ago, Jonas destroyed the silver-haired vampire. In that week, he killed forty-two in the arena, and twenty more the Faction sent, each one more powerful than the last. The first six were the most difficult. After that, Deva offered minimal assistance, only interfering in the background when a few had to be brought closer to Jonas's level. No need to chance it. Jonas had to win. There was no other option. Within a few hours, he was able to dispatch them without her aid.

Efficient. Powerful. Focused. Deadly. He was the top Bulldog, guarding her property. Nightly, he moved around the castle's exterior, hunting the enemy, keeping watch. Both his outlook and attitude changed. The champion – determined to see this to the end – replaced that smart ass, carefree, private investigator.

"Jonas Sparx. You're a changed man. A stronger vampire. You *are* a champion." She carried a gray box tied with a red velvet ribbon. "I usually don't give gifts. When I do, I want to see your face."

It was then, he saw her true beauty. She wore a deep blue cashmere sweater with black leggings tucked into tan doe-skin boots. A high ponytail made her look fresh out of high school. Smiling, her eyes sparkled with pride. She created the finest warrior.

He opened the box carefully. Two training outfits. His phone. A receipt for two cases of frozen vampire blood – with instructions on how to thaw and use – waiting for him on the jet, and her personal phone number. "Aw. You shouldn't have! Thank you." His eyes used to be green as the sea, filled with false bravado. Now, the green was flecked with spots of gold, silver, and hard-won confidence. "I regret that we didn't know each other in a different time." He held his hand out for hers, a gesture from one noble to another.

"Had we met any earlier, you may not have survived the encounter." Placing her hand in his, she gave a slight nod.

He didn't kiss it as one might expect. Instead, he touched the back of her cold hand to his forehead. "You are indeed a queen. I'll never forget you or what you have done for me."

Pulling back, she looked him in the eyes. "Our true fate hasn't been played out yet."

"Yes," he said, understanding. "I will kill Seth."

She placed her hand on his arm. "Watch your back. You may have dealt with him in the past, but that's nothing compared to the next time you meet. He knows you're supposed to stop him. He also knows he's not going to let that happen. He's evil. More so than all of us put together."

His eyes flashed. "I'll make sure that evil dies with him."

"Kill him. Even though she is your weakness, I wasn't kidding. For some reason, he really does like her. Once you leave, if you need help, don't hesitate to call. I gathered resources just for this." Sighing, she looked down at the ground. "I do understand, Jonas." Her eyes found him again. "I too have loved mortals. I remember how fragile they were. We are protecting her."

He smiled once more. "Thank you."

"One thing you will need. Quatrains. They will tell you where the stones are located." She turned to the door. "You can bring them out, Chey."

A half-black/half-Indian woman entered. Brown eyes danced with happiness as she slipped forward. She looked to be in her late 40s with the giddiness of a small child. Brushing a hand back through her brown hair, she smiled at Jonas. "Well, now. You didn't tell me he was so handsome."

"Chey."

Rushing forward, the woman seemed to sway from side to side. Around her middle was a bit of a paunch from years of eating well. In her hands was a tray with three rolled parchments. "These are what you were talking about?"

Deva sighed. "Good help is so hard to find."

Chey snorted. "Good help, my ass." Turning to Jonas, she pointed. "I used to change her bottom when she was younger."

Deva cleared her throat. "Just give him the parchments."

Chey smiled, winking at Jonas. "She's embarrassed about that. She used to get in trouble by going do—"

"Chey!" Deva interrupted. "The man's in a hurry."

Chey giggled. "Very well." She handed them over. "These are what you came for."

"The Quatrains?" This woman's presence brought up more questions. Smiling at Chey, he winked. "Someday you and I will have a drink and you can tell me all about the Deva *no* one knows."

She nodded. "Yes. That sounds like a right good plan."

Deva shook her head. "That's not happening."

Chey stomped her foot. "Excuse me? If I want to drink with a handsome man, you won't stop me." Winking at Jonas, she pointed down at the parchments. "Yes, my sweet boy, those are the Quatrains. Each is marked in the order it must be followed. They're written in the language of that stone's resting place. What you're looking for is hidden in the language. You must decipher the text once it's been translated. You'll need to find someone you trust to translate them for you."

"Oh?" Jonas lifted a brow at that.

"Translating them will be hard. We don't know what language each one is. That's determined after the first stone is found. Then the first Quatrain will present itself and so on. Be careful. One wrong word could have you searching far away from where you need to be. If that happens, Seth will probably beat you there. Be very careful and precise."

Looking between them, furrowed brows bookended a confused gaze. "Without these, how will Seth know where to look?"

Deva sighed. "That's where it gets tricky. Seth would see nothing if he got the Quatrain. Some magical failsafe. Once Seth has the stone, *it* will give him the general location of the next and so on."

"It will tell him where it is?"

"Not the *exact* location. More like a visionary picture. If one is buried in the ocean, he will see water. Nothing definitive, but a starting point."

Sighing, he looked down at the tray. It was a very old satchel, made of animal hide. Running his hand over the surface, he carefully placed the scrolls inside. "Sheep hide." Closing the flap, he shouldered the bag. "I don't think of this as a goodbye. We will see each other again before our journey's end."

"That we will."

The same guy who brought him appeared in the doorway. That was his cue. The thought of leaving sent a slight pang of regret through him. Once the hard part of his 'training' was complete, he became more than a guest. He stood at Deva's side, plotting, planning, and killing those who tried interfering. It was enjoyable. He recalled the words of Master Kan when Kwai Chang snatched the pebble from the old monk's hand. "Time for you to leave."

Gathering his things, he bowed, heading to the door. He surrendered his bags to the limo driver. He could feel the respect from him. Deva was right. He was different. As he stepped into the harsh glare of the sun, he felt its warmth for the first time in five hundred years. He also felt cleansed.

Chapter 41

Two long weeks. At this point, she didn't care what happened to him. She silently prayed he was dead. Death, she could understand and forgive. Willfully shutting her out? There was no forgiveness for that.

Each day brought more of the old Dusty back. The one he first met who didn't need another soul to help her do her job. Many days – and a few nights – she spent at the lake searching for that rock. Every sparkling grain of sand caught her attention. The trash bags multiplied from bottles, beer cans, and other garbage left by partiers. So far, she found nothing pertinent, but the lake was getting cleaner by the day.

With Cathy's murder, she was back at her desk. On the wall behind her hung Seth's little love note. If that wasn't enough, there was a bouquet of flowers on her desk from Travis.

Travis. That was a touchy-feely subject. The voice in her head argued that she did have real feelings for him. She didn't know what love was. Lying was better than burying a friend.

Cletus delivered her special order. Bullets and silver and turquoise rings coated in gold. Two different bullet styles meant two different guns. She now sported two Glock 19 9mm G5s. Cletus made her an offer she couldn't resist. The holsters hooked to her belt. It took a few days to get used to, but it was the only way to keep silver and wooden bullets at her fingertips. Left-hand silver, right-hand wood, the only way to remember.

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On the flight back, Jonas didn't see the sexy attendant. The one snacking on her probably suffered worse. For all Jonas knew, he was one of the caged monsters he destroyed.

Landing, disembarking, walking through security, all went off without a hitch. Once he was outside, he smiled. The temperature difference was forty degrees from the Arizona heat to the Tennessee humidity of August. Catching the scent of 'Eu De Vampire' briefly engaged his hunter mode. He could sense them from miles away. Seth, Kanis, Garrick, and Amelia knew he went to Deva, but not why. Armed with her training, they never would until it was too late.

Hailing a cab, he stopped by the small post office. There was still the matter of the package Garrick overnights the day he left.

The postmaster smiled. "Didn't think anybody was gonna pick this up. I was gettin' ready to—"

"When was this package picked up?" The man's face went blank as Jonas spoke.

Looking up, he smiled. "Oh... 'bout... fourteen days ago... I believe. Yeah! That's right. The guy was shaking like a leaf. Tore that package open so fast. Left a trail of Styrofoam from my desk to the front door. It was this box! Not sure why I kept it."

Smiling, Jonas nodded. "Thank you. You have a nice day now."

"It's like using your muscles," Deva said. "By the time, Kanis confronts you, he'll see only what you want him to see."

Walking the few blocks to Dusty's office, he paused outside the door. Hearing the beating of her heart, the rhythm of her breathing, and smelling her scent made him smile. It was like coming home. He penetrated her mental block once because she allowed it. Reaching out, he tried slipping behind it again. With all his training, he still couldn't get through. It was beyond anything he'd ever encountered. The only ones like that were powerful vampires or heavily-drugged mortals. It was hard compelling someone whose mind was twisted out of reality. 'Status quo,' he reminded himself. *Same Jonas that left.* "Honey, I'm home!"

Not looking up, she didn't give him the time of day. Her fingers continued typing on the computer, eyes moving from the file back to the monitor as she filled out the proper forms. "I'll call out the ticker tape parade. Yee... haw." Her voice was dull, laced heavily with sarcasm.

Hooch raced over, jumping up and down, begging to be petted. When Jonas bent down, Hooch kissed his whole face before flopping on his back for a belly rub. He laughed, greeting the happy dog with kisses and talking sweetly. After that, Hooch went back to lay down beside Dusty.

It was chillier inside her office than on the air-conditioned flight back. Walking to his desk, a few things caught his attention. Flowers on her desk. Bullets on his. Opening the cases, he noticed they were silver and wood. Reaching over, he touched the silver, grinning as they had no effect on him. "Are you hinting you wanna see 'Guns N Roses'?"

"Har-de-har-har." Her voice was as crisp as a glacier.

He motioned to the flowers. "Secret admirer?"

"None ya."

He picked up the scent like an air freshener reaching the end of its useful life. *Seth.* He wasn't there, but something he touched was. His eyes darted to Dusty. She didn't pay him any attention. Flipping pages soon became tapping again. His eyes moved around the office, searching. She had every right to be angry, but they couldn't work this way. "Very nice." At this point, the flowers were a footnote. There was a real possibility that Seth was too close to Dusty. That bothered him. Reaching over, he fired up his computer. Cracking his knuckles, he watched his screen come to life. "So," he said, entering his password. "What did I miss?"

The murderous glare warned him to tread lightly. Eyelids slowly blinked in irritation before moving back to her work. He didn't even check his messages, proving once more what an asshole he was. The first day he didn't call, he was just busy. The second day, she thought he was dead. After the fourth day, she knew he was gone. It upset her. Kept her between angry and sad. Now, it was rage. Sinking back in her chair, she arched a brow. "What makes ya think anything happened here?" The tone of her voice spoke louder than her words.

"Idle curiosity."

"Check your messages first, *then* ask questions. Moron." That pissed her off. She went back to her work, slamming things.

It was going to take a lot more than smooth-talking to fix this. Taking out his phone, he checked the text first, kicking himself in the ass for not doing it sooner.

Dusty: You better be dead.

Wincing, he called his voicemail. One message from her.

"Sparx! Garner. Not even sure ya made it, but, *whatever*. We got some crinkled-up shit. It's Seth. He's onto the fact that I'm... What the dripping fudgesicles?"

Closing the phone, he cleared his throat. "Well, obviously, I'm not *dead*-dead. I had a feeling Seth was going to play games with you. Don't worry. You're protected by very powerful people. You're in good hands."

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, she glared over. "I'm not in the market for new insurance, but thanks. I've lived my whole life on my own. I'll be fine once you're gone. The sooner, the better."

Ouch! Back to square one. "All right. So, tell me what he did."

What he did? Oh, so now you're curious?

'Knock it off. Just answer the man. You're acting like a spoiled brat or a jealous girlfriend.'

Huffing more at the voice than Jonas, she went back to typing. After a few moments, the printer sounded. Standing, she walked over. Grabbing the sheets, she dumped them on his desk. "Missing person's report. Cathy Walters. Shortly after, they found her car. Then her headless body. Seth put her head on my car with a love note." Sitting back down, she rolled her eyes. "This poison ivy, quicksand case of yours has me breaking so many laws, it's not eeeeeven funny. Ridiculous."

His eyes narrowed. "A love note? You don't by chance still have it, do you?"

"You wanna see it? Why? It didn't involve you, Sparx. It was between me and Seth. My very own love letter." She leaned back, a faraway look in her eyes. "Such beautiful handwriting with a severed head." Shrugging, she resumed the irritated tapping on her computer. "I've had worse propositions."

"Oh."

Oh? Her phone rang, stilling her anger. "Garner..." Her voice was forceful. Working mode. "Hey, you..." Then it took on a sweeter note. Playful. "Yes, I remember, but can't tonight ... Ya know what they say. Promises are made to be broken. Especially if it's from a detective on a hot murder case." She laughed, blushing slightly. "Well, *that* goes without saying ... Ya know I can't share that ... No, not even with you. Probably the same as yours ... Animal attack, yep." Once more she laughed, a soft smile playing on her lips. "I'll tell ya what. I'll call if tomorrow's looking better. Right now, I have to finish this report then take Hooch out for some fun. He's been cooped up in this office all day ... Hm? Yes. How did ya know? ... Oh. Well, good guess ... I hear ya. Tomorrow, we'll get Philly cheesesteaks with everything ... Hey, you know the deal. Show me yours, I'll show ya mine ... bye, sexy."

He heard the conversation, but it became white noise. Dusty had become a pawn. Now, Seth was going to torment her. Playing with his prey gave him perverted pleasure, begging for the sweet release of death. Seth wouldn't kill her. He had other plans. What was so different about Dusty? Jonas found himself pulled to her like some magnet. He wanted more but desperately wanted to protect her. It could be that she was a puzzle he couldn't figure out. A challenge. Seth planned on making Dusty a vampire as well as a hostage because of her association with him.

Your weakness shows.

Seth had minions combing Cider Lake, which gave him plenty of time to torment her. That severed head wouldn't be his last message and the next would be worse. Because the stone was buried in the lake, the magnetic draw on Seth would be weak. It would take him far longer to find it, which meant more time to stalk her. As soon as he got the damn thing, he would leave Cider Lake... and Dusty... alone. When she finished, he rose, walking over to her desk. "Can I see it?"

"See... what?" There was a confused, disgusted look on her face.

"The love letter."

Arching a brow, she settled back, sneering. "I thought this trip was supposed to fine tune your skills?"

"I wasn't a very good student." Little did she know what he did to keep her alive.

"It taxed your investigative skills too." Reaching behind her, she pulled the small clear baggie off the clip, handing it over. "For obvious reasons, I didn't show it to Travis or the cops. I shoved it in my pocket and had Willie check my... present... which he confirmed was Cathy's head."

Taking the evidence bag, he examined it, reading the words. "Love, Seth, eh? I leave for two weeks and you've got men crawling all over you."

"What can I say? I'm charming."

"That's one secret admirer you don't want."

She shrugged indifferently. "I always attract the bad boys."

Turning, he made a small circular motion with his hand.

"At least *he* keeps in touch an-"

Everything froze.

"Thank you... whoever." During his training, he worked on perfecting that spell. Reaching into the baggie, he removed the sticky note. Gently blowing over it, whispering in the ancient language, he commanded the paper to reveal the location of its author.

Placing the note on his forehead, he closed his eyes. Flying through Cider Lake, familiar landmarks soared past, before stopping in front of the old Kingsman Coal Mine. Donnie told the truth. Removing the paper, he placed it back in the baggie, rotating his hand in the opposite direction.

The clock on the wall started ticking again.

"-d understands the importance of communication, which is something *you* don't."

"He does know how to make an impression. I'll say that much." Ignoring the barbed remark, he offered the baggie back. "I'm sorry it cost a woman her life."

Looking at him in disgust, she waved her hand. "I don't want that. That's more *your* thing than it is mine. Remember? I dabble in mortal killers. You dabble in immortal ones."

Nodding, he held onto it. "You should take Travis up on that cheesesteak. There's nothing we can do right now. I'm gonna shower, take my Hemosynth, and go over everything. I got your number," he waved his phone. "I'll ring if I have any epiphanies."

"You go do," she waved a hand dismissively, "whatever. I have to finish this then we're headed to the lake."

Seth had all eyes on her. If she found the stone, he would know it before she surfaced. That's when Seth would turn her into his personal pet. In a beat, he was at her desk, grabbing the corners, getting in her face. "And you think *I'm* reckless?"

Jumping, since he just appeared nose-to-nose, it took a second to calm down. There was a look of 'what the?' on her face. "What the crystallized ice caps?" Her hand fluttered to her necklace. "Are you trying to give me heart failure? Jesus! I did *not* miss that!"

"You don't think he watches your every move? You don't think he knows you're trying to locate that stone?"

Anger replaced confusion. "We have to find that stone before he does! When you left, I *told* you I was looking for the damn thing! With you gone, that left one person to do it since I can't tell another living soul why I'm searching for a piece of rock in the lake!"

"What if you find it? Then what? Would you like me to tell you? It's the least I can do."

His anger fueled hers. "Yes, Jonas, enlighten me." Sarcasm bled through each word.

"As soon as you find it, he'll know. He'll be on you before you can even think about silver bullets, wooden ammo, or stakes. Then guess what? He won't kill you. He won't even turn you." Another lie, but it was necessary. "He'll take you halfway and leave you! I know you don't give a fuck, but I," he looked at the flowers and back, "am pretty damn sure Travis does! Don't make him regret it!"

Rolling her eyes, she turned back to her desk. "Travis is none ya. Keep his name out your filthy mouth!" The need to protect Travis was strong. "By the way, you're fucking welcome for thinking of you and ordering extra silver and wooden bullets."

Pushing off, he turned away. The woman was a bloodhound on the right scent. She wouldn't stop until that stone was in her hand. Spinning around, his eyes gleamed flecks of gold and silver as twin spires of death extended. "If there is another death in Cider Lake," he snarled. "It will be mine."

"If Seth wanted me dead—"

And he blinked out of existence.

"I'd already be!" she shouted at the empty spot. "Asshole!" When the report was finished, she retrieved the two pages. They went in two separate folders. One went on her desk, the other went in a special box beside Bob's. *Inconsiderate Asshole* was for Jonas. Putting it inside, a post-it-note accompanied the cover, *you're welcome, Asshole*. Back at her desk, she took out another file and started writing.

Pulling out the map, she laid it on the table, anchoring down the corners. There was a small area left to search. It could be knocked out in a day or two. She wasn't going to rest until that damn stone was found and destroyed. Then Jonas Sparx could take all his undead buddies, out of her small town, and life could get back to normal.

Chapter 42

Jonas stood outside Kingsman Mine. "Seth!" It was abandoned. No one would bother looking for anyone in a place that hadn't seen the light of day in well over a century.

"Why, Jonas Sparx." Seth's practiced drawl sounded in the tree above him. Wearing that arrogant smirk, Seth floated down. "Have ya come to join the winning team? I know you haven't come to do battle. Ain't time yet." Narrowing his eyes, he grinned. "Well, Jonas. You've taken a shine to that spark plug partner of yours, haven't ya? She does give good head," he winked, followed by a thoughtful look. "Or... my bad. I'm the one that gave *her* good head."

"You're a sick fuck."

"That is the rumor. So, we've established you ain't here to fight or join me. What do I owe the pleasure of your fine company?"

"I can get the first stone."

Seth lifted a brow. "Come again?"

"You get it then you and your hemoglobin gang leaves. You stay away from Dusty. We'll let fate decide what happens from there."

Leaning back against the mine's weathered sign, he crossed his arms. "I know you been buddying up with that delicious temptress. By the way, how is my ex? Maybe she managed to toss some voodoo your way." Seth stuck out his hand. "You got yourself a deal, son, but, if you can't do it, I'm not only gonna take that Lil' gal with me, but I'm gonna turn this whole town into an episode of the 'Walking Dead'. We clear?"

Jonas looked at the hand then back at Seth. "On your honor?"

"Son, I ain't had honor for going on two thousand years, but if it makes ya feel better," he winked, curling and extending his little finger. "Pinkie swear."

The prophecy claimed Seth would assemble the stones and he and Jonas would fight a final battle. Guaranteed. But Cider Lake... and Dusty... would be safe for now. If he failed, it made no difference anyway. Nodding, Jonas walked to the water's edge, gazing over it. Closing his eyes, he opened his palms and concentrated.

"I don't see no X-Wing fighter coming up outta this swamp, Master Yoda. Y'all having some problem with the force?" Seth chided.

"Ekess wer ternesj di iejir si lasau wux," Jonas whispered, as Seth cocked his head.

About a quarter mile down, a small ripple broke the water's surface. Seth could feel the ancient sound ringing in his blood. Holding out his hand, the stone flew to it as a lost dog, suddenly seeing its master.

Spent, Jonas fell to his knees.

A mixture of shock and respect crossed over Seth's face. "I stand corrected, son. I believe I'll put this in a safe place. Not that I don't trust anybody, but... well, I *don't* trust anybody." Holding the stone in his palm, his eyes turned yellow and his voice lost its drawl. "Pertus comte mas enke deux." It shimmered and floated off his hand. A brief image of the Great Pyramid appeared before it vanished. "Well, don't that just beat all. Looks like I get to take a trip home." He whistled. It was one Jonas knew well; a call to his children.

They appeared, some a few hundred years old, but most were younglings. "I believe we have worn out our welcome." Turning to Jonas, he nodded. "Ya have my word, son. Trust we'll be seeing one another along the way."

"Wait!" one of his crew yelled. "That's the fucker who killed Donnie."

A blond brow lifted as Seth looked down. "That true?"

"Yes."

Laughing, Seth clapped him on the shoulder. "You have my thanks."

"What? Donnie was my brother and—" knowing Seth cared little for loyalty, the vampire switched tactics. "Seth, you got the chosen warrior right here. Kill him and we won't have to worry about—"

"Shut up!" Seth said.

"I'll do it myself!" the youngling said, eyes glowing red. He flew at Jonas, fangs bared, hands curled into clawed talons. "This is for Donnie!"

With a snap, the screeching boy exploded into a ball of blue fire, ashes floating into the lake. "Good help is so hard to find." Seth turned back to his followers, his voice raised a notch. "Anyone else have anything to say?" Silence. "I thought not."

"I'm *going* to kill you," Jonas said, still on his knees.

Seth turned back, nodding his head. "I look forward to our next adventure, Jonas Sparx. We're gonna have so much fun. Don't forget to bring your cute partner. I'm so looking forward to showing her a few things." Giving another whistle, he was surrounded by a black vortex. It lifted him and his gang away, leaving Jonas alone.

"It hurts, yes?"

"Are you everywhere?"

"I'm where I need to be." Bacchus offered him a hand. "Do you think that was wise?"

"Sometimes you have to cut off a finger to save a hand." Shaking his head, Jonas got to his feet.

"That's very astute, Jonas. Well, not for us, but—"

"I couldn't let any more people in this town die."

Bacchus smiled, nodding. "All the people, or just one in particular?"

He sighed. "That ship has sailed away, I'm afraid."

Patting Jonas on the back, he chuckled. "How much you have yet to learn. You can steer a ship, Jonas, but at the end of the day, it's all about where the wind chooses it to sail."

"Enough with the vagueness, the deep thoughts, the hidden meanings." Looking around, Jonas realized this wasn't a dream. "Wait. Are you really here?"

Bacchus grinned. "Yes, I'm *really* here, Jonas. I figured it was time."

"Where is Seth going?"

"That is for you and Dusty to learn."

"Why is she part of this? What's so special about her?"

"The players were selected for a reason. Just as you were chosen from birth, so was she. This prophecy is ironclad. Only the chosen – you for the immortals, Dusty for the mortals – can stop this. Only the chosen can decipher those scrolls. How do you intend to tell her Seth has the first piece?"

"I... don't know."

"Better come up with something. He now has a head start."

Jonas looked out over the lake. When he turned back, Bacchus had vanished. Rolling his eyes, he willed himself back to Dusty's office.

Chapter 43

Back at the office, he felt better about his decision after seeing her destination. "He's already got the first piece."

Startled, she drew a bold black mark through her map, ruining it. "What?! How do ya know that?"

"I went to reason with him. He had just found it."

"How did ya know where he was? Never mind that! Why the hell didn't you just kill him? Then we'd be done with this whole Jiminy Cricket mess!"

"It's a prophecy, Dusty. It's *going* to happen. He already had the stone and was heading off to the next location. Instead of wondering why something happened, help me focus on the present." He lifted his suitcase, setting it on his desk. "This is our priority. Deva gave me scrolls that will help us." Unzipping it, he removed the satchel carefully. Taking out the first scroll, he unrolled it.

"If Deva has all this information. The scrolls. The power. The ability to kill Seth, then why hasn't she?"

"Dusty." He gave her a deadpan stare.

Raising her hands in the air, she rolled her eyes. "Fine!" Glancing down at the scroll, she crinkled her face. "Do we get the English version?"

A deep sigh escaped. "Great. Not only is it written in quatrain format, but this one is set down in Hieroglyphics. At least we know where it's located. I was told that each scroll is written in the language of the land the stone is in." Carefully rolling back the parchment, he placed it lovingly into the satchel and then in his suitcase. "Know anyone who can translate ancient Egyptian and two other languages?"

"That's vague. Which other two?"

"We don't know yet."

"Yeah, I know a professor who knows many languages."

"Well, let's go. We need to see this professor."

Taking a step back, she shook her head. "I can't."

Turning, he stared at her. "Why?"

"I'm dead there. I can't take that chance."

He set the case down. Walking over, he placed his hands on both sides of her face. "Dusty, we don't have a choice."

She quickly removed his hands as if they burned, walking away from him. "Why do *I* have to go? You could do that mind thing and make me forget. Do it on your own."

"Not possible."

"Why?"

"*You* were chosen for the mortal side, *I* for the immortal. It was a decision since birth, which makes me understand your training. Especially if your family knew. It can't be changed. Prophecies do come true. You are with me till the end. Now, about this professor..." He grabbed his case again.

"Fine. I didn't take his class, but we got to know each other. He's a genius with languages. Not sure how many, but the CIA called him in for something they found. Had inscriptions no one could decipher. He couldn't either, but... None of your vampire buddies can translate these?"

He shook his head. "The fewer involved, the better. Think your professor will help?"

"He's retired. Turn it into a trip to Egypt and he'll jump at the chance. He might be able to read the others as well."

"What makes you think the stone is in Egypt?"

"Hieroglyphics equals Egypt."

"Good. You were paying attention. If he can translate this, we'll take him along. You explain everything. If he gets nosy, *you* deal with him. I need to call our bankroll."

Her head snapped in his direction. "We have a bankroll? Psh, someone best be paying me for my damn time then!"

Jonas spoke into his phone. "I need your plane ... Not yet, but Dusty knows a professor who can translate. If we make it a vacation, he might be willing ... True. I *could* do that, but there would be more to deal with... Yes, thank you." Putting away the phone, he motioned to the door. "Let's go get your professor. The jet will be waiting."

Chapter 44

Antoine Dubois lived in a house over the pay scale for a Community College Linguistics Professor. The concrete driveway wound through well-trimmed hedgerows, stopping at the professor's mahogany and stained-glass front door.

"Posh. Not what I was expecting."

"It was his wife's dream home." Dusty parked in the shade, leaving the windows down. "He sank his entire savings in it."

Turning, he eyed her with concern. "What if he wants to bring his wife?"

"Two months after moving in, they found an inoperable brain tumor. Gabrielle lasted three months after that. He doesn't go out, but I think he'll come." She turned to Hooch. "Stay."

As they headed to the door, Jonas gave her a sidelong glance. "You know a lot about a man whose class you weren't even in."

Shrugging, she rang the bell. "Just let me do the talking. I'm a better convincer than you are."

"*Convincer* isn't a real word, young lady." Antoine Dubois was a tall black man, with a clean-shaven face. Rich brown eyes peered over half-moon glasses. He could have been in his early to mid-fifties were it not for a head of neatly-trimmed silver hair.

Dusty jumped. "Professor, I—"

"Dusty!" Setting his cane aside, he opened his arms, pulling her in for a hug. "I was just making a batch of brownies. Oh, my God! It's so *good* to see you! It's like Christmas." Pulling back, his eyes narrowed as he reached for the cane. "Are your fingers broken?"

Furrowing her brows, she looked down at them. "Don't appear to be?"

"No phone call. No text. Not even an email! You just disappeared. I heard you died. I was devastated. Your number stopped working."

Jonas cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry. I had a stalker. Ya know how that can be. Had to get away. It lasted longer than I expected."

"Ah. It's been too long. How have you been? Please, come in. Have some brownies."

She turned to Jonas. "This man makes the *best* desserts!"

Seeing a new side of Dusty, brought a smile to Jonas's face. "Good to have on a camping trip."

"I added caramel, chocolate chips, and almonds." Antoine limped to the kitchen.

She chuckled, hitching a thumb over her shoulder. "Antoine, this is my partner, Jonas. Sparx, this is Professor Antoine Dubois."

"It's a pleasure. Dusty has told me nice things about you."

"She wouldn't have thought I was nice if she took my class." Resting his cane against the table, Antoine pulled Jonas in for a hug. "Just call me Antoine. Any friend of Dusty's is a friend of mine." Releasing him, he turned, grabbing the tray of brownies, setting them on the counter. "Please, sit down. Would you like milk with that?"

She nodded. "Oh, definitely."

Jonas shook his head. "No thank you. Lactose intolerant."

He poured the milk, setting the glasses on the counter with the brownies. "Please. Sit." He looked at Dusty. "So, *Miss Convincer*, what are you here to convince me to do?"

First, she took a drink, washing down the brownie. Wiping off the milk mustache, she turned to him. "We have ancient scrolls that no one has seen. We need you to translate them. It's gonna take time."

He nodded. "I'm intrigued."

"We have to go to Egypt. Like yesterday. A private jet is waiting for us. I remember how you always wanted to go. I was hoping you could come and—"

"Globetrotting is for the mobile." He picked up his cane. "I can work on the translations, but as for joining you—"

"What's wrong?" Jonas interjected, tilting his head toward the cane.

"Advanced Osteoarthritis in my right hip. I'd be useless trying to navigate the desert of Egypt."

Jonas nodded. "If it wasn't for that?"

Antoine laughed. "Son, I'd already be out that door, hollering for you to hurry—"

Jonas stopped time before placing his hand on the man's hip. "Sana a plaga tua." Afterward, he sat in his chair, restarting time.

"-but since I don't believe in miracles," the Professor continued.

"Stand up," Jonas told him.

The old man's eyes narrowed, but he reached for his cane.

"Without it."

"I—"

"Antoine," Dusty interrupted. "We're pressed for time. This is seriously a make-or-break mission. In fact, we're *literally* saving the world."

"Fine, but when I fall and break my hip, I'm suing you *both*!" He rose, slowly at first as his mouth fell open. "Th-there's no pain." He took a few tentative steps. "No pain at all." His eyes widened, testing his leg, raising and lowering it, doing a few deep squats.

Dusty smiled. "Nice! We're on a tight schedule. Are you in?"

"Finish your brownie. I need five minutes to pack a bag." Jumping up, he headed toward the stairs, stopping at his wife's portrait. "Gabby, I'm finally going to Egypt!" Then he was gone in a flash.

Dusty put the remaining brownies in a container. "Not bad, Sparx. At least for everyone else you're a halfway decent sort."

Antoine came down as fast as he went up. "Let's move it!" Once outside, Antoine halted, seeing Dusty's Z. "Oh no. Park that NASCAR reject in the garage. We'll take my Range Rover. *I'm* driving."

Dusty looked annoyed. "My—"

Antoine headed for the garage. "That's my only condition." He looked at Jonas. "Young man, you're either brave, stupid, or have a death wish riding with her."

Jonas smiled. "Maybe a little of all three."

After parking the car, Dusty let Hooch out. While she and Jonas grabbed their bags, Hooch checked out the professor before giving slobbery kisses.

Chapter 45

On the jet, Antoine picked a seat and sat down with the satchel. Glancing around, he let out a low whistle. "Someone's rolling deep pockets. Am I getting paid for this?" Giving a laugh he shook his head. "I'm just kidding." Once settled, he unrolled the scroll. "Oh, my God. Proto-Dynastic Hieratic. *Where* did you get this?"

Sitting down, she fastened her seatbelt, locking Hooch in. "Somewhere in Arizona. Can ya translate it?"

Looking back at the papyrus, he nodded. "It will take time. This is nothing like the Hieroglyphs we see today. Has to be five-thousand-years old. I'll do my best. I should be able to figure out the base part, and from there it might be a guessing game. Let's see how much I *can* translate first." Winking, he began his research.

Dusty looked out the window. "Egypt. Can't say I've ever wanted to go there to save the world. It could be worse. Had a dream once about Egypt and finding some hot prince or something."

Jonas arched a brow. "Travis won't like you dreaming about finding some hot prince."

Eyes widened as she quickly pulled out her cell phone. "Travis? ... Something came up with the Walters case. Partner and I have to go out of town to check it out ... Sorry. I'll make it up when I get back ... A few days... no need. Taking him... Oh, come on. No... fine." Rolling her eyes, she whispered low into the phone. "okyeahiluvyatoobye." Putting the phone back, she shrugged at Jonas. "Just something we say."

"Mhm."

"Not that it's any of *your* business." Resting her head against the window, she closed her eyes. "Wake me when we get there."

Chapter 46

The Gulfstream 650 headed east. A sleek F-59 Designator – the US Government's highly classified stealth drone – shadowed it twenty miles back. Watching the live feed from a secured room inside Andrews Air Force Base, General Thomas Daniels chomped on his cigar. In his early sixties, he had more tin on his chest than Star-Kist had cans to pack tuna in.

Turning to the well-dressed man, deep blue eyes watched him glancing through a folder stamped *Classified* in large red letters. The ID tag, hanging from his pocket, trumped all the brass General Daniels earned. "Agent Knight," Daniels grumbled, switching the stogie to the other side of his mouth. "Care to tell me why the United States Military is spending taxpayer dollars, using a highly-classified drone, to spy on three private citizens?"

Travis Knight smiled. "Not really." He handed over the files he was perusing, "I'll need everything on Jonas Sparx. And don't give me shit about it being classified. I have a higher security clearance than the President."

Daniels huffed, running a hand through snow-white hair, before taking the files. Giving Travis a curt nod, he exited the room.

Inhaling deeply, Agent Knight of the NSA placed his hands behind his back, staring hard at the live feed. "Dusty, Dusty, Dusty," he mused. "Whatcha got your pretty Lil' self into this time?" As he watched, his secured line rang. "Knight... Yes, sir. Tracking her now... Egypt... I don't believe that will be necessary." His jaw clenched. "Sir, I object to that course of action. She is our only hope of finding out what the item is. We can't—" Sitting up, his brows furrowed. "No, sir. My emotions haven't compromised the mission. I—" he sighed. "Yes, sir. I understand... No reason for reassignment. I'll handle it." After the call, Travis sat back, running a hand through his hair.

General Daniels came back, handing him a disc. "Everything on Jonas Sparx. Isn't much." His brow creased. "Something wrong?"

"New orders." Travis turned, facing Daniels. "How fast can you have an F-15 fueled and ready to go?"

Daniels blinked. "In record time, but we're short on pilots. Most are deployed—"

"I'm the pilot, General. Let me know when it's ready."

The General tilted his head. "Do ya love her?"

"Excuse me?"

"I know that look. Seen it too many times when a man's getting ready for a mission he might not come back from."

"Yeah." Travis nodded.

"Ya told her?"

"Yes. She thinks I'm kidding. I just spoke with her twenty minutes ago." Travis pursed his lips. "General, are you married?"

Daniels held up his left hand, the simple gold band answering the question. "Thirty-seven years in March."

Travis smiled. "Congratulations. When's the last time you told her that you loved her?"

He looked at his watch. "'Bout two hours ago. You should tell her ya love her."

"I will," Travis said, heading for the door. "Right before I put a bullet in her. Let me know when that bird's ready."

Daniel's mouth dropped, letting that cigar fall to the ground as Travis vanished out the door.

To be continued...