

The
Blood
That
Flows

How sweet
is your blood?

Stephanie Van Orman

The Blood that Flows

By Stephanie Van Orman

Virtualventures

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*Dedicated to someone very important to me.
They know who they are, but perhaps it's better if all of you don't know.*

Virtualventures

The Blood that Flows

A Novel

By Stephanie Van Orman

Virtualventures

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Chapter One

Not Just a Bubblegum Girl

“A vampire goes through four phases in its development. One of you two must be able to tell me about them,” Detective Marshall said gruffly. He looked from Dudley to me, like he was expecting us to raise our hands.

Neither one of us moved. Why should we? This wasn't bloody school. We were sitting on mismatched chairs in his cramped office, which smelled of tobacco and old French fries. A pile of paper was on the verge of sliding onto the floor from the top of Marshall's filing cabinet and I suspected a wad of gum ground into the carpet was stuck to my shoe.

Marshall just enjoyed talking like this. A former police chief in some distant city before he'd resigned and moved here to lay down the law about vampires—which would have worked, except here the Chief of Police, Pierce Wagner, was a closet bloodsucker. With Marshall's passion for slaying vampires, it was impossible for him to work with police who sympathized with the undead. So, now he worked as a detective for the masses of humans who hadn't quite got the memo. This was a vampire city.

Me? Yeah, I got the memo. I got it when I was fifteen. Did I know the different phases a vampire went through? Well, I knew some of them but remained unclear on what happened after a certain point. One thing I knew for sure—vampires were not invincible. As for the rest, I'd come here hunting for the gory details of their lifespan, since things in my life had taken a distinct turn for the worst. I couldn't let Marshall know that. He wouldn't trust me if he thought I had my own agenda, so I returned his gaze patiently and acted bored but willing to let him play teacher all day.

I didn't know Dudley's story. He looked like he was in his late twenties with dark eyebrows and a rough five o'clock shadow. His expression read like a tombstone. The message was simple—dead men don't talk and neither do I. Too bad really, since he looked like a movie star from black and white film noir, despite his rough edges.

Marshall waited for several long moments before he grunted, “Get out. You're both worthless.”

Unfortunately, both Dudley and I were in Marshall's office for job interviews. Dudley was applying to be Marshall's partner while I was applying to be his receptionist. Dudley was a private detective already. And me—as I said before, my aspirations were fewer. I just wanted to root around Marshall's files and get as much information on vamps as I could before I got canned.

I cleared my throat, directed my gaze pointedly at Dudley, and said, “Sorry, I rather hoped this would be a private interview.”

“I don't have time for private interviews,” Marshall said crossly.

I ground my teeth together. I didn't want to have to do this, but it was better to act like a fool than to let a vampire hunter masquerading as a private detective in on my true stance. Dumb girl routine number four coming right up. “I'm not interested in vamps,” I said, twirling a lock of my hair. I wouldn't be able to use that routine after I turned twenty-four, so I had to get good use out of it while I could. “I'd rather answer your phone, sort your messages and keep your files straight than get involved with crap that could kill me. I thought you just stalked married women who strayed from the path.”

Marshall gave me a weird look and then opened a jar on his desk and offered me a piece of round pink bubblegum. Probably the same stuff that had been stomped into the carpet.

I shook my head and said, “No thanks. I’m trying to cut back.”

He smiled. He liked me. No problem. I was in.

“Okay, so girlie here is too smart to get involved with vamps. What about you, boyo?”

Dudley shook his head coolly and recited in disinterested tones, “A vampire goes through four cycles. First, they are a human who has been tagged by a vampire to be their mate. If the human is unwilling, it will die.”

“And if the human is willing?”

“Then they will end up sharing massive quantities of their own blood with the vampire as well as drinking the vampire’s blood. A human won’t transform into a vampire unless they consume at least ten liters of vampire blood over two months. During this time, both parties experience a drug-like euphoria where they believe that they can’t possibly live without the other. Even ancient vampires can fall into this hole. Many of them can’t bear to kill their lover, even though they know what will inevitably happen next. Once this first phase is complete, the human is a new vampire and even if it is unreasonable, both the new vampire and the old one are filled with suspicion and anger toward each other. The old vampire liked the human and is disgusted by them once they change, so much so that they will murder them if they have the chance. The new one thinks the old one is jealous of their newfound power and beauty. I’m sure there are plenty of different emotions experienced, but in the end—one of them will kill the other. I’ve never heard of a case where one of them didn’t die. Then there’s the third phase, where the vampire who survived is not a nuisance to anybody. They don’t kill in the third phase.”

All of this, I knew. It was beyond this that I hit unfamiliar territory. What happened in the fourth phase?

Dudley looked indifferent, but he continued. “In the final stage, they want to mate, but vampires don’t exactly mate. They either make a new vampire out of a human and die, or they repeat the process of falling in love over and over again without giving up their legacy. That path turns them into killing machines and causes no end of trouble. I’m sure you’ve seen it.”

Marshall shook his head carefully. Then he looked at me and said, “Be careful who you date.”

I turned my head away saucily. “Why would I want to date anyone?”

Actually, I was having a hard time hiding my discomfort, and turning my head gave me an out. What Dudley said was exactly what I suspected, but I didn’t want to believe it. What mess was I going to have to clean up?

Marshall talked to us some more before he told me I got the job and dismissed me saying, “If you want to stay out of trouble, then you’ve probably heard enough.”

I nodded, shook hands with both of them, and headed out. I particularly looked into Dudley’s face before I left. I wanted to know what he thought of me. His expression was exactly what I expected. He thought I was a piece of fluff—completely unworthy of his attention. Perfect.

Neither of them would have suspected that I was a murderer.

After hearing Dudley’s speech, my story probably won’t seem outrageous. Maybe it’ll make perfect sense.

I'm not really a murderer. They don't call it murder when the victim is a confirmed vampire. They call it 'ending a legacy'. You have to have a license to do it and back when I was fifteen I didn't have one. It's a huge secret that I have one now, even though I haven't killed any vampires since I got it. The police don't issue them to anyone under twenty-one, so I've had mine for two years. Like I said, I don't use it—it's *just in case*.

My story begins when I noticed that my older sister, London, was dating someone. This in itself seemed remarkable, and if you'd known her, you'd know why. Shy doesn't even begin to describe her. When they started dating, I took an interest. She was seventeen when I was fifteen. It was in my best interest to learn as much as I could from her experience—except that she wouldn't tell me about him. The only thing I knew was his name, Schroder. True, I saw him from time to time, but together they only had eyes for each other. I'd never seen obsession disguised as romance before. I thought everyone was like that when they fell in love... until it turned bad.

You guessed it. He turned out to be a vampire and just like in the scenario Dudley took us through—they shared blood until it drove them both mad. London would have been the one to die because even though her instincts were changing, something inside her stayed the same. She was too reserved to murder him and he was strong. He looked to be in his early twenties, but vampires didn't age. Who knew how old he was? There was no way she was the first lover he'd taken, and even though London knew he would eventually kill her, she had no drive to beat him to it.

So, what drove me to do it for her? That part of the story is still a little fuzzy in my memory. I remember one night when they were on the couch. He was drinking her blood while I watched from the shadows. She groaned and something in the sound warned me that he was going too far. Tonight would be London's last night... unless I did something. I knew it wouldn't be enough just to scare him away. No vampire can stay away from the person they have transformed. They are obsessed until one of them is dead. I remember crouching with a knife in my hand and then... blank. I don't remember anything until I came to be standing over his corpse, stained red with his blood, and listening to London's screams. Then I remember disposing of the body—burning it in the backyard along with a huge pile of perfectly good two-by-fours and spruce branches to cover the smell.

That was it.

Looking back, it's hard to believe that I could have had the energy to commit a crime like that and then cover up my tracks. However, to this day no one has questioned me about it.

Sometimes I wonder what kind of vampire Schroder was, not to have anyone know where he went or care once he was gone. Even if the local police didn't care what happened to one useless vampire, one would think that he would have somebody. Instead, no one came looking, and in the weeks and months and years that followed my crime, not a single soul has asked me about him.

Every year since London became a vampire, she has become more and more withdrawn. Is she angry at me for what I did to her lover? If she is, she has never said so. Most of her thoughts are a mystery. She doesn't talk and most days, it seems like she doesn't move. Sunlight hurts her eyes and she says the night reminds her of her mistakes. She stays home. She does craft projects and sells them online, never leaving the flat. We live in an apartment in the city and keep it a secret from our parents that she's been dead for the past eight years. In an area as corrupt as this, it's easier to keep secret than you'd think. The only thing that happens is that my mother comments on our appearances when we come home for the holidays.

“London, you look like an angel,” my mother says wistfully as she gazes dreamily at her oldest daughter. Then she looks at me tragically and says, “Sweeper, have you been using that under-eye concealer I bought you?”

“No,” I answer, even though I exhausted that tube and started on a fresh one. I don’t mind getting old. Old feels clean.

I wasn’t looking for a job related to vampires until London broke from her routine by going out at night. After spending almost a decade inside, she started sneaking out of the apartment, down the fire escape to prowl nightclubs. I followed her almost every night for a week before I realized what was happening. I didn’t like to admit it, but Dudley confirmed the truth. She was looking for a mate. And I was wondering how to dispose of another corpse because I wouldn’t let London’s mate murder her and he surely would if I don’t stop him.

So I applied for the job working for Marshall. How did he get rid of dead vampires?

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Chapter Two

Familiar Face

Monday morning, I showed up for work. Marshall and Dudley were holed up in the former's office. Marshall only surfaced once to show me how to work the coffee machine and give me a pile of non-paying client files to call. Why didn't he mention that I'd be doing that on Friday? I might have thought twice about the job. Reluctantly, I took the stack of files. Then the surly detective gave me forty bucks to go buy them breakfast with. Heck! How long had they been talking?

When I finally sat down to make the phone calls, I realized this job wasn't as meaningless as I supposed. Actually, it was quite the opposite. The first file not only had the billing information but also contained the whole case history. Marshall was supposed to track down a missing person. Marshall had found them—wife gone astray—just as I suggested on Friday. Now the husband was pissed and didn't want to pay.

It wasn't until the fourth file that I found something regarding vampires. It was a simple case. The client just wanted to know if someone they knew was a vampire. They weren't. Case closed.

After that, almost every case was about vampires. For the most part, the conclusions Marshall arrived at were less than satisfactory to the clients, hence they wouldn't pay.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Dudley came out of Marshall's office, carrying a stack of files. He stopped and balanced them on one of the chairs in the waiting room while he sorted them into his briefcase. I felt his eyes on me as I opened the last file.

"Am I that cute?" I ask humorlessly, looking into his unimpressed eyes again.

"You look familiar to me. That's all. I just can't place you."

"Maybe we knew each other when we were growing up?" I suggested, not believing a word of it.

He cocked his head to the side. "It's possible. I remember I knew a girl with the same name as you once, but it couldn't be you. You don't strike me as the kind of woman who would ever choose to slaughter a pig."

The late afternoon sun came through the window to my left and the Venetian blinds cast horizontal shadows across his shirt. It was hard to say what made him so attractive to me at that moment. Even though his face was made up of perfect lines and the sunlight made his brown hair shine like copper—the feeling came from somewhere deeper. Something about him screamed that if he knew everything there was to know about me, he would get it. He would get everything. He would understand why I killed the vampire. He would toast me for not hesitating to do what I had to. He would approve of my protecting my sister and allowing myself to grow old and unused at her side. Maybe it was just a passing fancy—or maybe he was my soul mate and I was going to have to let him slip through my fingers like I had every other man I'd ever wanted to pursue.

He leaned on the desk and looked at my face. "Do we know each other?"

"My memory isn't so good," I said limply.

"Well, I'll think about it," he said as he swung his bag over his shoulder and marched out.

Through the glass partition, I watched him walk down the hall before I got back to work. He had great shoulders.

Then I had a look at the last file's contents. It was an older file—opened three years ago. It was a request from a person who seemed to be a vampire. That surprised me, but I supposed

even vampires sometimes needed a detective service. I bet Marshall was liberal-minded enough to retire vampires on vampire requests as well as human requests. This particular bloodsucker was looking for two vampires who had gone missing. In human time, a person is missing after they have been gone for two or three days. In vampire time, no one thought to look for these bloodsuckers until they had been missing for five years. I stared at the pictures in disbelief. One of the vampires he was searching for was Schroder, and the other one was my sister, London.

I was so shocked I felt like I was having a panic attack, but I refused to lose my visible cool. Rather than worry about the details, I forced my eyes to the front page to see Marshall's conclusion. When I looked at the billing information, I saw that the client was a paying client. Their balance was zero. If that was the case, why was I being asked to call him?

Then I saw something that made me clamp my hand over my mouth. Tucked in the file was a picture of London leaning against a pole at a bar, with me standing in the background. I picked up the picture and examined it carefully with my heart pounding in my throat. Had Marshall realized that I was in this picture? Was he showing it to me intentionally?

Marshall probably needed to contact the client because he'd found a new lead. This file was in the wrong pile.

The old detective began to stir in his office.

I put the picture back and closed the file. Then I stuck a post-it note on the front that read, "No amount owing. Action required?" Then I picked up the pile and went into Marshall's office like I wasn't worried about a thing.

I tapped on his door politely and he called for me to come in.

"I finished the pile," I say nonchalantly. "There are a few minutes before five o'clock. Is there anything else you'd like me to do before I go, Mr. Marshall?"

He turned around and looked at me. Dudley wasn't the only one with an unreadable expression. I couldn't tell if he knew I was connected with London, but if he didn't know, it was only a matter of time before he figured it out. My resume had my address on it and if he followed London home when he saw her at the bar, she would lead him to the same address. However, there was also the possibility that he didn't look at my address carefully. I didn't talk to London at the clubs. Maybe he hadn't made the connection, but all the pieces were there.

I had to do something.

"No," Marshall said, interrupting my thoughts. "You can go home."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow."

I gathered my things and walked out of the office, thinking about evasive action. I could send London home to our parents. That wouldn't be too hard. I could handle her mail (if there was any) while she was in the country and my parents could keep an eye on her until Marshall stopped looking for her. As for me working in his office—it was perfectly fine. You keep your friends close and your enemies even closer.

Besides, our parents lived in the boonies. I wouldn't have to worry about London looking for a mate out there. There is never anyone interesting out there. I only met one remotely appealing boy when I was growing up. He lived next door to us when we were teenagers. He was closer to London's age—totally gawky—but kind and the fabric of some of my best memories growing up.

"What are you thinking about so completely?" Dudley said abruptly, coming up behind me as I exited the building. "You should be more aware of your surroundings. Someone could sneak up on you."

Like him?

I answered wearily, "I guess someone could. Did you forget something upstairs?"

"Not really," he said, slinging his bag over his shoulder in that way of his. "I just thought you might like me to walk you home."

And lead him straight to London, no doubt. Marshall might not have noticed the duplicate addresses, but Dudley could have. He was a P.I. in his own right, wasn't he?

I smiled coyly and prepared to tell a few lies. "Actually, I wasn't going straight home. My fridge is completely empty. I was going out to eat, but I'm sans a companion tonight. Would you care to join me?"

"Your treat?"

"As long as I get to pick where we're going. I'm a receptionist—not a billionaire."

"Does that mean you're going to take me to the café across the street?" he asked, indicating the saddest little joint with grubby windows and no one eating inside.

"Yep," I said positively and began making my way toward it.

Dudley grabbed my arm. "No. That's not even a real restaurant. It's a drug nest. The only people who pop in there are going to get stoned."

"So? I'm sure they still serve food," I said, with my nose in the air.

He sighed. "The point is, the bread will be moldy and the meat will be expired. I'll treat you to a real restaurant."

I nodded.

I was actually hoping he'd refuse me entirely and leave, but having him pay for my meal was a close second.

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Dudley's idea of a restaurant was different from mine. The place had atmosphere. The walls were papered in dark red brocade and the seats were upholstered in black velvet. Each table was lit by a single chandelier hanging over it. The table cloth itself was red with a black fringe.

And he thought the place I wanted to take him was creepy.

He seemed to do a quick reading of my thoughts and before he commented, "This isn't a drug nest. Neither is it a vampire hangout. This is probably one of the safest places to talk in the city. It's run by Russians."

"Really?" I asked skeptically. "So why did you want to bring me here specifically? Is there something you need privacy to say?"

"Do you only like privacy *some* of the time?"

"No," I said, feeling foolish.

He eyed me carefully and let the subject pass. "Your name is Sweeper? That's quite unusual."

I started playing with a lock of my hair and flat out refused to answer such a stupid question. Of course, that was my name. What game was he playing?

"I still can't shake the idea that I know you from somewhere. My first name is Tate. Does that ring any bells with you?"

I tapped my fingers on the table and pretended to think, but I knew that if it didn't ring any bells in two seconds, it wasn't going to. With no bells ringing in my head, I looked at the ceiling to buy some time. He probably didn't remember me from anything other than the case of Schroder and London. He was trying to get me into a position where I had to admit what I knew,

but I was not falling for it and there was no way I had met this stony-faced man before. He wasn't going to corner me.

"If we've met before then I'm sorry—I don't remember you," I said after a lengthy interval.

Then suddenly his eyes went wide. It was only for a moment, but from that single unguarded moment, he betrayed his thoughts. He honestly didn't know who I was before and now he had made the connection.

I sat still and kept my expression neutral.

Could I go to jail for killing Schroder back then? Probably not. What I did was illegal, but killing a vampire wasn't on par with murdering a human. In a way, it was a public service, like returning a corpse to the cemetery. If I got caught by the cops, there was no problem. They were reasonable.

What I was worried about *was illegal* retribution. It sounded like the vampire who hired Marshall was too lazy to track down London himself. In that case, could it be that he was too lazy to take care of the revenge of ending London's legacy himself? If that were true, then Marshall and Dudley could have been asked to kill her. The only thing I needed to do was make sure that no one found my sister. That would be enough as long as they didn't find out it was actually me who killed Schroder.

"What were you like when you were a teenager?" Dudley asked, leaning back in his chair and pulling out the makings for a cigarette. Actually, he wasn't even looking at me.

"Excuse me?" I asked. I was confused. How much did he know? Did he know more about the case than I suspected? I should have looked closer at that file before I gave it back to Marshall. I should have xeroxed it.

Dudley's eyes shone with interest as he went on. "Were you a loner or a diva or..." he hesitated, "a tomboy?"

My eyes narrowed. I actually was a tomboy, but how did he know to ask that? "I was boring. What were you like?" I asked evasively.

To my surprise, he answered clearly—even elaborating a little. "I was a loner, so alone, actually, that I remember my best friends were the girls who lived next door."

"Did they talk to you?"

"One of them did."

Just then my mobile phone rang and I excused myself to answer it. We hadn't ordered yet anyway, so he could hang on a second. Except it wasn't really a phone call. It was my alarm bell going off, but Dudley didn't know that. There are so many ring tones—my alarm bell could be mine. It was set to remind me to wake London up. Usually, if I didn't wake her, she'd sleep all night and all day and then all night again. She'd never wake up.

However, I was looking for an excuse to duck out on Dudley. Yeah, I did say I was attracted to him earlier, but that was before I saw the file on London. I had to get her sent off that night. If I worked all night, I could get all her stuff out by dawn and then have Dudley over for dinner at my place the next night. He could see that she was nowhere to be found. At least, that was my plan.

I pretended to talk on the phone and then made my way back to the table.

"I'm sorry," I said apologetically. "I have to go, but how about if I cook you supper tomorrow night to make up for it?"

Dudley stared at me. "Fine, but can't you have a drink with me before you go?"

I frowned. "I can't. Are you going to be at the office with Marshall tomorrow?"

“No.”

“That’s too bad. Could you meet me outside his office at five?”

He nodded and I smiled charmingly. At least I hoped it looked charming.

I walked out of the restaurant thinking about him. He was a loner, huh?

When I got back to the apartment, I was immediately aware that something was wrong. Did something happen to London?

I ran to her room, threw the door open, and a horrific sight welcomed me.

“Bloody hell!” I exclaimed.

A man, a human, hovered over London. Splattered blood stained the bedclothes and the carpet. London had slashes on her throat and the guy was wiping the blood off his lips with the back of his hand and then licking it off.

“Piss off!” he shouted.

I pulled my phone out of my bag and yelled, “I’m calling the police.”

The guy looked genuinely spooked and made for the window, but I got a good look at him before he tripped down the fire escape. He was blond with unshaven stubble on his chin and light-colored eyes. Like her last boyfriend, I couldn’t see the attraction. He looked creepy, with dark purple lines under his eyes, but then again, what was there to see except someone who wanted to drink blood?

Funny though, I didn’t see that when I looked at London.

My sister lay motionless on the bed with a glassy look in her eyes. Actually, she hadn’t looked sharp since before she became a vamp, but this expression was more vacant than usual. Her dark hair curled around her white face and she stared off into space like she hardly noticed my arrival.

I closed the window, locked it, and drew the curtains. Then I went into the bathroom attached to her room and got a bandage to stop her bleeding. Vampire blood didn’t clot at all compared to human blood. After all, a vampire was only two steps from being a corpse. It would take ages for her cuts to close. As I wrapped her wounds, she yanked the blanket out from under her and pulled it over her chest. If she was cold, he must have drunk quite a bit.

I shuddered. What had London done to her body and for what? It would take her over a year to close up, even after she stitched herself shut. Sometimes I thought vampires were more like Frankenstein’s monster than Dracula. Nevertheless, vampire biology fascinated me. For one thing, their digestive system didn’t work. Since London’s body wasn’t taking in any new nutrients she was surviving on what she got from Schroder, eight years ago. There was no new material to rebuild the broken cells. However, even though her heart ceased to beat, her nervous system still worked beautifully. In fact, it vastly surpassed a human’s. The tiny electric current flowing through her allowed her five senses to keep working. It allowed her to feel pain, to feel tired, and to activate killer reflexes—if she had any. Right now, it looked like she was allowing herself to be drained again. Some vampire she was turning out to be.

If she was cold, her electric functions were slowing down, which meant she hadn’t drunk enough of his blood to maintain the status quo.

I whispered quietly, “How much has he drunk? A cup? A liter?”

Silence.

“Two liters?”

She averted her eyes.

I didn't ask anything after that. She wasn't going to tell me how close she had come to changing him into a vampire. Instead, I got her suitcase down from her closet.

She gazed at me wearily from the bed. "What are you doing?"

My look could have killed, but she was already dead, so my scowl had no effect on her. "I started working for a private investigator today and when I was going through his files, I found a file on you. There's a vampire looking for you and Schroder. I don't want him to find you, so you have to go home until the P.I. closes the case."

"I can't go anywhere," she whispered.

"Why not?"

"Because Garth is here and I have to be with him."

I was so angry I could spit. I stomped around the room cramming her belongings into the case until it was overflowing. "You'll die," I informed her like it was news. "Even if my P.I.'s client doesn't get you... when this guy Garth becomes a vampire, he'll kill you."

"He's not going to kill me. He has some friends that will protect me."

I wasn't surprised by what London said. Nothing she could say would have surprised me at that point. Vampires and humans who are in the love phase will say and do just about anything. It was after the high passed that the dangerous time came, but London was too blind to see it and my hands were tied because the moron she was dating was still a human. Until the recently exiting Garth became a vampire I couldn't do anything to him. It would be better for everyone if the loser stayed human and left her alone.

Well, at least there was one silver lining on that dark cloud day. London said she had to stay here so she could be with Garth. That made it sound like he wouldn't be able to follow her out to our parents' place.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and said, "Listen to me, London. Haven't I protected you all these years? Can't you do just one thing for me and go out to Mum and Dad's without an argument? The private investigator I'm working for—Marshall—is supposed to report your whereabouts to a vampire. What do you think will happen when he does that? Someone will come after you and end your legacy. Please. Put your romance with this guy, Garth, on hold for two minutes. I'll find a way to get Marshall to drop the case. You might be able to come back to the city within a week." I didn't actually believe what I said for a second, but I put my heart into my speech anyway.

London looked tired but otherwise unreadable. It was always like this. I was never sure what she was thinking.

After what felt like an age, she said, "I had actually been thinking of moving out soon anyway, but if you want me to hide out in the country for a few days, I guess I can do that for you. Afterward, I want to move in with Garth."

I frowned... deeply. I didn't want London to move in with her sleazy boyfriend who would inevitably kill her if Marshall's crew didn't, but I couldn't decide if I should argue the point now. This was all happening too fast.

I'd have to cross that bridge when I came to it. The most important thing at that moment was to get London out of the city—away from Marshall. She'd be safer.

I got up off the bed and called to arrange for a truck to come to pick up her things that very night. Then I braced myself for the work of moving her things when she was as helpful as a corpse. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Three

Dinner with the Enemy

The next day at work, my muscles screamed and my mouth yawned in turns. I didn't get to bed until four in the morning and I got up at seven to make it to the office on time. Marshall didn't have anything interesting for me to do and I couldn't tell if he was impressed that I hadn't run away with my tail between my legs when I saw the file yesterday. I still didn't know what he knew about me and London. He was a hard nut to crack.

The night before, after an hour of lying my can off to my parents and six hours of manual labor getting London packed up, I got two and a half hours of sleep—plus fifteen minutes standing in the shower, where I could have fallen and cracked my head open. My workday began with forty-five minutes in transit, followed by eight hours sitting in front of a glowing computer screen and the odd lunch hour where I ate cookies and drank bitter cola to keep myself from passing out. *After* all that, I still had to make dinner for Dudley.

As I came out of the office, he was there waiting for me.

Making polite conversation on the way was unnecessary because we took the train, so we couldn't have heard each other anyway. I just had to focus on staying conscious and believe me—that was hard enough.

At my place, I made a salad out of the vegetables I always kept in my fridge, so it wasn't the freshest thing ever, but tough luck for him. All I hoped was that he wouldn't call me on the somewhat flat lettuce after I lied the night before about having an empty fridge. I made paninis because they were easy and fast. I wasn't sure about Dudley, but I was hungry, and eating now wasn't soon enough.

While I cooked, he wandered around the living room. I didn't care. After four in the morning, there was nothing incriminating to be found. London, and all evidence of her existence, was gone by two. I spent another two hours redecorating, so the place would look respectable for Dudley.

When I finished preparations, I called him to the table. To impress him, I laid the table with my best chartreuse dinnerware.

"It looks good," he says kindly. If you saw what I put on the chartreuse dinnerware, you'd know exactly how kind he was being.

"Thanks," I replied, but as we ate, neither of us spoke except to ask for the salad dressing.

Toward the end of the meal, I was holding my head with one hand and the corner of my panini with the other. I couldn't possibly finish it and as I looked at Dudley across the table, I knew the evening had been a bomb... from a date perspective. From the hiding London perspective—I thought I aced it.

As long as he didn't have a good time, he'd probably be out the door in five, four, three, two...

"Mind if I turn on the news?" he suddenly asked.

"Go ahead," I said in my least encouraging voice, hoping he would catch my drift.

Then he, dead-serious, went into the living room, plunked down on the couch, and turned on the evening news. I poured myself another glass of water and joined him, leaving a good-sized cushion between us on the sofa. After all, he was the enemy. I mean, a man whose idea of changing for the evening is to undo the top button of his shirt without taking off his tie could only be an enemy.

Soon, my water was drunk and we were watching some insipid story about how many dogs need to be adopted at the humane society. Bored, I flopped my chin onto my open palm.

Suddenly, Dudley said, "I remembered where I know you from."

My blood turned cold. "Oh?" I said, trying not to sound like it mattered to me.

"I think I knew you when I was a kid."

"I don't think that's possible," I said, pretending to be very interested in the last drops of water in the bottom of my cup. "I'm twenty-three and you look like you're at least—"

"Twenty-six," he supplied.

Oh, he was younger than I thought.

"I was older than you," he went on. "I lived next door."

Turning toward him, I couldn't stop gawking. I did remember a boy who lived next door. That was right. He was eighteen, and in the same graduating class as London. He was quiet and my memory of him was precious because I thought he was nice. What was his name? It was with the most monumental effort of my mind that I was able to formulate a name—Tate Crosswood. However, I couldn't for the life of me remember what he looked like. Could he be the same guy? The first names were the same.

"I was called Crosswood then," he explained stiffly before I had the chance to speak. "That was the last name of the husband my mum had at the time. When I left home I changed it back to the name I was born with—Dudley. Do you remember me now?"

I blinked. I had no idea how to respond. I couldn't decide if he was who he said he was or if he was pretending in order to get me to talk about London. "H-how have you been?" I finally managed to stutter.

"Well, after that night, things have been... different. My mum was so terrified of my being caught that she moved me straight to the city. I didn't even get to go to graduation."

What was he talking about? He spoke as if I should know, but I had no clue. What night?

"I've felt like a hunted man ever since. I wanted to see how you grew up. You're so different from what I remember. The Sweeper I remember was a pale little teenager with stiff expressions and dark eyes that only followed her sister. You seem much less tense now. I guess that's a relief because it means you weren't damaged by our escapade. Even though you've changed, there's still something about you. There was never anything remotely special about London. In my opinion, she was far below average. I've always wondered why that vampire chose her."

"What?" I said. What I meant to say was, 'What did you just say about *my* sister?' Heat filled my head.

Dudley didn't seem to notice he had offended me. Instead, he seemed lost in thought as he continued. "I finally decided. I think he chose London because he knew she wouldn't be strong enough to murder him when the time came. While working as a private investigator, I've seen a few documents on him. He was a crafty bloodsucker. London was his seventh lover. He was used to the routine. He just didn't expect you to interfere. Me either, for that matter."

Dudley looked at my face and he finally seemed to realize that something was wrong with me. I was a mass of confusion. I could only follow a little of what he said. Some of it made sense to me and some of it didn't. Why would his mother ship him off? I had no memory of that. Not to mention that I was ticked off by the way he had insulted London. Forget whether or not his accusations were justified. It wasn't his place to say those things about my sister—whether I had thought them myself or not.

“Sorry, I probably shouldn’t be talking about London so casually. Thinking about her probably hurts you.”

Now he was apologizing?

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry for,” I say nonchalantly. “It doesn’t hurt me to think about her.”

Now it was his turn to look confused. “Sorry,” he said again. “I just thought you loved her so much that you’d be crushed when she died.” He took one look at my face and revised his comment. “She’s not dead,” he said, realizing his mistake. “Sorry. I’m an idiot.”

“Why did you think she was dead?” I asked briskly.

“I thought she was the weak type. It’s hard to imagine she’s survived all these years. I wonder how she’s made it.”

Now we were on a train of thought I *could* understand. Whether he knew London and me in the past didn’t matter if he was chasing her for Marshall and trying to pump me for information. He wanted me to brag about how I had been the one to keep her alive. I couldn’t do that. I had to be slick.

“Well, it’s been a while since I’ve seen her. I’m not really sure how she’s making out.”

Dudley’s next expression surprised me. It was like he thought if I hadn’t heard from her recently she was dead for sure. He thought I was being naïve.

Well, I was not volunteering any more information. I was about to suggest to him that he head for the door when suddenly our attention was drawn back to the TV. The news was over and instead of their regular programming, they were showing a movie. Dudley looked interested in it and put the remote on the armrest. Unfortunately, I was not brash enough to throw him out, even though I was dead tired. It would leave a bad impression after he said how we knew each other when we were teenagers.

I did okay keeping my eyes open for the first half-hour of the film. After that, I started to fade. I didn’t want to fall asleep, but the day and the night and the day of hard work were catching up with me and I couldn’t stay awake anymore.

I slept.

In my dream, time turned back years and years. I was beside a fire and I was dead tired—a lot like now. There were slivers of wood in my palms and I tried to pull them out as I lay back, my head resting on someone’s thigh.

Gentle hands took mine, one by one, and the worst of the splinters were removed quickly and painlessly with the tweezers on a Swiss pocket knife.

I looked back at the fire and saw the feet of the vampire we were burning.

Suddenly I woke with a start, my tired mind trying to sort out my dream of the past. Those weren’t London’s hands touching mine. She didn’t help me burn the body. Who else was there?

In the here and now, I sat in my own apartment with my head resting on Dudley’s shoulder. His arm was around me and his cheek rested on the top of my head. “I have never been sorry for helping you,” he said gently.

Chapter Four

Memories Bleeding In

Then memories flooded in.

The room was black except for the TV's blinking screen. I'd been reading in my room and came out for a drink of water. London and Schroder were making out on the couch. The acid in my stomach turned sour and disgust bubbled up in my throat. I crept into the kitchen, needing that glass of water more than ever. I turned the tap on, scarcely more than a drip.

The truth was her boyfriend terrified me. London said he was a vampire. That wasn't difficult to believe. He scared me. London said he had made her into a vampire. Whatever. I didn't know what to believe. She seemed the same to me.

As I carefully stopped the water, I heard London's sharp intake of breath. I stood there for a second, trying to imagine what that sound meant. I drank my water and as I swallowed, I remembered the last time that sound had come out of my mouth. It was the last time I had needed a vaccine. I put my cup on the counter and snuck through the dining room to approach the living room from another direction. Sinking onto the floor in horror, I watched a streak of red run in a single stream down her neck and pool in the crevice of her collarbone. He licked it out. I put my hand over my mouth to stop them from hearing my gasp. He was drinking her blood.

I didn't go for the knife right away. I sat there, stunned. Why was he doing this? Wasn't she already a vampire? Didn't she already give up her life to be with him? I got the phone and called 9-1-1.

"9-1-1. State your emergency."

"There's a vampire in my house. He's drinking my sister's blood," I whispered.

There was laughing on the other end of the line. Vampires weren't as common in those days. "Listen, kid, you can be fined for making prank calls to 9-1-1. Don't let it happen again!"

"I'm telling the..."

They had already hung up.

I went back to my hiding place. I started watching the clock. He had been sucking her blood for five minutes. Then ten minutes. Then fifteen minutes. I couldn't stand this. He was literally draining her. I crept back to the kitchen and got the knife. It was the biggest, sharpest one in my mother's butcher block. Then I hid behind the armchair and tried to get up the courage to step forward and stop what was happening.

London moaned. It sounded like she was dying. I couldn't stand it any longer. I got up.

"Schroder, stop it," I bawled, practically crying as I shifted my weight between my feet. I hid the knife behind my back, clenching the handle in my fist.

He continued drinking, not even acknowledging my presence.

"Schroder!" I yelled, gathering up my nerve. "Get off her!"

He let go. She fell limp on the couch. The rip he had cut into her throat was alarmingly large. I could see tendons completely exposed and her gore splattered across her white shirt. I thought he had killed her and I pulled my knife out so he could see it.

"What are you going to do with that?" he asked condescendingly.

I lunged.

He jumped out of the way. "She's a vampire. This is nothing to us."

"Nothing? She's dead!" I scraped the blade across his chest, and a trail of blood flowed.

Schroder's expression changed. "She's not dead!"

I hesitated.

He continued, his eyes were like death lanterns floating in the river—inhuman. “But I’m going to kill her over and over again until I get it right.” He spat at me and his spittle splattered across my cheek. I touched my cheek with my free hand. It was London’s blood he’d spat at me. In slow motion, I stared at the red liquid and felt its slippery quality between my fingers as Schroder moved toward her.

I sprang forward and grabbed his shoulder. He responded easily to my touch and swung around to face me. I plunged the blade into his chest. He tried to grab my knife-wielding hand, but I wouldn’t let him get it.

He lost blood in torrents as I scraped and stabbed. His hands moved like lightning to fend off my advance, but I fought like I was possessed and he couldn’t stop me. My final stroke hit home, right into his heart, and just as I wrenched the knife free he took hold of my wrist. He squeezed it so tightly I dropped the knife. He gripped my other wrist in his free hand, pushing me against the wall.

I’m dead, I thought.

I cringed and closed my eyes. I didn’t dare look at his expression. I thought I heard him lick his lips.

Then Tate broke through the backdoor. “Sweeper!” I heard him call. I opened my eyes and saw his lank figure enter the room. He picked up a lamp and slammed the stainless steel bottom into the back of Schroder’s head.

“Tate!” I screamed.

In hardly a moment, the gawky teenager jumped on Schroder from behind, and together, he and I brought the vampire down on the hardwood floor.

“Sit on him!” Tate yowled as he forced Schroder’s arms down.

I sat down on his chest, and as I did, the blood overflowed from his wounds and soaked my thighs and between my legs. Under me, I could see his cuts gape, showing the whiteness of his bare ribs. I turned my head and choked down the bile.

“He’s a vampire. We have to kill him!” Tate said as he snatched up the knife.

“Just do it,” I moaned.

Schroder was screaming and clawing like a maniac, but I managed to crush him under my weight, forcing his wounds open. Tate took the knife and cut, cut, cut, thwack! It was gruesome. The spinal column severed and the head fell loose away from the body. I fell off the dead vampire and puked.

That was the truth.

Dudley was the one who helped me prepare the pyre in the backyard. I remembered the way he looked with his thin arms and large hands carrying load after load of hardwood until he had covered Schroder’s body in the bottom of the fire pit. I sat still drenched in blood; desperately fatigued and so traumatized I couldn’t stop shaking. I thought his strength must be at its limit, but he kept working. He kept trying until he finally lit the pyre. Then he sat and held me in front of the fire all night.

In the morning, there was nothing left of Schroder, but ashes. He was gone.

My parents were out of town, so they didn’t find us, but Tate’s mother did. She helped us clean up my living room and afterward, she sent Tate away. She didn’t want him caught up in my mess.

I blocked every shred of memory—taking all the responsibility upon myself when we had done it together.

He helped me, putting his whole life on the line, because back then... he loved me. My heart nearly bled at the realization of it.

“I remember now,” I heard myself say, though the words seemed inadequate to describe my feelings. Dudley looked at me with an intensity I could scarcely return, so I looked away and kept talking. “I’m really sorry I didn’t remember you on sight. I should have. It’s just that I was kind of disturbed by what we did and I...”

He shook his head. “It’s okay. After my mother sent me away I felt like I needed to be in therapy, except that I couldn’t tell anyone what I’d done. I wanted to contact you a million times just to settle myself, but my mother made me promise not to. She didn’t want me connected to any of it. I think she wanted you and London to be blamed for the whole thing if it were discovered. I’m glad it wasn’t. And I got over my mental problems by killing vampires until I couldn’t feel anything anymore.”

When he said that last bit, a knot grew in my throat. “You aren’t thinking of hunting London, are you?”

“No,” he said, his expression was appalled. “What makes you think I would want to?”

“Marshall *is* chasing her,” I admitted, and yeah, my tongue was a little looser than usual, but Marshall’s case involved Dudley as much as it did me. Besides, he’d saved my life and my sister’s life once, why not help us again? I might as well lay my cards on the table to see what he could make of them.

“Really?”

“I saw the file.”

“Does he know she’s your sister?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had the chance to figure him out. I know that a vampire asked him to find London and Schroder. The file was mixed in with some old cases. From the history in the file, it looked like Marshall wasn’t having any luck. The case was closed for years until he saw London in a nightclub and took a picture of her.” I bit my lip and continued, “I’m in the picture. I’m in the background and I’m a little out of focus, but I’m definitely there. Everything points to London and me being together. He’s looking for that vamp’s murderers—London and me—”

“And me,” Dudley interrupted.

I smiled wanly and continued as if he hadn’t said anything. “I just don’t know if Marshall has made the connection between me and London yet. I guess he hasn’t talked to you about the case?”

“Not one word, but you know it’s unlikely that he thinks someone other than London killed Schroder. Marshall would probably end her legacy just to close the file. It’s possible that’s what the vamp hired him to do in the first place. Where’s London right now?”

I rolled my eyes. “I moved her back to my parents’ place for the time being. I didn’t want her bar-hopping and lately, there’s been this guy.”

Dudley’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Is he her first lover since...”

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“I’m sorry, but I meant what I said earlier about London being dead. I am shocked she’s managed to stay alive all these years. She was always such a trembling little rabbit of a girl. I can’t imagine becoming a vampire changed that.”

I put my fingers between my eyes and squeezed my nose bridge. “I know. If I don’t do something, either Marshall, or the monster who hired him, will probably kill her.”

“It’s not the fact he’ll kill her that worries me.”

I pulled my hand away from my face. “What are you talking about?”

Dudley’s face was pale and his dark eyes looked hesitant. “Haven’t you ever wondered why the vampire population never goes down?”

“Huh?”

“If a vampire can’t have offspring and their only way of reproducing is making a new vampire and dying, then why are there always plenty of vampires when they kill each other and vampire hunters like me keep killing them? Shouldn’t the number of vampires go down until they become extinct?”

What he said was true and I didn’t know the answer.

“Groups of humans sometimes catch a vampire to drain it and drink its blood, until all the members of the human coven have been transformed into vampires. It’s against a vampire’s nature and is basically hell for them. It’s supposed to be worse than gang rape is for a human. To make it worse, the process takes months—”

My mouth was dry as I finished his thought. “And then they kill the vampire.”

Dudley nodded.

London’s words filled my head as I remembered what she said before she left. *He has some friends that will protect me.* Suddenly, I felt sick to my stomach. London was precisely the kind of vampire who would end up a target for people like that.

“How many people do this? How many people gang up to hunt a vampire?”

“I think three to five is the normal number, but I’ve heard of incidents of covens as large as eleven,” Dudley said. “Obviously, the more humans the longer it takes and the worse it is for the vampire.”

I was on the verge of screaming as I picked up my phone and programmed my parents’ number in. With each ring, I felt my heart would stop if no one responded.

My mother answered.

“Is London there?” I demanded without delay.

My mother’s voice was sweet and patient. “Not now. She went out to meet some friends who were visiting from the city. Do you want me to have her call you when she gets back?”

“No. Do you know where she went?”

“She just said she’d be back later.” I could tell from my mother’s tone she was imagining how jealous I was of London’s beauty and social life. *As if!*

I shrugged off my response and spoke as normally as I could under the circumstances.

“Thanks. I’ll try her mobile.”

I hung up and called my sister’s cell phone. It rang and rang. I ended up leaving a pointless rambling message for her to call me. I had no idea what else to do. Pacing my living room, I was becoming hysterical.

“Calm down,” Dudley said, putting his hands on my upper arms to steady me. Looking in my face he continued, “Do you know where she could be?”

“No!” I shouted, pushing him away, my cheeks flushing with hot blood. “If she left my parents’ house then I have no bloody clue. She could have gone anywhere with that guy.”

“Then there is something we can try.”

“What?”

“Marshall. If he’s chasing her, he might know where her lover is.”

“That’s brilliant!” I exclaimed.

“Let’s go.”

Virtualventures

Chapter Five

Bleeding her Dry

Marshall's office windows were dark when we got there. We stood on the sidewalk. I peeked around a post office box while Dudley followed me and frowned at the black building.

"Do you have a key?"

He frowned. "No, but I half expected him to be here."

"What are you two doing?" a voice rang behind us.

It was Marshall. He stood in the middle of the sidewalk, dressed in his gray suit with his gut hanging over his belt.

I didn't know what to say. My tongue was tied in more knots than a ball of yarn the cat had been playing with.

Dudley salvaged the situation by doing the talking. "We want to discuss a case you've been working on," he said smoothly.

Inwardly, I chuckled. I thought Dudley didn't talk.

Luckily, Marshall looked interested. "Oh?"

In Marshall's office, I found the file on London and got a closer look at it. Dudley explained the situation while I read furiously. It was just as I remembered, except that the file had been updated since I last saw it.

I stared in disbelief at the messy scrawl in front of me. "So, you already contacted this vampire—Roan—with London's whereabouts three days before my job interview here?"

Marshall nodded and rubbed his chin. "It's too bad. Sweeper, you should have come to me about your sister when you saw the file. I don't know what I could have done, but—"

"Do you think he'll go after her?" Dudley asked, cutting him off.

"Probably," Marshall said unhelpfully. "It's hard to imagine why he would have made the request if that wasn't his plan."

"And you didn't get any information on any of the humans who made contact with London?" I asked impatiently.

"No. That didn't matter to me. I was just doing my job—limited as it was."

Dudley shook his head disapprovingly and muttered something crossly under his breath.

"I understand," I said sympathetically. I couldn't say that I would have done more work than I was paid to do in his place, either. I put it out of my mind, pulled out a pen, and copied the contact information for the vampire, Roan. There was only one thing to do. I'd have to hunt him down and see what he knew about London.

"Sorry, I can't be more helpful," Marshall said, speaking more to the disgruntled Dudley than to me.

Dudley scratched the back of his head as I finished writing the address.

"Thanks, Marshall," I said as I got up. "Just to let you know, I might not come to work tomorrow."

I didn't stay to watch Marshall's eyebrows or the rest of his reaction. I left the office. I needed to get to Roan's house on the edge of the city. The address was part of a village the growing city had swallowed up.

As I marched out, I thought about the things I needed to take if I was going to confront a vampire. I didn't have a car, so I needed to arrange for transportation. Maybe a taxi was the best I could do. My vampire slaying license was in my pocket. Weapons? I didn't have anything with me other than the standard pepper spray. The only gun I had was at home and I only had four bullets. So it was probably a waste of time to go home. I would have to go shopping.

Dudley followed me out of the building and grabbed my arm. "You're not thinking of going to talk to that vampire, are you?"

"It's the only lead."

"Try calling London again."

I steadied my hands and tried her number, but it just rang and rang. No one answered.

"See?" I said, tossing my mobile at him. "What else am I supposed to do?"

He caught it in one hand. "I'll go with you."

"Got a gun?" I fumed, marching away from him.

"I got fifty."

I did a double-take. "What?"

Dudley smiled while I stared.

Vampire hunters masquerading as private detectives; why didn't I have them in my life before?

As it turned out, Dudley and I stood outside Roan's mansion by two o'clock in the morning. I was exhausted and my nerves were strung as tight as bowstrings. The cab pulled away from the curb. Now there was no way out.

I looked over at Dudley. He looked just the same as he did when I met him in Marshall's office the first time—silent and serious. That must be what his mask looked like. His thoughts weren't the only things he was hiding. Of course, you couldn't tell by looking at him, but he had three guns and two retractable knives that extended as long as katanas.

Me? I was carrying less. His swords were too heavy for me, so I wore a knife and two guns; one in the back of my pants and one in my boot.

Lights cast inverted shadows on the front yard grass as we headed up the steps toward the house. Maybe we would be able to see something through one of the windows—especially the basement ones.

After we'd gone around the house twice, Dudley whispered, "It looks clean and it is very quiet. The house is probably empty. Unless Roan is on the second or third floor."

"Should we just ring the doorbell then?" I said, trying to be funny.

"No," Dudley smirked. "We should check the garden shed."

"Why?"

"There's a light on. It's dim, but there. Can you see it?"

I nodded.

The shed he was referring to looked like a former garage, abandoned when the owner built a four-car garage onto the main structure of the house.

Dudley and I crept up to the shed and looked in the window. It was dusty, but through the grime, I could see the white outline of a square on the floor. Light shone around the edges of a trap door.

I tugged at Dudley's sleeve. "Do you see that?"

He didn't say anything. Instead, he tried opening the window.

"Do you think we need to break in?" I whispered. "Maybe we should go to the house and ask for the vamp himself?"

Dudley's face finally showed some emotion and he looked pained. "I'm sorry, Sweeper. I think this situation is much more serious than you realize. I'm worried about London. Do you think vampires who are made the natural way care about each other? They don't. Vampires only care about each other when they are vampires made with the same blood." He breathed deeply and then looked me gravely in the eye before he continued, "Roan and Schroder probably had a pact and slew their vampire host together and now Schroder is dead, his partner in crime is looking to repeat the crime with London as the victim. It wouldn't surprise me if London went prowling for a mate, didn't find one (she has got to be the most backward vampire in the world), Marshall told Roan her whereabouts, he found her looking for a mate and supplied her with a human he prepared. Actually, it's quite possible he has more than one human he wants to transform into a vampire. Don't get me wrong. I don't know for certain, but London might be here, so we need to be careful and snoop before we barge into the house."

After giving me one last look—I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be encouraging or comforting—Dudley started to pry the window open.

Now he had my attention, he wasn't moving nearly fast enough. I almost pushed him aside to jam the thing open myself. My panic was turning into frenzy.

Finally, Dudley got the window open and I held it up with one hand while he helped me through. Once I was inside, I turned to pull him in. Within seconds we were both standing on unholy ground beside shelves of seeds and fertilizer.

I felt impatient as long as we were still outside. Now I felt like an intruder.

We crept along the old garage wall until we came to the trap door. There was a carpet rolled up beside the entrance. It looked like it was normally used to keep the trap door hidden. Someone must be down there.

Dudley seemed to think this was another bad sign and drew his gun, cocked it, and slid it back up his sleeve. "Everyone is down there," he whispered. "That's why there's no one to cover the door after them. You should stay up here."

"No. I'll cover you," I said, getting the gun out of my boot.

Dudley carefully lifted the trap door and, after peering through the gap, threw it open.

I looked down. A dimly-lighted bulb in the cellar shone upon a tiny staircase leading down. There we could see another door, which was closed.

Dudley glanced at me and then proceeded down the steps.

I followed him, grateful he didn't try to aggravate me by telling me to stay behind again.

Sounds came from behind the door. I put my head to the wood, but couldn't hear much. I could make out a woman's voice and a man's. I couldn't understand what they were saying, though it was obvious they were yelling.

Dudley cracked the door open and we peered through the gap. The only thing visible was a man's back. Light shone in the basement, which was more than I expected for a vampire gathering. I could just make out the man's burgundy velvet dinner jacket. His blond hair was slicked back, covering the neck of his jacket, but the white hands by his sides told the tale—he was a vampire.

I could hear his voice now as he said, “Your story is *almost* believable, but you’re so weak. It’s hard to believe you killed him on your own. The thing is, if you didn’t kill him, then who did?”

The vampire turned to the side and when I saw his face, I had to slap a hand over my mouth to keep myself from screaming.

“Bloody hell,” Dudley mouthed.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. “Isn’t that Schroder?”

“It can’t be.”

Then I heard London’s voice. She sounded exhausted and slightly choked. “It was all a mistake. I loved him.”

“You’re probably delirious from the blood loss,” the vampire continued, “but try to concentrate. I didn’t ask you if you loved him. I asked you who killed him.”

London didn’t answer.

I bit my lip. This was intolerable.

“London, I think you don’t quite understand the situation. There are fifteen of them and one of you. Each of them needs ten liters of blood within eight weeks. I have only started seven of them. It would be best for you to let them drink in shifts, rotating, so you don’t have to give the entire hundred-and-fifty liters in two months. If you don’t answer my question, I’ll start another three tonight. Do you really want me to make it worse?”

London sobbed.

I moved to open the door, but Dudley stopped me. I pushed away his hand and reached for the door.

Dudley grabbed my shoulders and pulled me away from the door before I could move it. I fell backward and as we both fell to the ground, I landed between his legs. With his chest against my back and his breath on my cheek, he whispered desperately, “There are at least sixteen of them already in there, if not more. Fifteen of them are still humans. We can’t shoot them. We have to wait until some of them leave before we can get to her. It’s too dangerous to go in now.”

“But!” I hissed.

“But nothing,” he retorted. “If we go in now, we’re both dead. Let’s just listen.”

My face was like fire as I nodded and Dudley patted me on the shoulder. We stood up and resumed our position in front of the door crack.

The vampire extended his hand and it looked like he was about to snap his fingers, when London screamed, “My next-door neighbor!”

“Shit,” Dudley breathed, but he didn’t move.

“Really?” the vampire said, pausing in mid-motion. “And what was that ‘neighbors’ name?”

“I don’t remember,” she mumbled.

“You don’t remember? Well, there are some things a person should never forget. One of them would be the name of a loved one. Let me tell you some things I remember about Schroder. He was my twin. I lost count of how many people he killed for my sake, including the little bitch that sucked my blood and tried to end my legacy before I even started living.”

“This is much worse than I thought,” Dudley muttered.

Then the vampire stepped out of the way and I could see London. She was strapped to a table with her arms extended—her wrists were tied to poles on either side of her. She had cuts in her wrists and the blood was dripping into a pail on one side and into a human’s mouth on the other.

I couldn't stand by and watch this. Dudley put his arms around my shoulders from behind and held me tightly to his chest to stop me from doing anything stupid, but he didn't attempt to stop me from looking.

The vampire went on through set teeth. "Give me a name now, or I'll add another three."

London's head lolled back. "Tate Crosswood," she admitted weakly.

"Ah, now you're being reasonable, but here's the clincher," he said, moving languidly toward her and rubbing his temple. "Do you have proof?"

"It was eight years ago. What kind of proof are you looking for?"

"Well, for instance, did someone besides you see him do it?"

There was another pause and I grabbed Dudley's fingers. What this vampire was doing to my sister was too cruel and it seemed like London was going to take Dudley and me to hell with her.

"Once again, did anyone beside you see him do it?"

I couldn't see the vampire now, because he was standing by her legs, but I heard her gasp as he cut her.

"My sister saw him!" London screamed.

"Good. Your sister saw him. Garth, I believe you mentioned something about a sister. Can you tell me more about her?"

I couldn't see Garth, but the enthusiasm in his voice made me wince. "She was her roommate in the city. Her name is Sweeper. I'll give you the address."

"No thanks, Garth. I already have it." The vampire came back into view. He was sucking on the knife's point like it was a lollipop. "Well, I think that finishes our first meeting nicely. Garth, you keep our princess company while I'll go check on these 'facts'."

"Don't hurt my sister!" London yelled.

"Of course, I won't hurt her." The vampire chuckled ironically. "Just so long as she tells me what I want to hear, then she definitely won't get hurt. I wonder if she's like you or if she has more spirit. I haven't had a proper mate in a while. Maybe she would do. You know how much fun it is to mate, don't you, London?"

"Don't touch my sister!"

"We've got to go," Dudley hissed in my ear.

Halfway up the stairs, I heard Roan's voice proclaiming to the whole room, "We'll meet again tomorrow night."

When we reached the shed, we heard the door open and movement in the stairwell. Dudley chucked me out the window. I landed on my can with a bump. Biting down on a scream, I scrambled to my feet and frantically pulled Dudley after me. We couldn't risk being discovered. I had already seen what they did to vampires and I didn't want to know what they did to humans. They seemed utterly ruthless. Dudley toppled to the ground. I closed the window as quietly as I could before ducking down.

"Which way should we go?" I panted.

"Around the back. They'll probably go to the house."

We snuck around to the back of the garage when, suddenly, I bumped into the front end of a black BMW. That was why there were no cars out front. The human coven had all parked behind the old garage. There were six cars in total.

"Bad idea," I hissed, just as I heard the side door to the garage open and voices as the group came out.

“Keep going and we’ll start walking down the alley. Maybe we can hide in one of the neighbor’s rose bushes.”

Keeping our heads down, we got past the cars and onto the paved alleyway.

“This isn’t going to work,” I said, nothing but solid stone fences and closed garage doors in front of us. “They’re all going to have to drive past us as they leave. They’ll see us for sure.”

Dudley took my hand. “Let’s try to run to the end of the block and get around to the front.”

I nodded and we took off.

I could hear their voices and car engines igniting. My heart pounded, my breath came in short gasps, and my feet didn’t move fast enough.

And I had to leave London.

I glanced behind me to see if any of them were headed toward us. The first car moved, but luckily it headed in the opposite direction.

We made it to a curve in the alley and Dudley threw us both into a shadow. I saw a cluster of garbage cans and ducked down behind one. Dudley jumped in beside me and I moved over to make room for him. He pulled out a notepad from his inside coat pocket and flipped it open.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Keep quiet.”

When the first car came our way, he jotted down the license plate number, but after it passed the air was quiet.

“Only one car turned our way. The rest must have gone left, but we should wait here to make sure.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. It’s a pity there are no good hiding places between here and Roan’s. If he locks up his back gate after the last car leaves, we’ll have to sneak back to the front if we want to save London tonight.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Well, we have to wait a few minutes. Roan made it sound like he was leaving Garth in the basement alone with her, so if we only have to get rid of him—it should be pretty easy—even if he is a human. One of us should probably get a car before that.”

“I could take a taxi out to my parents’ place and borrow theirs,” I suggested, knowing it wasn’t a good idea before I finished speaking.

“If we’re going to do that, then maybe it would be better if we came back tomorrow night.”

“No. We can’t leave London here like this.”

“Then we’ll have to steal one of Roan’s.”

“Can we do that? What if he calls the police?”

Dudley’s voice was hesitant and when it finally came, it sounded hoarse. “I have actually been thinking of calling them myself. Even though just being a vampire is technically illegal, you probably know the chief of police is a vampire.”

“Pierce Wagner?”

“Yeah. Even though he’s a bloodsucker, that doesn’t mean he would condone this kind of behavior. It’s out of harmony with a true vampire’s nature. It’s torture. There’s a reason why there can’t be more than eleven members to a human coven. A vampire simply doesn’t have enough blood to change all of them without being drained completely dry even if they let her suck their blood. Those humans Roan has gathered don’t know that if he isn’t careful, London won’t live through the ordeal and probably the only one who will actually end up becoming a

vampire will be Garth. Although it's possible Roan may sabotage his transformation as well. The rest will die if they don't find another vampire to finish their dosage."

"Should we report them?"

Dudley sucked in his breath. "I don't know if the police or Pierce Wagner would take our side. I've had a few dealings with him, but not enough to predict how he would respond. I don't know the history behind the most important police officer's transformation. Maybe the police would sympathize with us, or maybe they'd kill us just for seeing what one of their buddies was doing. I don't know."

I didn't know either, so I clapped my jaw shut and sat quietly.

"The thing is, whenever I've been faced with something similar, I've just killed the vampire the humans were draining and put an end to it, but I can't do that this time. What do you want to do, Sweeper? Should we come back tomorrow or should we try to save London tonight? What do you think?"

I sat down, pulling my knees up to my chin, and thought. This whole thing was a disaster. Roan could have already left the mansion and gone to my apartment to find me. Luckily, I wasn't there. If he went there and found that I wasn't, the next place he could go was to my parents' place. They were home. What would he do to them? They didn't know anything about this. They didn't even know London was a vampire. How could I prompt them to get them out of there? I couldn't. They probably wouldn't believe me. Rather than having him meet my parents and possibly torturing them, it might be better for me to meet him first, but the thought made my stomach turn and my head delirious—like I was in a nightmare.

But on the other hand, if Roan left to go to my place then maybe ripping off one of his vehicles wouldn't be as hard as I was imagining. The timing would work out better that way because then I could take London directly to our parents while Roan was still at my apartment.

Then something else came to my mind. "Dudley, do you think Roan will be able to hunt you down since you changed your name?"

A muscle near his eye twitched. "It will probably slow him down a little, but I can't hide forever. Besides, there's no need to worry about me. You're the one who's in immediate danger."

"Let's go get London," I said, getting to my feet. "We'll try going around the back way and if that fails, we'll try the front. I don't want to wait for any more cars. I think they already left the other way."

Dudley nodded and got up.

Chapter Six

Dudley Doesn't Need a Wooden Stake

The alley was quiet as we made our way back. The gate behind Roan's mansion was closed, but as I inspected the latch, I saw there was no lock. I could open it just fine.

"Why isn't there a lock?" I asked Dudley.

"It's probably a sign Roan doesn't do this sort of thing all the time. If he did, there would be locks on the gate and the shed windows. He's doing this specifically to avenge Schroder. It's not his regular entertainment or business."

"Is that a good sign?"

"No. If he's usually a well-behaved vampire, he could have friends in high places who back him as a moral blood drinker."

I shuddered. That was a bad sign.

The yard was empty behind the shed now. All the cars were gone.

"Let's just try the front door," Dudley said as he walked past the window to the shed and opened the door.

Once inside, we could see the carpet spread out over the entrance to the cellar. Dudley stooped to roll it up while I held my gun at the ready. Once it was off the trap door, I could see there was no light coming from under it. Dudley swung the door open into blackness.

Dudley took out his gun and motioned that he was going down first. "It's dangerous to turn on the light, in case someone in the house sees it," he cautioned. "Stay at the top of the stairs, so you can alert me in case there's trouble."

I did as I was told and watched the doors. My heartbeats ricocheted around my ribcage, but Dudley came right back up and said, "It's empty."

"What?" I exclaimed, not bothering to keep my voice down.

"They must have either taken London into the house or driven her away in one of those cars. Let's check the house."

I was going to have a heart attack. This whole situation was so much worse than I envisioned when I struck out to save London tonight. Who was I kidding? I wasn't experienced enough to protect London.

I peered down the stairs into the blackness and wondered if Dudley could make up for all that I wasn't.

Through the eighty percent shadow, his face looked tired and strained.

"All right," I said, throwing my lot in with him.

The mansion wasn't as big as I thought it was—not by half. Dudley and I searched the place as best we could without going inside. Who knew? Maybe there was another secret trap door that led to another pit of misery. If there was, we couldn't find it from the outside. In any case, we gave up looking at around five.

Regardless of the time, I called my parents. Annoyed, they said London had called them and told them she was going to stay with her boyfriend for a day or two so she wouldn't be home. I asked them if they had his address or phone number and of course, it turned out they were too dumb to ask. They didn't think anything was wrong.

Now I was sitting on Dudley's couch with a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I didn't smoke or drink coffee. I was just trying to look normal in front of Dudley who was drinking a cup of coffee and smoking heavily.

He ground out the last fragments of his cigarette and leaning across the table, took mine. "I know you're shocked, but try to pull it together," he said before taking a long drag.

Actually, I was so tired I could hardly think straight. I had only ended up at Dudley's because I fell asleep in the cab we took when we left Roan's. Dudley couldn't take me home under the circumstances, so he brought me to his place instead. He didn't try to carry me into his apartment. Instead, he shook me until I was conscious enough to walk in by myself.

Dudley lived in a nice place. The long living room's huge windows viewed the west. Two leather sofas with a coffee table between them faced a large screen T.V. at the end. As for the rest of the apartment, I hadn't seen it yet.

I wanted to pass out, but Dudley wanted to talk and who was I to deny him? I didn't think he was the type to talk.

"Are you scared?" he asked hoarsely.

"Not really," I answered truthfully, but I might have been too exhausted to realize the ramifications of everything that had happened. "I was sort of worried about my parents at first, but after I talked to them on the phone, I don't think there's much danger."

"Probably not. No matter how I think of it, I just don't think Roan is an animal. The way his place was set up just didn't make it look like he was. Did you see the table he had London on?"

I nodded, but I felt sick.

"Well, vampires who do that sort of thing for a living—"

"For a living!" I blurted, whipping my head toward him.

"Well, yeah. Vampires might not need to eat to live, but they want other things—beautiful surroundings, travel, vehicles, clothes, and other luxurious items. They can't just sit around and wait for wealth to come to them. Vampirism generally makes ordinary-looking people look beautiful. Death can do that to people, but that doesn't mean making them vampires will make them any more resourceful. Lots of them aren't better at making money after death than they were before it. They were weasels when they were alive and they're still weasels after they're dead. Most vampires are made the way we saw tonight, except if Roan did it as a regular thing, he would have had better equipment for strapping London down. Since he's a gentleman, we're going to have a harder time."

I paused and I let what he told me sink in. Even though I lived with London for eight years, I really didn't know anything about vampires at all.

Dudley lit a new cigarette and the smoke in the room got thicker.

"Are you worried about your mother?" I asked.

"No more worried about her than you are about your parents. Like I said, I think Roan is a gentleman, which means he's not going to bust into my mother's house and point a gun in her face or rip her throat out with his fangs just to watch her die. If he gets in touch with her at all, he'll do it in a civilized fashion. He'll probably just ask her where I am and he's probably enchanting enough to charm the diamonds off a snake's back. However, it might take him a while to find her. She's not going by the last name of Crosswood anymore, either. There's no point in his injuring our parents to get to us, as long as he isn't too impatient—which I doubt he is. He seemed extraordinarily controlled compared to some of the whack jobs I've seen."

"What do you think he'll do to us when he finds us?" I asked shakily.

“He probably won’t do anything to you if you tell him I was the one who killed Schroder,” Dudley said, looking at me with an even gaze.

It was at this moment that I realized what he suggested wasn’t what he feared would happen. It was his recommendation of what I should do.

“That wouldn’t be fair,” I said.

“It would be the truth,” he countered. “I was the one who killed Schroder.”

“But you wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t for me.”

“Look,” he said—interrupting my train of thought. “I appreciate the sentiment, but my motive is only to keep you safe until I kill him.”

The confidence in his voice took my breath away, but if he was so sure of himself, why was he on the verge of setting off the fire alarm with all those cigarettes in the ashtray? I asked him as much.

“I’m just worried this won’t be the end of the track. I kill Schroder, then I kill his twin, then someone else shows up looking for revenge, like their long-lost younger brother, and it goes on and on. I’ve been waiting for something like this to happen for eight years. I’d like to have an end to it.”

I yawned. All that made sense. “But what about London?” I asked. “Do you think we’ll be able to get her back after you kill Roan?”

He looked away. “I’m afraid the two things aren’t necessarily related. If she’s with Garth, he’s probably more than capable of finishing the transformation of all six of the other members that were started tonight and killing her in the end without Roan’s help, if he’s not dumb enough to keep adding members. Roan may have even washed his hands of London already and he’s just waiting to check on her information before he makes it official.”

“So?”

“So tomorrow, I’m going to talk to Marshall and some of my other sources to see if I can find out anything useful about Roan.”

“What do I do?”

“You find an address for Garth.” Dudley paused and looked at me earnestly. “And if Roan finds you in the meantime—you tell him I killed Schroder.”

I couldn’t answer him. I turned my head away, reached up, and flicked off the lamp above my head.

“Promise me you’ll do it,” he persisted and for a second I thought his voice sounded desperate and grating.

“No. I’ll do what I think is right at the time.”

Dudley sucked in his breath and I lay down on the couch with my back to him. When I heard him leave the room, I pulled a throw blanket over my chest.

I was going to go to sleep. Whether I liked it or not.

Chapter Seven

Is that a Gun in your Pants?

Invasion of privacy?

Well, what else did a private investigator do?

When I woke up the next morning, Dudley was gone. He left a coffee shop bagel and a note on the table beside me. The note said, “Sorry, I had to get an early start. You can stay here as many nights as you like.” There was a key folded up in the paper.

I didn’t exactly know what to make of Dudley or any of this. I felt like an idiot as I added Dudley’s key to my key ring. For some reason, I thought I was so damn smart keeping London safe all those years. From everything I had learned over the past two days—I might as well have left her with our parents. Her timeline probably would have played out much the same. I had to face it, I was not on Dudley’s level. Whether he was a grouchy saint or the very devil acting like a grouchy saint, I couldn’t tell the difference with perfect confidence. When I thought about the seventeen-year-old Tate Crosswood, I couldn’t help believing everything he had told me.

I rolled off the couch and went into the kitchen. I poured myself a glass of water from the tap and looked at the clock. It was past noon.

My hair felt like sheepskin that had been left out in the sun and my clothes felt sticky. I couldn’t even go home to change my clothes. Roan might be waiting for me to come back to the apartment. So, I had to make do with whatever Dudley had.

His bathroom had the look of a room that had been quickly straightened, so did his bedroom. Well, it wasn’t like it mattered. As long as he had hot water—I could survive.

Once I was done showering and borrowing his razor, I went to his room to find a clean shirt. I pulled out a white dress shirt from his closet. It wasn’t like there was much else to choose from. I’d wear my own jeans and suit jacket, but I needed a clean shirt, at least. Maybe I could pick up a few things after I prowled around town a bit.

I tied my wet hair up in a French twist and thought about where I was going to go to investigate Garth. I didn’t have any ideas, except to go around from club to club (the same clubs where I followed London) and ask if anyone knew him. It was going to be slow going—probably an exercise in futility. I didn’t even have a picture of him or know his last name.

I frowned and mentally braced myself.

Then I picked up the bagel Dudley left me and headed out. I’d take the bus to the downtown core and start my search there.

It was hopeless.

I had wandered around the city for hours. My feet hurt and my brain felt jumbled.

Finally, I found myself standing in the lobby of the police headquarters looking at their Most Wanted Criminals board. After inquiring at half a dozen clubs, I had given up. Heck, *I* couldn’t even remember what that loser, Garth, looked like anymore. I stared at the board, hoping either he or Roan was on the list, but it felt like such a slim chance that I suddenly became an insecure teenager looking at the casting list for the school play.

Out of nowhere, the person beside me started talking to me. “Looking for someone?”

I turned around and it was a person I had never seen before. Well, I had seen him before, but only in the paper, never in real life. Except there was something about him that didn't show up in the pictures—he had the greenest eyes I'd ever seen. It was the police chief, Pierce Wagner.

"Yeah, I was," I said, turning back and pretending to examine the list even though I was already through with it.

"Most of these criminals are vampires," Pierce said. "Are you sure you can handle a vampire?"

I smirked. Pierce himself was so obviously a vampire, I wondered how he managed to say that without choking on his own tongue. But I had decided to let it go and play coy. Dudley wasn't the only one who didn't know what to make of the crime enforcement in this city. There was a lot I hoped to squeeze out of him if I could. "It's not for me," I said lightly. "I work for a P.I. and I was just checking the list while I was passing."

Pierce suddenly leaned in and whispered, "Then why is there a gun on your back?"

I stared at him and he chuckled while I checked to see if it was sticking out of my suit jacket.

"No. It's not visible," he said, making an unsuccessful attempt to hide his amusement. "And neither is the one in your boot or the switchblade in your pocket. Tell me seriously, who are you looking for?"

I flicked my hair out of my eyes and bit my lip. "It's not really who I am looking for, but who is looking for me."

"Hmm," he murmured, looking me over from head to toe in a way I'd never been looked over before. It wasn't like I was a piece of meat. It was more like I was being evaluated like a weapon and he was gauging how much damage I could do. From the expression on his face—he didn't think I could do much. "And you are planning on taking care of them yourself without notifying the police that someone dangerous is after you? What a sad appraisal of our police service," he said languidly.

"I didn't say I didn't trust the police," I said, shrugging my shoulders. Offending the police chief was not on my list of things to do today.

"Well," he said, turning back to the board, "are any of these fine ladies or gentlemen the person who's looking for you?"

"I don't think so," I said. Actually, I was looking at the door.

"Maybe you should have a chat with one of the officers anyway. You know, just to let them know what your situation is, in case someone finds you floating down the river tomorrow."

I had had about enough of this. "Look, I realize what you're trying to do, and considering who you are, I think it's really sweet of you to take this precious second out of your day to give me a little friendly advice, but I don't think I'd get the advice I'm looking for from one of your officers. So, unless you're willing to answer a couple of my questions personally, you're wasting your time."

Then he smiled.

Don't get me wrong. I had seen vampires smile before. I'd seen vampires in clubs laughing their heads off pretending to be drunk and I'd seen London's wan attempts, but I had never seen a vampire smile like Pierce. He should have looked dangerous, but instead, he looked—genuinely pleased. It was a miracle he managed it with those sharp teeth.

A shiver crept up my vertebrae.

"I would love to answer any question you might have. Please, come this way."

I expected him to take me to his office, or somewhere I would have felt similarly uncomfortable, but he didn't. He took me outside to a quiet little area with scads of potted plants.

"Ask me anything," he said.

I looked around nervously. We were alone, but just barely. Completely out of earshot was the city street and there were pedestrians on the sidewalk. Actually, he couldn't have brought me to a safer place.

He was standing in a shadow, with the sun well out of his eyes and it looked like there was an ache in one of his shoulders. London would have curled up in one of those shadows and fallen asleep if I made her come to a place like this in the middle of the afternoon.

"Have you ever heard of a group of humans ganging up on a vampire so they can all transform themselves into vampires?"

"Naturally," he said like he was chewing the side of his cheek. "I wish we could do something to stop that sort of thing from happening, but unfortunately, vampires don't have any rights. They can be murdered on sight by anyone with a license, and as you know by that cute little document in your wallet, those licenses aren't exactly hard to get."

"Well," I said shyly, "that's more for self-defense than for vampire hunting."

"I know," he said, smiling again.

Hearing that put my walls up. "So, how do you know all about me?"

"I don't know all about you. I don't know your name. The piece in the back of your pants is just a little big for a woman with such a delicate waist. It's a man's gun. The same goes for the one in your boot. The straps are a little big for you, aren't they?"

I flicked my pant leg. I didn't think it was that obvious.

"As for the knife in your pocket, your pocket gaped slightly while I was standing next to you and I saw it."

"And the license?"

"There's a microchip in every license we issue and a little light goes on by the door of the station whenever someone who has an active one comes in. I saw you come in. I'm not as intuitive as all that."

"All right," I said, feeling slightly less creeped out. However, I still felt like an amateur trying to play with the big boys, and talking with Pierce was only making the feeling grow. "I agree that vampires deserve some rights, but shouldn't the way they're created play a part in what kind of protection they're entitled to?"

"That's why it's so difficult to fight for vampire rights in the city council or elsewhere. There's no way to prove whether a vampire was made in a natural way."

"What kind of punishment is there for the crime of draining a vampire for the purpose of changing multiple humans into vampires?"

"It varies," Pierce said and his tone sounded ominous. "If anyone ever offers you that kind of deal, no matter what the price, please contact me personally." He reached into his pocket and drew out a tiny gold case that contained business cards. He offered me one and I took it.

"Does that mean you're prepared to deal with such a case unofficially?"

He shrugged one shoulder noncommittally.

"Your personality is different from what I imagined," I said, pocketing his card. "Though I wish you'd be more specific about what kind of help you can offer."

"Are you saying there's a case like that now?"

I blew out some air and pursed my lips.

He kept talking. “Well, vampirism is generally a misunderstood condition. Humans see it in such a strange light. To them, it’s eternal youth, freedom from disease, freedom from human desires and frailties. From what I understand, it’s merely the exchange of one set of problems for another.”

I sat down on one of the larger pots and looked at him inquisitively. London was never this forthcoming about her situation. The comparison made Pierce look like a wonder. “Go on,” I encouraged.

“For one thing, vampires cannot have children. Their bodies cease to grow or change and they cannot produce offspring. I have heard of many vampires who mourn for offspring after they’ve enjoyed a few years of *supposed* immortality.”

“What else?”

“For them, love is basically a lie. If they happen to fall in love with someone, that someone will inevitably die or murder them. Doesn’t that sound joyful?” he said sarcastically. “They have all the time in the world, but a timer starts as soon as they find someone they care about.”

“I see. So, how many times have you fallen in love with a human?”

His face remained completely still and unaffected. “Are you saying I’m a vampire?”

“Of course, you’re a vampire.”

“Who told you that?” he asked, narrowing his eyes in mock suspicion.

“I thought it was common knowledge, but even if I hadn’t picked up that little tidbit somewhere along the lines, I would still know it. Just look at you.”

He crossed his arms and asked, “Exactly what about me makes you think I am a vampire?”

“Look at your skin. It’s perfect. No scars, no blemishes, no facial hair. Vampire hair doesn’t grow, so if you shave once—that’s it. Look at the way you’re standing—out of the light and with your back to the sun.”

“It’s just a coincidence,” he said, his expression deadpan.

I shook my head wearily and snorted. “You think I care if you’re a vampire? I wouldn’t have wanted to talk to you if you weren’t. Do you believe all humans think vampires are either monsters or models? Some of us understand a little more about it than that. I’m trying to find some information and help my sister, okay?”

His smile was unnerving and he kept using it. It was knocking me off balance. “Ask me. I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

I paused. Even though I said what I said and he said what he said, I didn’t know how to word my question. Also, I recalled Dudley saying he wasn’t sure he wanted to involve the police. I trusted Dudley more than this guy, so I drew back.

“Thanks for being so forthcoming. I’ll call you once I figure out what I need,” I said.

“It would be my pleasure to help you,” he said kindly, putting out his hand to shake mine.

I shook it. His skin felt slightly cool, just like London’s.

“Still don’t want to tell me your name?” he asked, peering at me.

“It’s Sweeper.”

“An alias? I’m not as frightening as all that.”

“No. That’s my real name. Have you ever heard of a vampire called Roan?”

Pierce nodded. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” I said, pulling my hand away. “That’s all I wanted to know. Bye.”

“Bye,” he echoed.

I walked away and put myself back on the sidewalk. Dudley was right. If Roan had been a good boy in the eyes of the police chief, then there was probably no hope of getting help from him. The police probably had bigger fish to fry, and if it was Roan's first offense, they might sympathize and let him off.

I twitched.

The day had been a complete waste.

Virtualventures

Chapter Eight

Double Take

There was no dining room table in Dudley's apartment, so I sat on the couch as I crammed Chinese noodles in my mouth.

Dudley was in the shower. He came into the apartment two minutes before and disappeared into the bathroom.

I was stuffed to the brim on noodles and diet cola by the time he made a second appearance. His hair was wet and he wore a loose pair of jeans with a white T-shirt. He looked good—every bit as attractive to me as the other day when he was standing in the office. I noticed the lines of his arms and had to avert my eyes to stop myself from gawking.

"Did you leave any for me?" he asked as he picked up one of the cartons.

"Only just. So, did you find out anything interesting today?"

He frowned. "Not really. Marshall acts tough, but I'm gravely disappointed in him. He's getting old and lazy. Actually, I think he's planning on closing his office soon and moving someplace warm. He didn't know anything, but I spoke to another one of my contacts who did."

"What?"

"I have a friend who catalogs as many vampire creation stories as possible. Roan and Schroder's story is a rather interesting one. Roan had a vampire lover who tried to kill him and Schroder stopped her, except he didn't just kill her, which would have mirrored what you and I did for London. Instead, he chained her up and drank her blood until he became a vampire, like his brother."

"And then he killed her?"

"Yes, except there is one interesting twist to this story. I told you how Schroder used to mate regularly. Roan isn't like that. According to my source, he has never taken a mate. Like I thought, that guy is really not cut from the same fabric as his twin. I don't know what to make of him."

Neither did I.

Instead, I put it out of my mind and watched as Dudley paced the length of the room. He picked up a set of chopsticks and broke them apart. He was silent as he ate and paced. "What did you find out?" he asked between bites.

"I went around to the clubs London was frequenting when she met Garth and asked about him. No one knew him."

"Surprise," Dudley said in a deadpan tone.

"Then I went to the police station to see if Roan or Garth were being chased by the police."

Dudley snorted. "Were they?"

"No, but someone interesting talked to me."

"Who?"

"Pierce Wagner."

Dudley nearly choked on the food in his mouth. "You actually talked to him? You can get an appointment with the mayor faster than that guy. What did he say?"

"Nothing much," I said, but I felt like I was lying. Because I felt bad, I amended my comment by adding, "I asked him if he knew Roan and he said he did."

"Anything else?" Dudley asked eagerly.

“No. By that point I wanted to get the heck out of there, so I left, but he gave me his card and told me to give him a call if I had any questions for him.”

Dudley scratched his face thoughtfully. “Well, that’s different. Do you know why he stopped to talk to you?”

“No clue.”

Dudley clearly had an idea why, but he wasn’t saying.

“What is it?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” he said, stopping to pick up a napkin to wipe his mouth. “When do you think you’ll be ready?”

“To do what?”

“To go back to Roan’s. I borrowed a car, so let’s go back to that basement and see if we can get London back tonight. I don’t have any other ideas.”

I felt like squirming, but I tried to keep a cool head on my shoulders. “We can go when you’ve finished eating.”

“Empty,” I whispered as I climbed the stairs out of the basement in Roan’s old garage.

Dudley had already told me it probably would be deserted because there were no cars crowding the back gate, but I had to check anyway. I had my doubts the other night, but tonight, I was fearless. Those vampiric monsters were torturing London and I had to find her.

Dudley’s jaw was clenched like he was suppressing a scream. I was frustrated, too. Our leads were slim.

“What do you think we should do now?” I asked as I took his offered hand to help me up the last few steps.

“We can hide in the bushes and wait to see if they show up later. It’s only twelve-twenty-three now, so they might not show up until later. Humans who are about to become vampires want to throw their time schedule off, so they might not show up until three or four. Do you want to wait?”

“Let’s check out the house,” was my answer.

“Sure.”

We split up and started circling the grounds.

I was an idiot. Dudley had no idea how much of an idiot I was. I didn’t think we were going to get anywhere doing things his way—creeping around the back alley and waiting in the bushes. I was prepared to sacrifice my life for London, so I had another plan. While Dudley was around the other side of the house, I walked right up to the front door and rang the bell.

It was a minute or two before the door was answered by a maid dressed in a smart black pantsuit with a white collar. “May I help you with something?” she asked skeptically as she examined my outfit (still the same one I was wearing earlier when I spoke with Pierce).

“Yes, I was wondering if I could speak with Roan.”

“Whom shall I announce?”

“Sweeper Robertson. Tell him I’m Detective Marshall’s assistant and I’d like to talk to him briefly about his case.”

The maid pursed her lips and invited me inside while she went to ask if the master of the house was available.

After she left, I took a look at the place. The decorations and furnishings were classic and had been kept immaculately. I stood there and priced out the furniture. In the entryway alone and I couldn't even calculate the cost—it was staggering.

After a minute, the maid returned and asked me to follow her. She led me through a doorway, down a dimly lit hallway, and then through another door into a sitting room. It turned out to be a library chock-full of the most beautifully bound books I had ever seen. I didn't even know people had book collections like his. I thought books only looked like that in period films.

Inside, Roan was sitting behind a huge oak desk and to my surprise, Pierce Wagner was lounging on one of the brown leather armchairs.

"Hello again," Pierce said, rising to greet me before Roan could say anything. The Chief of Police seemed strangely pleased to see me. I smiled and extended my hand, which he shook warmly—even though his hand wasn't exactly warm. "I didn't expect us to meet again so soon," he continued.

"Oh?"

"As a matter of fact, he is visiting me today only to ask if I know you," Roan said blankly from behind the desk. "Except when he appeared, I was at a complete loss. It's good to get visits from old friends, but I had no idea how I should know you. Now that you've introduced yourself it makes perfect sense. Detective Marshall's assistant?"

"Yes," I said, moving away from Pierce and standing in front of the desk. Standing closer to Roan, I was surprised by his looks. He looked almost identical to Schroder, but his skin wasn't smooth. It looked almost crumpled. Well, most identical twins looked slightly different.

"If you have something to say, I wish you had called and arranged for a meeting. As you can see I have company now and it's quite late. Could we meet tomorrow morning?"

I gathered up my courage and started talking. "I'm afraid not. This matter is rather urgent."

"This isn't how I do business," he said, picking up a telephone receiver and preparing to dial a number.

"You see," I said before he could call anyone. "While I was at work I happened to see a file regarding a search request from you about my sister—London Robertson."

At this statement, Roan looked distinctly uncomfortable. His eyes flicked toward Pierce, back to me, and then he dropped the phone.

"She disappeared yesterday and I was wondering if you'd managed to get in touch with her?"

Just then, I saw a flicker of movement outside one of the windows. Dudley was watching.

Roan's expression was disgustingly relaxed. "I haven't seen her."

"I find that hard to believe. Did you hear from her at all? A phone call? An email?"

"No."

I couldn't help glaring at him. Actually, I had to clear my mouth of saliva before I could speak to stop myself from spitting on his desk. "All right. Then I was wondering if you possibly had the address or phone number of a guy named Garth. I understood you were in contact with him."

Roan leaned back on his chair and put his left ankle on his right knee. "Sorry, I've never heard that name before."

At this point, I was fuming and I didn't know how to continue. I wasn't sure if his lies were for my benefit, or Pierce's, or both of us, but I didn't want to leave without getting something from him.

Suddenly, a slightly different tactic popped into my head. "You know, I knew your brother Schroder," I said boldly.

For a second his eyes lost their façade and he looked at me like he could kill me just to get me to shut up. Then the mask was back up and he looked at me casually. “Of course you did. Since you’re London’s sister.”

“Look,” I continued, audaciously leaning my knuckles on his desk. “I don’t know what kind of protection you have from the police, but I’m just going to come right out and say what’s on my mind. You’re after London because you think she murdered your brother who turned her into a vampire.”

Roan didn’t look at all shocked. He had obviously gotten a grip on himself in the past ten seconds.

Pierce came up beside me and said calmly, “That is a very serious accusation.”

My head flicked toward him. “And what’s your position in all this? Do you just let vampires and humans do whatever they want?”

“It’s complicated,” he drawled.

“Explain it to me.”

He licked his lips and said, “Roan here is one of the most powerful vampires in our city. I’ve known him for several years now and I can give a fairly accurate description of his history and dealings. He was made honestly, no matter how dishonest his brother made it afterward. If you think he loves his brother, you’re wrong. His brother was unbelievably dishonest and cruel—even from a vampire’s perspective. If you make an attempt on Roan’s life—no matter how justified you think you are—the ramifications will be so dire you won’t be able to bear the consequences.”

I tilted my head. “Oh?”

“The stable vampire community won’t just let you do whatever you want. I’m telling you this for your protection. Now, if your sister is missing, it doesn’t matter if she is a vampire. You should contact the police and we will look for her. I’ll even supervise the investigation myself if that will make you more comfortable.”

I didn’t believe he would find her and now I really did feel like spitting, but Dudley told me this was all I could expect from the police.

“Right,” I said bitterly, before turning to leave.

“Wait,” Roan said, getting up from his chair and coming around to face me. “If London didn’t kill my brother, do you know who did?”

I stood there and looked at him. I didn’t know how to answer him and I was sweating bullets. If I said Dudley did it, then Roan would go after him, but since London already pointed the finger at him, Roan was probably planning on going after him anyway. If I said London did it—the torture would be double and she’d probably be dead before I could find her anyway. If I said I did it—I would be forfeiting my life and he probably still wouldn’t let London go. Not to mention my death wouldn’t be painless.

I had to do some creative lying—lots of truth mixed with a couple of carefully selected falsehoods.

I winced.

It was a part of the act.

“I was there that night, but I was fifteen years old and kind of traumatized by what I saw. I’ve never remembered that well. All I do remember was London screaming when he bit her, but she didn’t want Schroder dead. Plus, I’ve lived with her for eight years since then. She has only just stopped mourning.”

“Is that so?” Roan asked disbelievingly.

“Yeah.”

“You really don’t remember anything?”

When I looked up to read his expression, he was much closer to me. I could see his face and neck with more clarity. Suddenly, I was so scared I could hardly move. Roan was supposed to be Schroder’s twin. He wasn’t.

I grabbed the collar of his shirt and ripped it open until the buttons popped. His chest looked exactly how I thought it would. Exactly where I stabbed him were scars. His collar hid most of it, but his throat had the mark all the way around where Dudley beheaded him.

“I thought I killed you,” I breathed as I stepped away from him.

“It took me five years to recover from what you and that brat did to me, but I didn’t want revenge against you,” he said, stroking the scar on his neck with his thumb. “Even though I suffered that much, I didn’t feel like you did anything wrong.”

“Why?” I gasped.

“Why do you think?”

I thought madly, but nothing made sense. The ends didn’t join up. “Because your brother,” I stuttered, but the truth was staring me in the face. “You never had a brother did you?”

“No. I had a twin brother and a bloodsucking bitch drank on him until he died. I went after her. I could have just ended her legacy right then and there, but wouldn’t that have been a waste?”

Pierce spoke up. “So, you did the same thing to her that she did to Roan? That’s brilliant,” he said sardonically. “How did you do it? How did you make everyone believe Roan was still alive?”

“It wasn’t easy. It started when I had to keep Roan’s death a secret from my parents. I’m sure Sweeper knows all about keeping secrets from parents. It was noble enough at first. I had to play both myself and my brother to stop their hearts from breaking. I’m sure you can understand the lengths a loving sibling would go to.”

“Are you sure you know which one you are? Roan or Schroder?” Pierce asked. “Things like this get confused so easily.”

The vampire shrugged his shoulders elegantly. “Ah, I can’t remember. These days I go by Roan. His reputation is cleaner than Schroder’s.”

I heard Pierce suck in his breath.

But Roan didn’t seem to care who he was talking to—whether it was me or Pierce. He was half lost in memory as he continued, “Sweeper, how could I blame you for trying to stop the same thing from happening in your family? I would have saved my brother if I could have.”

“Then why did you go after London in the first place, if you knew the damage it would cause?”

“I fell in love.”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. Vampires were so stupid about love.

He waved his hand in dismissal. “Not with her. With you, but how could I stand to murder you? I would certainly let you kill me if I let you drink one drop of my blood and I knew my passion would eventually drive me to that if I didn’t take steps to stop it—so I drank London’s blood and thought about you.” He touched my cheek and whispered in my ear. “I pretended she was you every time I touched her, every time I tasted her blood. She wasn’t herself. For me, she was you.”

I slapped his face.

“I had to keep my love for you pure—to keep both of us alive.”

My head was spinning and my brain was breaking. I couldn’t stand this. “Liar. Do you think telling me such a ridiculous tale will win you any points now? You hardly even saw me back then. How dare you say you loved me?”

“But I did,” he said softly. “You were like the opposite of a vampire. Most people want to be vampires, but not you. Can you imagine the horror of taking a flask of blood to your lips every night and drinking, say, a hundred and eighty milliliters, for two months? A person seeking to gain a vampire life does it. They know where the blood comes from and they don’t flinch. The price is too high—much too high for you. You didn’t love things or even seek selfish pleasure. You loved perfectly.”

“What?”

He took a deep breath and what he was saying sounded like something he had been aching to say. “If I came into your life slowly and took even a few days to make friends with you—you would have liked me. I would have done anything to make you like me. After our relationship was established, you would have done everything to defend me. That’s how you treated London and everyone else.”

“How could you know how I treated others? I repeat; you hardly saw me.”

“I didn’t need to. It wasn’t hard to see and I fell in love with you instantly. Everyone loves you, though you didn’t know it. You don’t see the way their eyes turn as you brush past, Sweeper.” His voice slowed as he finished his thought, “You wouldn’t want anything to do with me if I killed your sister. I did it to protect myself.”

“And you didn’t worry that I’d come after you and kill you?”

“I’d forgive you,” he said quietly.

This was infuriating. “You don’t make any sense. If you didn’t care that I would kill you, then why not try to have a relationship with me?”

“I didn’t feel that way at first.”

“I’m going to kill you now if you don’t start making some sense! What about what you’ve done to London now? Do you think I’ll forgive you for chaining her up in the basement of your garage and letting seven humans drink off her last night?” I accused, pulling the gun out of the back of my pants and pointing it at the ceiling. I wanted to hear what he had to say in response to my accusation. I wanted to force him to answer.

At first, he just stared.

Beside me, Pierce was preparing to play referee.

“It’s not me who’s doing that.”

“Is that so?” I said acidly. I couldn’t talk to him and I couldn’t stand his attitude of feigned innocence. I cocked my gun and pointed it at his head. “Well, if it’s not you then call Garth now and tell him to let London go before he drinks enough blood to change himself into a vampire. Do it now!”

“Why?” he whispered. “Aren’t you tired of having to babysit London? Don’t you feel like she is ruining your life? Don’t you want to have a relationship with a man? Get in deep with someone special in your bedroom without worrying about her down the hall? Live your life like it matters?”

“And you want to give all that to me?”

“Yes. I know it’s too late for you and me to be together, but I want you to have your life like you bit a piece out of it instead of what you’ve been doing, admiring your own life in a shop window... like it’s something you can’t have.”

“Stop making this about me. You could save her. She loves you. You could take her back.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Fine. Don’t take her back, but why are you torturing her and selling her blood to monsters?”

“He can’t help it!” Pierce interjects. “Once you’ve made someone a vampire, you can’t escape the suspicion they’ll come after you until after they’re dead.”

My eyes were hot as I pushed my sweaty bangs off my forehead. “Call Garth now or I really will shoot.”

“You won’t kill me with that little gun, and I *want* to do this for you. It’s a gift.”

“Call Garth!” I screamed, tears running down my cheeks.

“Pull the trigger,” Pierce ordered.

I tightened my finger around the trigger, but I couldn’t pull it. I couldn’t do it. I was afraid if I did, I’d shut his mouth forever and I’d never be able to save London. I dropped my gun and fell to my knees on the floor. “Please, save London. Stop them from hurting her. I beg you. Please, tell me where she is.”

He bent down so his eyes were level with mine. “You have to understand. I have to be strong now for you.”

He was completely crazy. I was never going to get anything from him. I picked up my gun, put it to his temple, and SMASH! BANG!

Roan was lying on the floor with blood splattered all around.

Except I wasn’t the one who pulled the trigger.

I looked to my left and Dudley was standing outside the broken window. He did it.

He took the barrel of his gun and broke away the extra glass around the window. Then he came in through the frame.

“It’s okay, Sweeper,” he said, getting down next to me and putting his arms around me.

“Why is it okay?” I wailed, pushing him away from me. “Now we’ll never find London.”

Dudley pushed my gun away and held my head to his chest. At first, I struggled against him, but then I released the handle and clung to him. Unhappiness assailed me, but his strong heartbeat soothed me. I wiped my tears away and tried my best to slow myself down.

Then I noticed what Pierce was doing. He was kneeling beside Roan, inspecting his body. My panic completely ebbed as I watched Pierce pull off Roan’s hair. He was wearing a wig?

“Don’t tell me this bloodsucker isn’t Schroder or Roan now!” I whined in complete confusion.

“No. It’s the right guy,” Dudley said.

Pierce looked grim. “It’s just that when he was burnt, I’m assuming by you, all his hair was burnt off. The eyebrows and eyelashes are false, too. He said a single bullet to the head wouldn’t kill him. It made me wonder if he’s taken one or two before. See? There’s a mark—here and there.” Pierce lifted his head and examined his whole skull. “He’s been shot in the head on four other occasions. He needs surgery to have them removed.”

“Is that possible?” I gaped.

“Sweeper, you slashed him through the chest, I severed his head and we burned his corpse and he lived.” Dudley sighed. “This is only going to stun him and when he wakes up, he’ll be more demented than before.”

“Great,” I groaned, “but how? How did he live? Only ashes were left the morning after we burned him.”

Dudley frowned. “I must not have put his head far enough away from his body. He must have gotten up and left while you and I were sleeping. That’s why there was no skeleton. There should have been bones at least.”

“But how could he move at all if his head was severed?”

Dudley looked sheepish, like he didn’t know the answer. He finally responded by saying limply, “He’s undead.”

“All right, so how do you kill a vampire, if doing all that doesn’t kill him?”

“There’s only one way—you have to bleed them dry. Well, I suppose there are gorier methods, but bleeding them is the most effective. When we burned him, we cauterized the cuts. If we’d left him to bleed out on your living room floor, we wouldn’t be having this problem.”

Pierce looked troubled. “Sorry to interrupt, but I need to take him out of here if I’m going to have time to help him before he wakes up. Can one of you please call for the maid? I need to talk to her.”

Dudley got up and went to get the maid.

Virtualventures

Chapter Nine

Taking a Ride

I sat on the floor with my legs in a W-shape feeling tousled and looking at my blood-sprayed shirt while Dudley went to get the maid.

Pierce took off his coat and wrapped it around Schroder's head. "Don't be so disturbed. After the surgery, he'll be a completely different person. Right now, he's brain-damaged. After the operation, I'll make sure he can't harm you anymore," he said with a friendly gleam in his eye. "And we'll get your sister back."

"How can you be so sure? We don't know anything about Garth. Dudley said they might not even be planning to come back here."

"Tate Dudley? In the flesh? Is that who your friend is? If it's him then it'll be okay. I've heard tales about him. He's the resourceful type. He should be able to find her."

I put my hand to my forehead in fatigue. I couldn't look on the bright side at a moment like this.

Dudley came back with the maid. She wasn't remotely surprised or disturbed by the sight before her, but looked to Pierce for an explanation, which he seemed happy to supply. "We had a little accident. Do you mind if I take him to my place for a while just to get him sorted?"

"Are you taking him to see The Scissor Man?" she asked, placing an impatient hand on her hip.

"Yes."

"My salary has been prepaid for the next six months, so if he doesn't come back—I'll be coming to see you."

Pierce returned her gaze calmly and said, "You don't need to threaten me, Jan. I know how these things work and you know where to find me."

"Then I'll get something to clean the blood," she said before slipping out of the room.

"Don't spend all your money bribing her," Dudley said, going to Schroder's feet and helping Pierce lift him off the floor. "I have some news," he said, looking at me. "While you were coming in here without my permission, I ran into a couple of humans prowling around the back. They were discussing how they were going to keep something a secret from Schroder/Roan... whatever this guy's name is."

"What?" I said, pulling myself together and getting up.

Dudley and Pierce grasped Schroder's body and carried him to the door and down the hall while Dudley talked. "I think it's good news. Apparently, Garth ran off with London when he took her out of the shed last night."

"Why did he do that?" I asked, hurrying after them.

"Why?" Dudley clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. "Probably because he fell in love with her and he was just pretending to be comfortable with it when they were draining her last night."

"But won't he just kill her himself after he transforms into a vampire?"

At that, Dudley frowned. "I thought you'd be relieved, but I guess you wanted a happy ending for this story. It's just that," Dudley said as they eased Schroder through the front door and down the steps to the car, "it's a miracle she's survived this long." He paused as Pierce opened the back door to his sedan and together they crammed Schroder's unconscious frame into the backseat.

Dudley slammed the door and leaned against it with ease. “This means she can take the natural course all vampires must take with Garth instead of being tortured to death.”

“Are you saying you’re going to give up on her?” I accused.

“No. Not at all. I only mean the desperation of the situation has eased considerably. I got a couple more license plate numbers, so we’ll be able to round up the rest of the humans who were in league with Schroder and question them about Garth. From there, we might be able to find a clue as to where Garth has taken her.”

I shook my head. “And that means?”

He put his arm around my shoulder. “It means I’ll take you to my place tonight and then tomorrow you can go back to work like everything is fine. Tomorrow night, you and I will question the owners of the vehicles and find out what we can—like Garth’s address. But seriously, Sweeper, if it turns out that she’s lost forever, that’s the path London chose and there’s nothing to regret. This is the path all vampires eventually take. It’s just a matter of whether or not she has the strength to kill Garth in the end.”

I knew she didn’t have the strength, but who was I to criticize? I didn’t have the strength to argue with Dudley now. I was angry with him, but at that moment, all I wanted to do was rest and get my head on straight.

Pierce gave me a grim smile and gently smacked Dudley on the shoulder to stop him from leaning against his shiny car.

“I’m going to go back inside and talk to Jan about how to handle any ‘visitors’ that happen to pop by tonight. Collecting their license plate numbers is all well and good, but unlike Dudley, I have the authority to take care of those humans tonight, so I’ll stay until dawn and round everyone up. But first, I want you to show me where they were draining London.”

“All right,” Dudley said, looking slightly perturbed. He clearly didn’t like being outmaneuvered like that. However, he quickly teamed up with the vampire policeman and started walking toward the back of the house.

I stopped them. “Are you guys just going to leave Schroder in the car?”

“What?”

“Well, if any of those humans come through the front door instead of the back and they see Schroder all mangled in the backseat of your car, won’t they get spooked and take off?”

“He’s got a jacket wrapped around his head,” Dudley pointed out.

“Maybe so, but I think she’s got a point,” Pierce said, ruefully stroking his chin. “Besides, he needs to be taken to a secure location. I really jammed myself in a tight place tonight. I want to stay and round up those humans, but I also need to take Schroder away before he wakes up. Hey, Sweeper, why don’t you drive him to my place? It’s better to take him there rather than the police station. One of my servants will know what to do with him and when you’re done dropping him off, you can drive back here.”

I glanced at Schroder in the back of the car and wasn’t sure I felt all that comfortable, but when I thought of the chance we could be missing to catch those humans who had been planning to drain London—I gave way.

“Sure, I can do it,” I said easily.

Pierce pulled out his car keys and got into the front seat. From there, he punched up a map on his GPS and showed me the way to his house.

“You can follow this, right?”

“I’m not a moron,” I replied.

He smiled and got out of the driver's seat.

Just then, I heard the click of the back door opening. Dudley was standing over Schroder with his gun to his head.

Pierce jumped on his gun hand before he could pull the trigger. "What are you doing?"

"I just want to make sure he doesn't wake up while Sweeper is driving him," Dudley protested.

"Don't shoot off a firearm in the middle of the street! I don't care if it's one in the morning, it'll draw unwanted attention. As if we aren't gathering enough of that just standing here. We can best help Sweeper by sending her off as quickly as possible. He won't wake up. Trust me. We just need to get her moving."

Dudley's expression was doubtful, but I was resolute. "You guys are the ones who need to get moving," I fumed. "If you let even one of those bastards go because of this pathetic quarrel, I'll see you both in hell."

"At my house, ask for Kilmeny. He'll know what to do," Pierce advised.

With that, I got in the car and slammed the door shut. Getting to Pierce's house would be easy. Except that the expression on Dudley's face in the side-view mirror as I pulled away looked distinctly uneasy. Whatever. I could do this.

I started driving. Pierce's house was nowhere near Schroder's. It was in a suburb on the other side of the city. I took a highway route. It was faster because there were no lights and no pedestrians.

I had been driving for about twenty-five minutes when I started to hear moaning from the backseat. My heart almost stopped as I craned my ear to listen. There were no words, just odd mumbling. I looked over my shoulder at his head, but I couldn't see anything in the dark. I got control of myself and put my foot on the accelerator. I would be there in ten minutes. Less if I sped.

I jumped when Schroder bumped against the back of my seat as he rolled onto the floor.

I put my fist in my mouth to stop myself from screeching. I was scared, but my yowling about it wasn't going to help anything. It might even wake the monster up. I clutched the steering wheel and got into the fast lane. I was flying down the road at a dangerous speed, but I doubted I'd get pulled over. After all, I was driving the Police Chief's car. I blew a piece of hair out of my eyes and pressed harder on the gas.

To my utter terror, Schroder's moaning turned into words. "It hurts," came his garbled voice.

I told myself not to lose my spunk. I said I could do this and I could. I took in a deep breath and talked to him rather than ignoring him. After all, he might not remember what happened.

"What hurts?" I asked in my I'm-a-receptionist voice. "Your head?"

"No. My heart," he muttered.

"Can you breathe?" I asked, thinking of the cloth wrapped around his head.

"Who, the hell, needs to breathe? Who needs to exist if I can't help her?"

My tone turned icy as I replied. "Maybe she doesn't need any help."

"I don't care if she needs me or not. I need her. I need the dream of her."

He sounded so pathetic from the backseat it was hard for me to remember what a monster he was, but I remembered in time and kept my tone cold and my conversation strict. I wanted to know what he had been up to. "What do you want to do to help her?"

"Money. There was so much money." His voice trailed off.

Were we even talking about the same thing?

“How did you earn it?” I asked. “Selling vampires to humans?”

“Why would I do that? I’m not like other vampires. I’m talented. If she had any idea how talented I am, her heart would melt.”

“Why not try to earn her heart that way?”

He suddenly bolted upright in the backseat and pulled Pierce’s jacket off his head. In the rearview mirror, I saw his bloody face and bald head. “You’re right!” he exclaimed. At that moment, our eyes met in the mirror and he recognized me. “Where are we going?”

I didn’t know how to answer. A part of me wanted to tell him the truth and a part of me wanted to hold off just in case he didn’t trust me or Pierce. On the other hand, he probably knew Pierce’s home. He wouldn’t like my answer.

So I lied. “It’ll be a while before we get there. You should lie down and sleep.”

I changed lanes. When I looked in the mirror next, he was lying down.

“You’re listening to *me*?” I muttered incredulously to myself, but apparently, he heard me, because he responded.

“It’s a small thing to give you.”

After that, he didn’t say anything else and it wasn’t long before I pulled up in front of Pierce’s house. From my humble experience, Schroder’s home was a mansion, but Pierce’s was a castle. Vampires were such materialistic bastards.

I stopped the car and cut the ignition.

“Are we there already?” came the weak voice from the back.

I feigned ignorance. “I’m not sure. There’s someone inside I need to talk to. Wait here. I’ll be back.”

There was no sound from Schroder, so I just assumed his assent and got out of the car. The bottoms of my shoes made weird sounds on the stone steps. I should have felt comfortable, but I didn’t. Feeling the atmosphere around me, I wasn’t sure if the air felt so charged because of the people watching me from inside the house or the vampire inspecting me from the car. I swallowed the creepy lump in my throat and pretended it wasn’t as distasteful as swallowing a spider.

I rang the bell.

The door swung open. Someone really had been watching me. Two men stood in the doorway. One was dressed much the same as Schroder’s maid. The other was dressed more like a butcher with a long white apron horribly stained in blood.

“Are you The Scissor Man?” I asked, inspecting the many tiny cuts on the man’s face and his razor-sharp haircut. It was so short it looked like it had been cut earlier that day.

He didn’t smile, but instead gravely introduced himself and the man next to him. “I am Kelly and this is Kilmeny. I’m not normally called The Scissor Man to my face and I’d prefer it if you didn’t start the trend. Pierce phoned us. He said you have a vampire for me to see.”

I resisted the urge to squirm. He didn’t sound like a doctor. I wanted to ask him if he had just come from surgery and if he’d lost the patient. That was the only explanation I could summon to account for his grim expression. Then the idea occurred to me. What if his grim expression had everything to do with me?

I took a step backward. “He’s in the backseat.”

The two men stepped out of the house and down the stairs very deliberately, rather like they were approaching a snake. Kilmeny took hold of the car door handle and opened it carefully and quickly.

Schroder was lying inside with his head on the seat. His face was smeared with blood, his lips were colorless, and his eyes were closed. He looked dead.

Kelly had a roll of duct tape around his wrist and he tore off a piece.

“What are you going to do with that?” I whispered.

He put one scarred finger to his mouth to silence me. “All vampires have fangs.”

Kelly leaned over Schroder. His fingers trembled as he stretched the silver tape over the vampire’s mouth. His hands shook so much, he was having difficulty making it straight before he put it on.

I bit my tongue to hide my anxiety. Something seemed wrong and I couldn’t pinpoint what it was. Was it these strange people or was it Schroder?

Something was scratching my leg. Ouch! I slapped it and looked at my hand to clear away the bug guts. A mosquito had gotten me. Blood stuck on my fingers.

Schroder’s eyes snapped open. Kelly hadn’t got the tape on him yet. Suddenly, he struck Kelly across the side of his face and within an instant had adjusted his position so he could kick Kelly in the chest. Kelly fell on his back and Schroder pushed his way out of the car.

Kilmeny slid a gun out of his sleeve and shot at him, but Schroder moved out of the way in time. The butler tried to shoot a second time, but something inside the gun jammed.

Schroder was on all fours licking his own blood that pooled in the dimple between his nose and his mouth. Then he pounced on Kilmeny like a wolf, grabbed his head between his two hands, and slammed it repeatedly against the cement. He was going to kill him.

“Stop!” I screamed.

Schroder didn’t even look at me. He was finished with Kilmeny by now and was on the lookout for Kelly. The Scissor Man had pulled two pairs of long silver scissors from out of nowhere and was approaching Schroder with purpose.

Schroder snarled and reached for one of The Scissor Man’s hands. He wasn’t fast enough and The Scissor Man scored a hit in the fat part of his palm.

I stood back—so appalled I couldn’t even move.

Schroder made a second attempt to grab one of the pairs of scissors but was again rewarded with a collection of cuts across his fingertips. I couldn’t believe Kelly was able to keep the vampire at bay. He moved lightning fast. I’d thought he was a shaky old man.

Schroder stuck his bleeding fingers in his mouth and sucked hard. Then he made a jump toward the gun Kilmeny had. It hadn’t even occurred to me to get it. I rushed to get it at the same time, but Schroder was faster. I half-crouched in front of him with one of my hands on the pavement and our eyes clashed.

He whacked me across the side of the head with the gun. I fell sideways and hit the ground like a black plastic garbage bin.

I would be dead before morning. I really was an amateur at this.

Chapter Ten

Cupid's Castle

When I woke up, I felt like a broken porcelain doll. I was lying on a black leather sofa in front of a huge glass wall. It was morning and the sunlight that came filtered through the window was gray. Beyond the glass was a large body of water. Was it the ocean? Was it a lake? I couldn't see the other side. Rubbing the back of my neck, I sat up.

Where was I?

I let my head fall back onto the couch and replayed my last memories. I was in the car with Schroder. We were at Pierce's mansion. He got one whiff of my blood, went psycho, and attacked Kilmeny and Kelly. Then he banged me on the side of the head and that was the end. Now the most important question was whether or not Schroder had beaten The Scissor Man. It wasn't 'where am I?' It was 'who am I with?'

Looking out the window, I determined that I was nowhere near the city because there was no major body of water very close by.

No matter how I thought about it, I couldn't figure out why I should have ended up in a place like this if The Scissor Man had won. That meant Schroder had probably killed him and brought me to this place—probably a second home of his where he could drink my blood and kill me whether I drank his blood or not.

Was that what was happening?

I was right the first time—I was already dead. It was only a matter of time before that monster stopped my heart.

I checked my body. A horrendous bruise had spiked out from my forehead where Schroder had hit me with the gun, but other than that there were no other lesions. This surprised me. I expected him to drink my blood at the first opportunity.

Looking around the open floor plan, the kitchenette was too small to be practical (another piece of evidence that I had been kidnapped by Schroder). Stairs led up to a second floor. A door hung on its hinges revealing the edge of a toilet seat. Another door obviously led outside.

I lurched to my feet. It was probably locked, but I had to give it a try. Wobbling, I made it to the entryway, where my shoes were sitting beside the door. As quietly as I could, I sat down on the floor and pulled them on. Then, I tried the doorknob. It gave. I winced, expecting an alarm to sound, but it was silent. I opened the door and stepped outside.

Crisp air cooled my hot skin. It felt especially good on my bruised head. A light mist curled around the house reminding me the shirt I had borrowed from Dudley was inadequate.

I expected to see a car parked next to the house, but there was none. There was no driveway, no garage, no fence, no neighbors, and absolutely no houses anywhere on the distant rolling hills. The grass around the house was unkempt and the grounds were wilderness. A little lane marked in the grass seemed like it hadn't been used in ages and it only led to the back of the house toward the water.

Feeling like I had no choice but to follow the path, I wrapped my arms around myself and walked down it. It began as grass and quickly became sand. The landscape beyond startled me as I realized how large the body of water in front of me was. It wasn't a lake. It was something much bigger. I was at a place I knew nothing of. I could be anywhere on the planet.

Walking down the shore, I found a dock, but there were no boats moored there. I didn't know what to do, other than to continue along and see what I could find. There might be other houses, other people, a boat—something to help me find my way back.

When I was a little girl, my mom read me a story. I stood there at the shore and the haunting tale came back to me.

It was a fairytale about a man who won a parcel of land. The size of his prize was determined by the parameter he could walk in a single day. Bright and early, he began walking. He felt energized and optimistic, so he walked far in a straight line. Before he realized it, the sun was high overhead. The sun's journey was halfway done. Turning, he walked quickly to the east, to widen the property. He walked as far as he dared to before turning a second time. By this time the sun was starting to get low, so he turned back toward the starting place, even though he knew his land would be an irregular shape. He increased his speed and pushed his limits of endurance. He had been walking all day. His breath came short. It was further than he calculated to his starting place and soon, he was running, trying to get to the beginning before the sun set. As he reached his goal, the man had exhausted himself. He dropped dead.

What did land matter to a dead man?

I held my breath as my mother revealed that the mysterious giver of the land was, in fact, the Devil himself.

As I walked away from the vampire's house, I wondered if I had been as foolish as the man who had unwittingly made a deal with the Devil?

I thought I was being offered a wonderful chance for escape since the front door had been left unlocked.

Since I couldn't get away, I would be dead by sunset.

As I walked along the shore, I kept thinking the next turn would show a house or a boat or possible help in some form, and each time I was disappointed. And there was always the temptation to turn back toward the mainland whenever I saw a break in the grass beyond the beach. On closer examination, they didn't look like trails, so I kept to the shore. After all, anyone who lived in this area would want to be close to the water, wouldn't they?

So I walked.

It was cold. I was tired. My head hurt. My belly rumbled. My mouth was dry and my ragged breaths scraped my throat. My feet ached as I trudged the uneven ground.

Slowly, the gray morning and cloudy afternoon turned orange. The sun was beginning to set and I finally concluded I was on an island. That was why there were no other houses—no other trails. That was why the door was left open. I had nowhere to go.

Why didn't my captor say so? Obviously, I wouldn't have believed him.

Now I didn't know how far it was to the house where there was clean water to drink and a place to lie down.

Finally, I found a fallen log and sat down just in time to watch the orange sun sink into the water.

Then a voice sounded behind me, "Have you finished exploring?"

I turned and saw Schroder—sans wig. The place where Dudley shot him in the head was held together with silver staples. He was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses and leaning against a tree

“Yeah,” I muttered, getting to my feet and brushing off my clothes. “I’m done.”

“And you’re going to come back to the house without a fight?” he asked skeptically.

“It’s a little late to fight.”

“Wonderful,” he said, coming over to me and pointing into the forest. “There’s a shortcut.”

My feet hurt like hell, and obviously, he had no vehicle to spare me. On this island, there was just the house, him, and me.

“So,” I started. I wanted to sound casual, but my voice failed me. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Well, I thought about what you said in the car. You said I should have tried to earn your heart. I had never thought of that as a possibility. When you showed up at my place last night, I was talking to Pierce. He was telling me about a particular woman he favored—a human.”

“Really?”

“Hard to believe, huh? I thought so too. So, I asked him how he was planning on having a relationship with her that didn’t end in a blood bath. He said he was simply going to leave blood out of the equation. He was just going to love her and never drink a drop. I had never considered having a romance that didn’t revolve around the sharing of blood. In case you didn’t know, it’s the blood that makes the love affair intense.”

Stopping, I looked at his face. He was scarred from the fire eight years ago. He didn’t even have eyebrows, even though the rims of his sunglasses hid the fact. When I looked at him I felt a twinge of pity for what I had done—not because the monster didn’t deserve it—but urch! I didn’t know. It was easier when I woke up in the morning and there was nothing left but ash, not a person walking around maimed... because of me.

Who could have a romance with him when he looked that way? They’d have to find his inner beauty. Did a vampire with five bullets in his head screwing him up have any inner beauty?

“I want to give it a try,” he said.

“With who?” I asked bitterly, hoping against hope he didn’t mean me.

“Who do you think?” His voice sounded less than amused.

Who was I kidding? Why else would he have brought me out here if not to use me for his little experiment?

“Have you ever heard of the story of Cupid and Psyche?” he asked suddenly.

“Cupid?” I repeated stupidly.

“Sounds like you haven’t,” he said, moving a branch out of my way before I got to it. “Cupid was the son of Aphrodite.”

“Oh?”

“Psyche was the third daughter of a king and her beauty was renowned. She was so famous Aphrodite became jealous and told the king she would destroy his kingdom if he didn’t leave Psyche as a sacrifice to her.”

“This sounds like the kind of story a vampire would like,” I said drolly.

“Perhaps,” Schroder said, looking at me like he didn’t understand my joke. “In any case, Psyche doesn’t die. She’s strapped to the edge of a cliff to await her doom. Aphrodite has sent her son, Cupid, to dispose of her, but when he sees her he doesn’t have the heart to kill her. Instead, he takes her to his castle where he sets up a situation for her to go on living.”

“How does that work?”

“He arranges it so she cannot see his face whether it be day or night and makes her his lover.”

I felt a chill run down my spine. “I take it she cannot leave his castle even if she wants to.”

“No. I imagine she couldn’t,” Schroder said, pulling away another piece of greenery to reveal the house.

It was a shack—not half the size of his mansion by the city, but it looked exactly like Cupid’s castle to me.

Back at the house, Schroder brought me a bottle of water and a bowl of vegetable soup with some crackers. He set them on the coffee table in front of the couch and sat down on the other side of the sectional to watch me eat.

“Sorry, I haven’t got anything better, but we came here in a hurry last night and I didn’t have the chance to shop.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, drinking the soup directly from the bowl rather than bothering with the spoon.

“You’re not worried that it’s poisoned?”

“Why would you try to murder me?” I asked, setting the bowl down when all the liquid was gone. “Aren’t I here so you can seduce me?”

“Seduce isn’t the word I would use,” he said. His voice was rather sharp.

“Love? You expect me to believe that you love me? I can’t believe that. I still maintain you didn’t even know me.”

“I did,” he said ardently. Apparently, he was not turned off by my unladylike display with the soup. Pity. I guessed vampires liked slurping.

I cracked open the crackers and shook my head. “It’s not going to float.”

“That’s because you drank all the broth,” he quipped humorlessly. He hung his head in an almost human gesture of despair. A few moments passed in relative silence before he spoke next. “I can prove it.”

“How?” I asked saucily. No matter what he said, he couldn’t convince me.

“It’ll take four days—at least.”

“And what happens at the end of the four days if I’m not convinced?”

“At the end of four days, we’ll see if I can win your heart. Before that, I have to get some more provisions for you.”

“Does that mean there’s a boat moored somewhere around here?”

“No.”

“Then how do you plan to bring anything here?”

Then he smiled—a strange twisting smile that reminded me of the line a snake would make as it disappeared through the grass. “Did you really think I would tell you how I plan to keep you here? It’s laughable you even asked.”

“You might tell me a thing or two, just so I don’t spend my time pursuing a dead end—like I did today. I felt like an idiot. You could have just said, ‘We’re on an island so don’t bother.’”

“I see. Well, when you put it that way, the electricity for this place is provided by a generator in the back of the house. Don’t mess with it. The only one who will suffer will be you. The well water isn’t particularly good, so drink the bottled water. There is no radio, or telephone out here. If you have a cell phone in your bag, it won’t work because there’s no reception out here. There’s no boat. I think that’s about it.”

I rolled my eyes. Yeah, that covered just about everything. I was screwed. “Well, when you’re getting those provisions, please remember to get me adequate personal hygiene supplies.”

“Are there really that many things?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll get you whatever you want,” he said like he was just now deciding to be gallant.

“Thanks.”

I finished off the soup and pushed the bowl away from me. Then I leaned back and sipped the water.

“Now I’m going to leave,” he said, getting to his feet.

“Where are you going?” I asked, attempting to hide my relief.

“To leave you alone. You can sleep upstairs if that’s more comfortable for you. I just want to give you something to think about before I go.”

I looked at him quizzically. What could he possibly have to tell me that would make a difference at this point?

He bent down and looked me in my eyes. “Remember the night you slashed my chest and burned me?”

“Yes,” I admitted, recoiling further into the sofa.

“Have you ever wondered why I didn’t take the knife from you?”

“Huh?” I asked, my fear forgotten as my eyes bugged out.

“I could easily have taken it from you. I didn’t. Ever wonder why?”

I stared at him. I had wondered why.

He backed away from me and looked down on me from his height. “That’s enough for tonight. I’ll let you digest that and I’ll see you tomorrow night. Try not to get bored.”

Then he headed out the front door.

I glared after him. I should have had the spunk to follow him to see what method he used to get off the island, but after spending the whole day walking fruitlessly, I couldn’t make my body move one inch. I ached in places I didn’t even know I had.

I put my head in my hands and moaned despairingly.

Just like Schroder wanted, I thought about what he said.

He had not taken the knife from me. He was willing to die at my hand. Somehow, his story rang true.

But was it enough to prove to me that he loved me? No. It only made me think he possessed enough humanity not to hurt a fifteen-year-old girl who was only trying to defend her sister.

Losing myself in thought, I fell asleep on the couch. I wanted to explore the house and get a feeling of where I was, but I was exhausted. The last few days had been murder.

In the morning, I got up and found some instant oatmeal in the cupboard. There wasn’t any milk, but there were clean dishes and a microwave, so I made it with water and gaged it down.

Then I went pawing around Schroder’s house. He said he wouldn’t be back until after dark anyway.

Upstairs, I found one bedroom. Its ceiling was slanted to match the slope of the roof, and the doorway was so low I had to duck to my head. It was a very ordinary room. It was dusty, except for the bed, which had been covered in plastic (the plastic was bunched up behind the door).

When I smelled the blankets though, they had a new scent to them, as if they were fresh out of the package.

There was also a bathroom on the second floor. It had a tub in it, though no shower was installed. I was going to have to take baths.

Going back downstairs, it took me a while to find the entrance to the basement. It was hidden behind a shelf containing linen in the bathroom. When I finally got the door open, I saw a spiral staircase that led both down and up. Fearing the unknown, I chose to go up before I went down. I found I had missed seeing the door in the upstairs bedroom closet.

Then I went down.

The stairwell opened up to let the person into an open space. My breath sputtered like an old lawnmower. Bloody hell, this was scary. Darkness shrouded the room. It took me a few infinite seconds to find the cord that turned on the light. When I pulled the string, about five lines of studio lights came on. And lucky for me, there was nothing grotesque to see.

One glance around the room told me what Schroder had meant when he said he was talented. He was an artist. Behind each of those lines of lights was an easel with a partially completed painting sitting on it. I didn't have to be an expert to tell how good he was.

I looked at each painting and then at stacks and stacks of finished work he kept off to one side—except there were paintings I couldn't see. At least I suspected the two huge vaults kept in the corner contained paintings. They might have housed anything really, like a two-way radio. The locks and hinges on them were super tight. I stepped away from them and examined the room. Why had I expected to find anything gory in the first place? London didn't keep that sort of thing in her closet. Schroder probably didn't want his best work spoiled if there was a flood, so he kept it in a water-tight container. Right? Or was there something more pertinent to my escape inside? I tugged on the handle again. No way was that sucker going to give.

So, I went upstairs and had lunch. Canned soup again.

Chapter Eleven

The Last Reason

The next day Schroder turned up at sunset. Vampires didn't like the sunlight, so I couldn't help but wonder where he had gone during that time.

He came lugging a sizable crate full of groceries.

"Wow," I murmured, looking at the pineapple leaves coming out of the top of the box.

He dropped it on the counter and said, "For you."

I was completely despondent. "This is a lot of food for just me. Are you ever planning to let me go?"

"Once you've been here for a while, you won't want to go."

"I seriously doubt that."

"So even after you thought about it, you didn't believe my first piece of evidence?"

I winced. From where I was sitting, I could clearly see the place where Dudley had shot him in the head a couple of nights ago. It was just above his left temple. I had deliberately avoided looking at it the night before, but now I couldn't help it. The mark was dark with a hideous black scab and the skin was pulled over it with two metal stitches.

"Thank you for not hurting me back then. It was worth something, but not as much as you hope," I said, seeking to meet his gaze rather than stare at his wound, but it was hard since he still wore sunglasses. "I have often wondered how I managed to take on a vampire and win, and if you weren't willing to hurt me then that makes everything make a little more sense. By itself, it makes you seem like you might be a good sort of guy since you let me kill you and all..." I trailed off.

He sighed. "I suppose it would have been unrealistic to expect more. I expected you to doubt me, which is why I came up with the plan—the four-day plan. Every day for four days I will tell you one reason that should prove to you that I have always loved you. Last night was the first reason and it seems to have had an impact."

I turned my face away saucily. His plan wasn't going to work. "What am I going to do here while you finish your plan? There's nothing to do."

"Like what?"

"There's no T.V. No computers. No books."

Schroder looked at me like he had never seen me before. "Those are the only things you can think of?"

"Well, I've never had this much spare time in my life. I'm always busy. I have to earn a living. I have to take care of myself—shop, cook, clean, wash, work. I have to help London meet deadlines, so sometimes I spend the whole weekend beading."

"While she sleeps?" Schroder asked suspiciously.

He was absolutely right. That was usually what happened, but it wasn't that London didn't work. She got a lot done at night, but she couldn't keep herself awake during the day. I had stopped trying to keep the same schedule as her. My system couldn't handle the constant change in times especially when I had to work nine to five, so I usually just saw her for a few hours in the evening and then went to bed while she stayed up.

All the same, I couldn't let Schroder bad-mouth her. "And you don't sleep during the day?"

"Not usually."

"Don't vampires hate daylight?"

“If you’re asking if I want to go sun tanning, then the answer is no, but that doesn’t mean I don’t keep normal hours. A vampire sleeping all day is a sign they’re unhealthy.”

My eyes narrowed. London had never stayed awake during the day. “Did you make her wrong on purpose?”

He scoffed. “It’s nothing I did. Vampires are all made the same way, even if they steal the blood. You think I don’t know her? It’s her attitude that’s sour.”

“Well, you’re the thing that’s been bothering her. She was crazy about you. When she thought you were dead, she was lifeless, too.”

“Whatever. She was like that *before* I changed her into a vampire. Nothing is different. Besides, haven’t you clued into the fact that I wouldn’t have bitten her if I thought she could overpower me?”

I averted my eyes. Yeah, what he said sounded true. I just didn’t like it. Dudley said the same thing and I didn’t want to face it when he said it either.

“After hearing you say such despicable things about my sister who I have protected with my life for the past eight years, how do you expect me to fall in love with you? Are your reasons really that great?”

“They are—especially the last one.” He took off his sunglasses and looked at me. His blue eyes looked especially pale now that he had no eyelashes.

Seeing him thus defaced, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. “I’m sorry for what I did to you. I wish there had been another way,” I whispered.

At first, he didn’t respond, and when he did, he asked, “Would you feel better if I forgave you?”

I put a hand to my forehead. “Probably not. Part of me wishes I really had killed you if it meant that you would never come after London. I’m not sorry for cutting and burning you when I remember what I saw in the basement of your shed. You were ordering your weasels to drain her. You pointed her out to Garth and asked him to seduce her, right? I can’t forgive you for that, so what good is your forgiveness if I still wish I’d killed you?”

He gulped down on something hard in his throat. “I didn’t realize you saw that. My mind has been cloudy lately.”

“You’re forgetting things?”

“All the time.”

“And now that you’ve remembered, do you still think you can convince me your feelings for me are real?”

“I have to try.”

“I’m listening.” I rolled my eyes rudely. I was only putting up with his nonsense because I was completely trapped. I crossed my arms and waited for him to give me the second piece of evidence.

“I didn’t turn you into a vampire.”

He’d already told me that, so nothing felt new. I let his words ring through the house for a moment and then said coldly, “If you’re not trying to kill me then please don’t bore me to death.”

Schroder didn’t disappear the next day. He spent the morning in the basement—painting. I sat on a stool behind him and watched him work. With nothing else to do, it was kind of

entertaining. He knew what he was doing and he worked so quickly it was hard to believe he had the stamina, especially with the thick blue fishing line keeping the cuts in his fingers closed.

“I didn’t come after you for revenge after I healed from being burned and decapitated,” he said, suddenly giving his third piece of evidence late that morning.

“That’s true.”

“And even now, I’m not keeping you here for revenge’s sake.”

“I know. If you wanted to kill me, you could have done it twelve times over.”

“Are you beginning to believe me?”

I snapped my fingers impatiently. “Even if I do believe you, it doesn’t change my feelings for you.”

“So, tell me. How do I make you feel?” he asked, turning his back on me and concentrating on his painting.

“I don’t want a vampire lover. I want a human.”

“Like Tate?”

My head nearly spun off my shoulders, but I managed to collect myself. “Technically, he was the one who killed you.”

“Yeah, he was a little shit.”

At this point, I realized that maybe Schroder didn’t see Dudley the other night. He was outside. Maybe Schroder thought I was the one who had shot him. Also, he bothered to question London about Dudley’s whereabouts. Luckily, London didn’t know I had met up with him. Maybe Schroder was still looking for him—for revenge.

“Did you go after him?” I asked quietly.

“Are you worried about him?” Schroder asked, cleaning out one of his brushes.

“Well, yeah. He was a friend of mine.”

“That kid may not have been a vampire, but he always looked hungry whenever you walked by. I wanted to kill him long before that fateful night. I didn’t want to do it with you watching, so I was stuck with him hacking my head off. Actually, I had forgotten all about him. That was why I had to ask London who he was. You know, to jog my memory.”

I exhaled heavily. So, that was how he thought with all those bullets in his head. “So you haven’t found him?”

“No. He seems to have dropped off the face of the earth. But you don’t have to be so happy about it. What was he to you anyway?”

“A good friend. I don’t want you to murder him, so if you have a shred of affection for me—don’t go after him.”

“Do you have good memories of him?”

“Not really, but he did save me when I was in too deep with you. Here’s a question for you. What would you have done with me if he hadn’t interrupted?”

Schroder started cleaning his brushes. Then he took off his apron and mumbled, “I have no idea.”

That evening I sat by the setting sun and sipped a bottle of cream soda. Schroder had brought me a whole crate of it. Watching the sun go down across the water was something I’d never experienced before. I relaxed. The next day Schroder would tell me his last reason. I planned to

reject him and then it was just the ticking of the clock until I convinced him that there should be a fifth reason to prove he really loved me—he should let me leave. If you love someone, let them go and all that crap. I hoped he fell for it.

The sun went down. The sky turned deeper and deeper shades of crimson until it turned navy. Then Schroder came in and took a seat next to me. He was carrying a black leather bag with him.

“Is that the last reason?” I asked cynically.

He nodded and set it down beside the couch out of my view. He turned and looked at me. Not a word passed his lips. Not a greeting. Nothing. He just looked at me with his probing blue eyes and searched my face.

Talk about unnerving!

“Is there something on my face?” I finally blurted.

He didn’t answer immediately but kept staring at me. Finally, he said in low tones. “You know, I don’t think the woman I see right now is the version of you that I’m in love with.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m serious. The Sweeper I’m in love with wouldn’t have acted the way you have. She would have taken up the brush and paints and shown herself in them. She would have run out to the water like a maniac and played until the sun came down. Windsurfing? Have you ever tried it?” He read his answer in my blank expression. “All the equipment is in the shed out by the water. I like to do it at night, but you would do it during the day when the sun was at its hottest just to show me what you could do that I couldn’t.”

“You must have a lot of strange ideas about me,” I said caustically. “I’ve never had the slightest interest in windsurfing or painting.”

“You’re missing the point. I don’t want the Sweeper that sits in front of me. You need to grow up.”

“I am grown up!” I cried.

Schroder shook his bald head like he wasn’t even hurt. “You are a baby, but don’t let that get to you. I know why it happened.”

This maniac was really losing his grip on reality talking about me like he knew everything. “Really?” I asked crossly.

“London.”

Now I was pissed off. Why did he keep ragging on her? “Stop it! My life has not been lacking because she’s been in it.”

“Of course, it has been. We’ve talked about this before. You just don’t see it,” he paused, “but my plan is perfect. Not only will you grow up, but you’ll change into the woman I love.”

I shuddered. “Are you waiting until midnight to tell me your last reason?”

“I was. Would you rather we got on with it?”

“Yes.”

He opened the bag in front of him and pulled out a rolled-up piece of black fabric. Then he undid the string holding it together and unrolled it, exposing a grand selection of shiny surgical tools.

“What are those for?” I asked—my voice toxic.

“The last reason. I’m going to let you remove all five bullets from my head.”

I was on the verge of snapping if I didn’t take things slowly. “What?” I whispered. “There is no way I can do that.”

“You can do it,” he said briskly. “Doing surgery on a vampire is nothing like doing surgery on a human. We’re not delicate. There are only two things you need to worry about. One is not causing any more damage to my brain. The second is managing blood loss. I don’t know if you’ve figured it out by now, but blood loss is the only way to actually kill a vampire and fire helps our blood clot.”

“You should have let The Scissor Man take them out, rather than asking me to do this. I’ll bet he has a steadier hand,” I said thinking of his hand tremors.

I was half hoping Schroder might say something about how he went berserk that night or whether or not The Scissor Man was still alive, but he bypassed it completely.

“You’re missing the point of the exercise,” he said. “When anyone—human or vampire—allows someone to do surgery on them, a tremendous amount of trust is involved. I imagine it must be easier for humans because usually there is nothing to be gained from murdering the patient on the table. In my case, you could easily kill me and sell my blood for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Maybe more, if you got an interested buyer. Usually, a full dose of vampire blood procured by draining the vampire to zero will provide half the needed blood to turn a human. I wouldn’t really expect you to sell my blood, but if you wished I were dead badly enough—you could kill me and let my entire blood supply spill onto the floor.”

“How would I leave the island then?”

He clasped his fingers into a steeple and said, “That’s the question. Do you think you could leave without my help? Do you want to kill me badly enough? Could you kill me when I’m intentionally lying at your mercy?”

I sucked in my breath. This was a risky game to play. If I did the surgery, would he let me leave? What if I screwed it up? What if I injured his brain even more and made him crazier? Then what would he do to me? Or what if I accidentally killed him and was stuck on his island forever? Crap!

“What if I refuse?”

“You can’t. You shouldn’t. You should accept this experience and move forward. This is the only way you can shake off the slave you are and become everything I dream of when I look at you.”

“So, I’d be doing this for you?”

“I’d consider it your first act of love for me.”

“Then I can’t do it,” I groaned. “I don’t love you.”

He licked his lips and shifted his position. For a moment, I thought I was making him desperate. “There are a lot of reasons why you should team up with me. I’ll let you think them over.”

With that, he got up, leaving all the tools on the table, bright and shining and terrifying.

I lay in the upstairs bedroom while Schroder went away. I was starting to understand what he meant and I didn’t like it. He meant that if I played by his rules he would give me something I wanted. He said he didn’t want blood, which was good, but if he didn’t want blood, what did he want?

Control over me.

I rubbed the back of my neck and looked out the window at the night sky. The moonlight was glimmering on the surface of the water. A red sail skimmed through the white road of water. That was Schroder—windsurfing.

Did I really have a choice?

The next day, I sat with him in the living room and talked to him about the process involved in doing surgery on a vampire. It was creepy. I wasn't even good at cutting up meat.

"And there's no anesthetic?" I had asked for the third time.

"No. Drugs don't work on vampires, but don't worry, I will hold still for you."

"It'll hurt, won't it?"

"Of course, it will."

Then I asked another question that had been nagging at me. "Why were you shot in the head those other times?"

He touched a scar behind his temple. "This one was a tragedy. It happened years and years ago, long before London. I knew a woman who wanted me to make her a vampire. I refused. I told her I was going to leave her. Her plan was to kill me by shooting me in the head and then commit suicide because she couldn't bear to live without me."

"Did she kill herself?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I would have completely drained her if I had been in phase four, but I was only in phase three and completely disinterested in her as a potential mate. I unloaded her clip into the air and then shot myself in the head with the last bullet."

I gasped. "Weren't you afraid?"

"My self-destruction knew no bounds when I had already damned myself by killing my brother's murderer. I actually didn't start to feel like living until I was faced with real death—vampire death. That's different."

I cleared my throat. "So, what happened to that girl?"

"I don't know. I was unconscious. When I woke up, she was gone. The rest of the bullets in my head are from business deals gone bad."

"What kind of business deals? Don't you deal in art?"

He laughed. "It pays *some* of the bills. Mostly it's a cover. I need money. I need so much more money. I haven't even finished paying for half the things here."

"So, if I let you die, someone will be here eventually to collect on your debts?"

He smiled. "Yes, eventually someone might come here if you're thinking of killing me and waiting for them. It would be a mistake. Those guys are too much for you to handle."

I started to squirm. "And if I refuse to do the surgery at all?"

"My condition may worsen and I might forget I wanted to keep blood out of the picture. Don't be afraid of doing the surgery," he said, putting his hand on my knee. "It's completely possible. I've done it on myself any number of times when I've been shot in places I can see—my stomach, my thigh, my arm. I just can't see the back of my head." He pulled up his sleeve and showed me a bullet mark on his forearm.

This was a terrible mess.

Freeze the area, dig out the bullet, cauterize the wound, and bandage it. It sounded simple enough.

Who was I kidding? It wasn't simple. It was horrible.

I piled up all the ice I could fit in an old laundry tub, covered it with a plastic sheet, and put it at the head of the bed. Then I clipped the magnifying lamp Schroder used for painting details to the headboard.

"I'm backing out of this if it turns out I can't do it," I warned him.

He smiled slowly—mostly to reassure me—and put his head on the plastic. "You can do it."

"Sure I can," I said loathingly.

Then I set a timer for an hour. He and I had decided that an hour with the ice would be enough to numb him out. If he wasn't frozen by then, he thought he'd never be, so we might as well get on with it.

When the buzzer rang, I got started.

I began with the bullet Dudley had put in his head. I picked up a pair of tweezers and pulled out the staples that were keeping the wound closed. When I pulled the folds of skin away, I saw how deep the bullet went and how hard it would be to remove. I took one of the long skinny tools with a little bit of a hook on the end of it and hooked it on the lip of the bullet. It slid right out.

This was amazing!

Then I took a sparkler and lit it with a lighter. Using the end of it for a couple of seconds, I burned the wound, and the little stream of blood that had been dribbling from the hole stopped. I shoved the sparkler under the plastic and put it out in the ice water. I sewed the wound shut with a star pattern and snipped the thread. Then I got a square bandage and taped it to his head for good measure.

I hadn't believed him, but this actually *was* easy.

Then I started on the next one. The next one was a little harder to get out, but it did come out.

On the third one, Schroder started talking—mumbling to himself the way he had in the car—except this time he made sense to me. "The Scissor Man would have killed me."

At first, I hesitated. I wasn't sure I wanted him to talk. I needed to concentrate, but maybe I could have an unguarded conversation with him. "Why would he have done that?" I asked.

It didn't work. He didn't answer me.

After that, he lay totally still—even after I had removed all the bullets and finished up. I moved the bowl of ice and laid his head down on a pillow so he could rest the remainder of the night.

As for me—I was amazed. I couldn't believe such a thing was possible. I had been able to do surgery successfully on a vampire.

Schroder slept for five days. He breathed, so I knew he wasn't dead.

On the evening of the fifth night, he rose and came down to the living room. I was ready to get down to business with him. I'd played by his rules. Now he could give me what I wanted.

"How do you feel?" I asked as he hobbled down the stairs. He looked much better—kind of like a cancer victim instead of like a bloodsucker.

“Different. My mind is clearer,” he said, and his voice sounded somehow looser than before. It was almost as if he had had something lodged in his throat and now it was gone. “Thank you,” he said peacefully.

“So, if surgery on a vampire is so simple, why didn’t you get it done before?”

He lowered himself carefully onto a seat on the couch. “You know, the first time I shot myself, things weren’t much different when I woke up. I didn’t think it made such a big difference. I knew I had a problem by the third one, but I didn’t have anyone I could trust to do it for me. You can’t underestimate how much someone will pay for vampire blood. Your best friend might sell you out. I’ve heard of plenty of cases where it has happened. Marshall is good at catching vampires who like to turn on their friends. He’s been doing it for years.”

“That’s why you used him?”

“All I was saying was I’d trust him to do an errand for me, not that I’d trust him to handle my surgery. He probably wouldn’t sell my blood, but he’d probably drain me anyway just to have one fewer vampire crowding the world.” Then Schroder leaned forward and looked into my face meaningfully. “Have I convinced you?”

I drew my breath in. This was when I found out if he was really saner without additional metal addling his brain. “Let’s see,” I began, attacking the situation with my own spin. “You wanted to convince me I was better off without London in my life? You know, whether or not I want her as my roommate does not mean that I want her drained by an unspeakably large coven of humans. I want her safe whether she lives with me or not. I love her, and as better proof that you love me—you should have offered to undo what you did to her by sending Garth to be her new mate. Even now, you should be helping me find her.”

“Find her?” Schroder repeated. “She was with those goons back in the city. Pierce has probably got her in protective custody for the time being—at least until he can educate her on the dangers of mating.”

“That’s what you think? Garth double-crossed you and ran off with her before you were supposed to meet in your shed that night.”

“What?”

“Do you have any idea where he could have taken her? I couldn’t find out anything about that sack of crap to give me a lead. Where does he live? Where does he hang out? Where did you find him? Where did you point London out to him? Details!”

Schroder looked shocked. “You’re not thinking about you and me, are you?”

“Of course not. Have you read me wrong all these years? I was trying to protect her. You steal her away to sell her blood and you expect me to fall into your arms? All you have proven by what has happened on this island is that you don’t want revenge on me and I don’t want revenge on you. I want you to fix what you’ve done. I want you to help me find London and I want her safety assured.”

“Nobody can do that, even if I hadn’t interfered. She’s a vampire.”

I breathed, heavy with patience. “If you really want to prove to me that you care about me—take me off this damn island and give me a lead.”

He peered at me. This wasn’t what he wanted.

Chapter Twelve

Not Your Girl

It was one of those mornings where you find yourself hungover and toxic, blinking at the light coming through the blinds in an unknown hotel room.

Freaking Schroder didn't want me to figure out where his island was, so to pay the price for leaving, I needed to be heavily sedated. And that only covered half of the price tag. To pay the other half, I had to take the bloodsucker with me everywhere I went once we arrived back at civilization.

Thus, I ended up lying on a hotel bed handcuffed to a slumbering vampire watching cable in French because I couldn't figure out how to change the language with the stupid remote.

This wasn't a permanent arrangement. He wasn't sleeping because it was daytime. He was sleeping because he had been awake all the previous night getting us back to the city while I slept like Psyche on valium. Unconscious like the dead, I didn't even know how we got off the island. Via boat? Via helicopter? No idea.

Now in the hotel room, the phone was yanked out of the socket and on the other side of the room. He'd ordered food and it sat on a tray next to the bed. Get this. I was supposed to wake him up if I had to go to the bathroom.

Even though I was not uncomfortable, I was still groggy from the drugs, so I fell asleep, too.

That evening, Schroder and I got up and I convinced him to let me plug in the phone so I could make a couple of calls. My brain had been murky from all the drugs, but now that I was somewhat back to myself, I could figure out where to pick up my investigation.

First, I called my mother.

"I haven't seen London," she said, like her patience with me was wearing thin. "All her stuff is still here. Sweeper, it shouldn't bother you that she met someone before you. She's two years older than you and someday a nice man will notice how special you are."

When my mother said this, I had to cover my mouth either to stop myself from laughing or to stop myself from crying. I couldn't tell which. She was so wrapped up in wishing London well, she hadn't even noticed I had been missing for over a week.

"Okay," I said, trying not to let my voice alert her to my distress. "Please give me a call if you hear from her. I've got a bunch of her work piling up at our place." The last bit wasn't true, but it sounded true, which was good enough.

"Can't you take care of that for her, Sweeper? If it gets unmanageable, I'll come up and help you."

"That's okay. I'll manage. Don't come. Besides," I said, sort of trying to be funny, "I've got a boyfriend too." I looked at Schroder. "He can help me if I need him to."

"That's wonderful, honey. What's he like?" She didn't believe me, she was only pretending, but I didn't care. This was a game I felt like playing.

"He's..." I let my gaze sweep over the vampire across the room. He was wearing a black bandana on his head to hide the gauze. For some reason, he reminded me of a monk. Even if my mother saw him, there was no way she would recognize him as London's teenage boyfriend. "He's the rough on the outside, sweet on the inside type. You'll love him."

Schroder gave me a disappointed glance. Then he gave me a wrap-it-up signal with his hand. "Gotta go, Mom. Don't forget to tell me if you hear from London." I hung up.

Next, I needed to call Dudley and Marshall, but I was hesitant to get on the phone with either of them. I didn't want Schroder and Dudley to run into each other, since Schroder still wanted revenge.

"Is there anyone you can call who might know where London and Garth have slipped off to?" I asked, holding the phone out to him.

Schroder snorted. "My connections are spoiled. I can't talk to the humans I was working with. They probably think I turned them in because there's no doubt in my mind that Pierce has brought them in. They're probably all waiting in jail by now. We could talk to Marshall."

"Don't you think we should go to Garth's?" I suggested, trying to move our investigation away from Dudley.

The vampire shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know where that punk lives. I wasn't thinking very clearly when I made him the offer. All I knew about him was that he was desperate for vampire blood and he had the kind of face that would draw in London. Since he looked like I used to."

"You don't even know where he lives?" I asked incredulously.

"Give me a break. I should have found out, but I didn't think of it. I had five bullets in my head."

I rolled my eyes and decided to let it go. "Okay then. I want to talk to Pierce to find out how capturing your coven went. What's his number?"

"You can't call him. The police are looking for you. If you called him, the number would be traced and they'd be here before you could hang up the phone."

"Then I'll have to go see him in person," I snarled.

Schroder looked at me disapprovingly. "How am I supposed to go with you to do that? Pierce is on the hunt for me, too."

"Then I'll go by myself, and you can follow me."

Schroder looked at me. Then he looked away. He had to think about it. He tried to get up, pulled on my handcuffs, and brought me up with him as he began pacing the room, dragging me in tow.

"Stop it," I shouted after I had been taken on two full circuits of the room and bashed into him three times.

"Fine. I guess it's got to be like that since I can't think of any other leads. Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

"No."

"Good. Then," he said, taking out a second set of handcuffs and taking my other wrist in his hand.

"Then what?" I squawked.

"Then you have to wait for me here while I go get ready."

I gave him my wrist reluctantly and he handcuffed me to the headboard. "Go get ready?" I asked skeptically.

"I need a disguise if I'm going to see Pierce."

He fetched a key out of the bottom drawer of the nightstand on his side of the bed and unlocked the set of handcuffs that kept the two of us bound together. I never would have guessed

the key had been somewhere so simple. Idiot! I didn't even try looking for a key and it was there all along. I smacked myself on the forehead with my free hand.

"You won't find the key for that set," he said darkly, flicking my bound wrist. "Come on. Don't lose your spirit now. I'm giving you what you want."

I winced.

He nodded at me before he put his coat and shoes on. He shook his keys in his pocket and went out, locking the door behind him.

Instead of watching crappy cable, I slept some more. And you know what? I slept so much better with Schroder out of the room. I didn't realize how miserable his shabby form made me feel until he was gone. Being with him was like hanging out with the Phantom of the Opera without his mask all the time. It felt particularly awful because I had been the one who beheaded and burned him. At least I hadn't been the one to make him crazy.

When I woke up, there was a note in front of my face and a key. "Dudley?" I whispered drowsily. That was right. I had fallen asleep on his couch. "You already gave me this key."

"What?" a deep male voice questioned tensely.

"You already gave me a key to your apartment. I promised you I wouldn't go home and I'd come to your place instead. Remember? I've missed you." Then I stretched and moved to rub my shoulder when *clank*. I came to the end of the tether the handcuff gave me. What was going on?

Then it all came back to me like an anesthetic knocks you out—except backward.

What had I been saying?

Bang! The door to the hotel room closed with a slam. That was Schroder and he hadn't liked what I mumbled in my sleep.

Stick it to me to have such piss poor luck.

I got up on my knees in the bed and picked up the piece of paper Schroder had left lying beside me.

I read it and practically heard Schroder's voice grating in my ear reading along. "Go wherever you want and I'll follow you. When you're ready to meet up with me again, come back here."

So, I wasn't allowed to know what his disguise was. I picked up the key and unlocked the handcuff.

Getting up, I made my way to the bathroom. It would be afternoon before I looked presentable enough to go out.

I shouldn't have been mumbling in my sleep. However, the feelings I had felt when I thought I was back in Dudley's apartment, made me stop to think. There was an ache uncoiling in my stomach. Dudley was probably somewhere in the city. He was probably somewhere cracking down on a lead, wearing his tacky necktie and sporting a freshly shaven chin. Maybe he was even looking for me. When I thought about that, my stomach sort of lurched. Well, I just had to push all that away. I couldn't see him. As long as I had Schroder on my back, seeing Dudley was out of the question. And if I should see him by accident I had to pretend I didn't care.

Thinking like that, I got ready to go out. The clothes I had with me were a mess, but as I searched the room for something of Schroder's to make do with, I found he had bought me a fresh set of clothes.

At first, I didn't know what to make of his wardrobe choice, since the clothes looked like something straight out of a romance novel. I was supposed to go traipsing around in these? Under normal circumstances, there was no way. Under these dire circumstances—okay.

To start with, he supplied me with a pair of capris made of faded blue faded denim. That wasn't the annoying part. Then there was a white peasant shirt—still not terribly irritating. It was the shoes he brought that made me writhe. They were white wedge heels with scads of tiny straps on them. How was I supposed to get any serious walking done in these? Was he trying to handicap me? I would have worn my shoes, but they didn't match those capris.

I was being ridiculous. I finished getting ready without forcing myself to further lengths of absurdity, which meant that I let my hair curl up as much as it would go with only a hotel blow-dryer and went out without a speck of makeup on.

I went downstairs. From the cheap hotel room to the slightly less cheap-looking lobby, to the bright city street where I hailed a shady cab. Then I was on my way to the police station. Luckily, I still had my own money—though there wasn't going to be much of it left after the cab fare.

When I got to the police station, I went straight through the glossy doors and right up to the desk.

“How can I help you?” the clerk asked.

“I'd like to see Pierce Wagner. My name is Sweeper. Is he in his office?”

“One moment. I don't think he's available.”

“Can you check, please?”

“Let me put a call through to his secretary.”

I nodded. It didn't matter what his schedule was like. Pierce would want to talk to me.

After her call, the receptionist turned back to me and said, “Chief Wagner is in the training hall at the remand center. He'd like you escorted there. Officer Kelly is free and he'll take you.”

“Officer Kelly?” I repeated as she came around the desk. Was she talking about The Scissor Man?

The clerk introduced me to an extraordinarily scarred man known as Officer Kelly. Now I knew why he didn't want to be called The Scissor Man. He was a police officer. Aside from the tiny long scars I had seen on his face at Pierce's, there were a couple of new ones that had almost finished healing. He put his hat on and led me outside.

“It's nice to see you again,” I said quietly. “I was worried about you.”

His expression was grim. “Thanks for the concern. It's unprecedented. Most people wish I was dead.”

“Why?”

He didn't answer, but instead, put out his hand to lead me down the sidewalk. “This way,” he said.

Together he and I walked down the length of the block, crossed the street, and entered a plain yellow bricked building. It was the remand center. Officer Kelly led me past reception, down to the rooms for reprogramming and basic training. I didn't understand why I needed an escort. I could have found it just fine. Then he took me to a door that required key card authorization. He swiped his identity card and the door opened. Down one more hallway, we found Pierce Wagner waiting—looking frustrated and tense. When he turned and saw me, all the intensity drained from his shoulders. He came over with a smile. Officer Kelly closed the door on us without saying a word.

“Glad to see you, Sweeper,” Pierce said, as he came within one foot of me. Without warning, he suddenly snapped his hand out and yanked my hair.

“What are you doing?” I screamed as he wrenched my head back and forth.

“Looking for bite marks,” he said, scanning my neck and arms. Then he put a finger down my neckline and pulled it forward as if to look down my shirt. I smacked him. “Schroder didn’t bite me, okay?”

“That’s what you would say whether he bit you or not. You should be examined.”

“Maybe, but not by you and not in this hallway,” I said, as I fixed my shirt.

“Are you insane? Would you really want anyone besides me to find out? If Schroder had used his own blood to turn you, there would be no one in the world who would help you, but me.”

I scratched the back of my head. I didn’t believe that. There was still Dudley out there. “Look, he didn’t bite me. He said he wanted to try a love affair where he didn’t draw blood just like you.”

Pierce shook his head wearily and let go of me. “It’s too late for him to say he practices noble vampirism. The coven he created to drain London was too large. I’m going to have to end his legacy the next time I see him. What happened?”

“Nothing. I’m fine. Look, I want to continue my investigation. Did you manage to round up the whole coven?”

“They’re in there,” Pierce said pointing.

I didn’t realize it before, but we were standing in front of a one-way mirror, and on the other side was what looked like a schoolroom with about thirty people sitting at desks while a teacher wrote on a whiteboard.

“What’s this?”

“These are the people we’ve stopped from becoming vampires this month and a few extras I enlisted in the class. It’s a series of lessons we’ve put together to try to convince people not to become vampires. Twelve of the people from Schroder’s coven are in there.”

I couldn’t believe how many people there were and they were all so young. My stomach turned over. “Can we hear what they’re saying?”

“Sure,” Pierce said. He turned a dial that controlled the volume of the intercom.

The teacher’s voice droned and grated over the speakers, “The average lifespan for a male human is seventy-nine years. The average lifespan for a male vampire is fifteen years from the time they were turned.” The teacher pointed to one of the guys sitting on the third row with his marker. “You there, how old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” the guy said.

He was the same age I was.

“Then you’d live to be thirty-eight. You’d be cheated of over half of your lifespan as a human.”

“But I’d be gorgeous!” the guy exclaimed rebelliously.

The teacher rolled his eyes and seeing that he’d done as well with his point as he could, he went on. “The average female human’s lifespan is eighty-five years. After transformation—what is their average lifespan?”

“What is it?” someone in the class shouted out.

“Seven years.”

“Only seven?” someone whispered in apparent shock.

The teacher continued, “The likelihood she’ll beat her man out during the mating process is about one in four. Usually, the men kill the women. Hear that, girls? You can become a vampire the dirty way if you like, but when it comes time for you to mate—and the drive will come—your lover will probably kill you.”

There was silence in the classroom.

“What else do you teach them?” I asked Pierce.

“Most of the other lessons are an attempt to teach them how to live normally. We feed them amazing food and take them for light treatments. You’ll probably notice that the light in there is brighter than out here.”

He was right. The hallway was considerably dimmer.

“The success rate for this project is usually around forty percent. Forty percent abandon the idea and the other sixty go for it and the blood that flows can’t be corked.”

“What happened to the others?”

“Do you mean the other two members of the coven besides Garth?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Dudley is looking for them. I put some police officers on the case as well, but so far I haven’t heard much. Have you been in touch with Dudley since you shook Schroder?”

This was one of those things. I couldn’t tell him I hadn’t lost Schroder. Even now, I expected to see his cold blue eyes peering at me from between the bricks in the wall.

“No, I haven’t talked to Dudley. If you see him, will you tell him I’m working on the case, too? I’m looking for Garth and London. I take it you don’t have any leads on them?”

“He covered his tracks well. I have no idea where they have gone. Sweeper, have you ever thought of *not* looking for London?”

My eyes were sharp. “What do you mean?”

“I mean this is the way vampires are made. This is the way they die. Vampires are despicable creatures as they are, but aside from the human covens, aside from the marketing of vampire blood, besides the drug trades vampires foster to continue their decadence, besides all that and more—this is how they live and die and it’s the only honest thing about them.”

“What?” I snapped.

He took a deep breath. “I’m saying it’s about choice. Sometimes a human can control a vampire and keep them at bay. It’s possible London didn’t have to mate with Schroder just because he tagged her. She chose to fall for him. She chose to let him live and thereby let him kill her. You intervened. Your interference is probably not looked on fondly by her. This time, why not let her try to finish it properly with Garth? If she dies, that’s her choice. If she kills him, that’s her choice too. A vampire that dies is one that didn’t give up on love. Let her—”

“I will not!” I said proudly, straightening my back. “I don’t see it that way. I’ll find them and I’ll kill him. You saw the light come on when I came into the police station. I have a license. If she really transformed him, I’ll kill him and deliver his slobbering corpse to your very doorstep if you’d like.”

Pierce looked away in disgust and clicked his tongue. “That would be a fine way to thank the man that saved her from being drained by no less than fifteen people. I like his conviction. I’ll tell you what. If you do manage to find them, if Garth is not a vampire, you can bring him here and we’ll swap the vampire blood for human blood. We’re getting quite good at reversing the effects. I’m sure he knows it’s an option.”

“Do you think that’s really a possibility?”

“No, but I think it would be a shame if you pulled the plug on a human you thought was a vampire. You would go to prison for a long time doing a thing like that. You’d better make sure he’s a vamp before you slit his throat.”

I nodded severely. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

Feeling our conversation was coming to a close, I put out my hand for Pierce to shake, but he held onto my fingers like he still had one more thing to say. “You should really listen to me. She’s not yours to protect. She can decide the ending herself. If you want to help Dudley with his search for the last two members of the coven, that’s one thing—an admirable thing—but it’s time for you to let London go.”

I nodded again, but I only did it only so he would let go of my hand.

“You’ll think about what I’ve said?” he asked, still not letting go.

“Sure,” I said.

He frowned as he freed my hand. “You’d better.”

I smiled politely. I sort of liked Pierce when I first met him, but not when he spouted that garbage and expected me to listen. By my third meeting with him, he had become nosy and bothersome and for whatever reason, he was interfering with what I had based my life on for the past eight years. What did he know, anyway?

When I left the building, I had a look around the street and started walking back toward the police station. After talking to Pierce, it felt like the next logical step in my investigation was to find Dudley and get what information I could from him. But I didn’t want to call him when I had Schroder following me.

I stopped at a crosswalk and took in the scene in front of me. Where was Schroder anyway? I couldn’t see anyone except Dudley.

Virtualventures

Chapter Thirteen

If You're Not The One

There was Dudley, poised to cross the street going west while I crossed north. He stood there, wearing a brown fedora, waiting at the corner. If I crossed and waited by the lights, he'd join me on the corner. Except his walk sign changed first and he didn't see me, so he continued down the street while I stumbled after him.

Earlier, I had decided I was not going to talk to him even if I saw him, but now that I had seen him, I couldn't ignore him. The attraction was too strong. Even worse, now that I had thrown caution to the dogs, I couldn't catch up to him. The light was short and those crippling heels slowed me down. I didn't even make it across the street before the pedestrian light turned off and I was holding up traffic. Looking up helplessly, I saw Dudley was already halfway down the block. I hurried after him, hesitant to call out in case Schroder heard me, but Dudley was getting farther ahead of me.

Damn it! We were both on foot and I was going to lose him!

He walked to the end of the block, crossed the street, and went into a lounge. Since he'd stopped moving, I had a chance to catch up, so my breathing slowed and I walked normally. Well, as normally as I could in those infernal wedges.

Inside, the lounge was carpeted in beef jerky brown and the bar stools and booths were upholstered in the same brown cow. Actually, it was pretty ritzy. After the spider web chandeliers and red brocade of the last place Dudley took me to, it was hard to envision him patronizing a place like this. Scanning the dining room, I tried to spot him. He was probably here to meet someone.

He was. He was in a booth with his back to me. Who was he meeting? I recognized her. It was Schroder's maid—Jan. She was handing him an envelope and glaring at him fiercely.

I took a seat at the bar, not three steps from them, and listened to the snippets of their conversation that came my way.

"Three blocks from the police station!" she exclaimed. "Why not just come to the house?"

A waiter went by and I couldn't hear Dudley's reply.

"Whatever," the maid said gruffly, leaning inwards to light Dudley's cigarette. "It cost me two hundred and twenty thousand dollars to get this much information out of them. You'd better be good for it. I know the bank is fed up with your crap."

Dudley started to say something, but the bartender chose that moment to ask me for my order. I answered that I wanted tonic water, and sent the man on his way, but again I missed Dudley's side of the conversation entirely.

Just then a man entered the lounge and from his look, I was certain he was Schroder in disguise. He had a black beard and wore sunglasses large enough to cover half his face. Having figured that out, I kept my eyes forward. I didn't want him to misinterpret my eye contact and think I was inviting him over. The only question I had was whether or not he would notice Dudley talking to his maid.

The next thing I heard her cackle was, "Forty thousand isn't enough to comfort those bankers, but I'll take it from you just in case you're tempted to spend it. And if you can't come up with the rest, I'm sure I can think of someone who can cover your debts."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dudley grind out his cigarette.

Then the maid excused herself without a care in the world. Schroder didn't even look at her as she swept out of the lounge. As a matter of fact, he was making conversation with an incredibly attractive blonde woman who was sitting at his table. Where had he picked her up? Then I noticed he had taken his sunglasses off. That guy wasn't Schroder. His face under those glasses was all wrong.

I did another sweep of the lounge. There weren't very many faces to choose from. The place was practically empty. There was no one here who could be Schroder, except... I turned to look at Dudley and found a pair of incredibly blue eyes staring at me.

"His name was Dudley?" Schroder said, looking at me cruelly. He had another cigarette in his mouth and he was pointing at a silver lighter on the table with his eyes.

I got up from my barstool and slid into his booth.

I was an idiot. I didn't see him from the front. I didn't hear him speak. I only saw his back and I was so anxious to see Dudley. I didn't think Schroder was intuitive enough to pull something so crafty. He had made himself look like Dudley intentionally to get me to follow him. It was the best disguise he could have chosen.

"I know him," Schroder continued. "He smokes too much."

I nodded miserably.

"And you," he said. Leaving his words like a threat hanging in the air, he lit his cigarette himself and took a heavy drag on it before going on. "Didn't shoot me that night. When I took you back to my island, I found your gun. No bullets were missing. Pierce couldn't have shot me because he wasn't packing a gun that night, so I contacted Jan to see if she had seen who shot me. Who? Tate Dudley. Jan didn't know him before the night he helped Pierce bring in my coven, but she knows him quite well now. She's been on a few dates with him." He paused for effect. "Does the news jolt your system?"

I wanted to act like I didn't care, but he had already heard my pathetic mumbling that morning, so I wasn't sure if there was a point in pretending. "He's probably just pumping her for information. You know, like the information she handed over to you. Two hundred and twenty thousand dollars? A little pricey, wasn't it?"

His expression of smug satisfaction faded. "She didn't pay that much for it. She's just trying to get me to top up her pocketbook since she doesn't have a job anymore."

"I suppose it doesn't matter to you what info she sells to Dudley. It's not like you own her," I said, wishing I had some bubblegum to snap.

"And it doesn't matter to you what Dudley does when he's with her? Even though, from what you said earlier, it sounded like you were living with him."

Man alive, I needed something in my mouth to help me keep some semblance of control over my facial features. "He would make a much better roommate than London."

The bartender brought my tonic water and Schroder laid out a menu in front of me. "You'd better eat something while we're here."

"Are you going to order something too and pretend to eat it?" I asked, scanning my choices.

"No." He put his head in his chin and took another drag on his cigarette. "Haven't you heard? I'm too low on funds to goof off."

I looked over the menu items again, but I couldn't see anything I wanted. The only thing holding my interest in the whole restaurant was sitting under Schroder's elbow—a manila envelope. "So, what did she bring you?" I asked, attempting to sound nonchalant.

"Oh, this?" he said, tapping it with one of his long fingers. "I'll show it to you."

“Really?”

“Oh, sure. Just give me a hundred and eighty thousand dollars and I’ll open it right up.”

He was hilarious.

“Maybe we can swing a trade,” I negotiated. “Pierce made some interesting comments. I’m sure they’re worth something. Besides, you said the envelope was for me, so why are you holding back?”

“I don’t want to spoil you,” he said, offering me a cigarette.

I eyed him skeptically. “What does it feel like when you smoke? Aren’t you dead?”

“Yes, my heart stopped beating some time ago. Smoking is just like breathing regular air—tastes like nothing. Except Dudley always makes it look so cool. He’s the one, isn’t he?”

“The ‘one’ what?” I said, beckoning a waiter over to take my order.

“The one you’d rather be with than me. You betrayed your feelings chasing me down with such enthusiasm.”

“I thought Dudley might have a lead,” I said, taking a second to point out to the server what I wanted.

Schroder waited for him to leave. “Pierce didn’t tell you anything useful if you were still looking for Dudley.”

“Didn’t you follow me into the remand center?”

“How could I, when you had The Scissor Man escorting you there?”

I remembered Officer Kelly and how relieved I was to see that he wasn’t dead. Now I understood why I needed an escort—to keep unwanted vampires away. It was kind of them to make the effort, but the guy sort of gave me the creeps.

Schroder suddenly grabbed my hand. “Why are you making that face? You don’t have any reason to be afraid of The Scissor Man. You’re a human. He doesn’t chop up humans.”

“You make him sound like a butcher for vampires. Pierce made him sound like a surgeon.”

“He’s both.”

“Well, whatever,” I said, shrugging off the implication. It sounded like Schroder would have ended up in pieces if he hadn’t somehow managed to get away. Even now, Pierce was still after him. I couldn’t think about that part, so I started talking about what I could think about. “Pierce brought in twelve members of the coven. There are still two more out there.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah.”

“No sign of London and Garth?”

“None. Now, are you going to tell me what your little maid researched?”

Schroder leaned back in his chair. “I think I was wrong about you.”

I peered up at him. What was this nutcase saying now? Before I took the bullets out of his head, he was hopelessly in love with me, and now he was looking at me like he was about to say something akin to back-pedaling. “Don’t you like me anymore?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I think I understand what Pierce was saying when he said a love affair without blood was much different. I feel like there’s no commitment.”

“Of course, there’s no commitment. I haven’t promised you anything.”

He discarded his cigarette in the ashtray and scratched the back of his head under his wig. He corrected his hat and said, “That doesn’t matter when a vampire mates. You think I have an extensive conversation with a woman when I’m going to drink her blood? I certainly don’t ask her permission. There are only two questions that are presented. First, does she want to drink my

blood? Of course, I'll drain her dry if she doesn't replenish herself somehow. I had one girl who kept getting blood transfusions because she wanted to keep it going without drinking my blood. That relationship lasted longer than the others. The second choice a woman has is she can decide whether or not she wants to try to kill me when I get that look in my eyes. What I mean is, I feel myself wavering in my commitment to this arrangement—my not drinking your blood and loving you anyway.”

I was about to tell him he had my permission to stray, but that meant he would eventually kill another girl, so I bit my tongue on it. Instead, I said, “Why don't you give up mating entirely?”

“I think I have to find a woman I love so much that I'm willing to die for her,” he said, looking past me, out the window.

I followed his eyes and stared out the window to see what he found so fascinating. I didn't see anything. “I guess you don't have that kind of affection for me,” I said smoothly.

He didn't answer me but continued gazing at nothing.

The waiter returned, carrying my food. After I started eating, Schroder said, “You're wrong. I just need to make sure the deed is well placed. I don't want to die for nothing. I want to die for everything I've ever dreamed of.” Then he sighed again and gathered up his pack of cigarettes and his manila envelope. “I'm done with you for now. Do whatever you want.”

“You're not going to follow me anymore? You got bored with that fast.”

“Nah. I just want some privacy. I'll be back and next time, you might not be able to shake me. I might decide that I love you deeply enough to make you immortal and then let you kill me. I can't do things Pierce's way. His way of loving is just another way of showing how selfish he is.”

Schroder got up and left the table. I was sure he meant what he said. At least until he finished with what was in that envelope, I wouldn't see him again. That might be five minutes or it might be five years. In any case, I had to take advantage of this opportunity and put as much distance between him and me as possible, but how could I do that? I couldn't ask for help from Dudley, as that would lead Schroder to him. I didn't want to go to my parents. They wouldn't understand the first part of this mess. Schroder wasn't afraid of Marshall. That only left one person I could think of—Pierce. And I wasn't sure if I trusted him.

I sat there and chewed on my food like the subject in my head.

Wait a second! Schroder left without paying. What the heck had I ordered? Was I going to be able to pay for it with the money in my wallet? I opened my money bag and saw there was no way I could cover the cost. My face turned bright red. What was I supposed to say when the bill came?

I looked at my plate. I'd eaten too much to send it back to the kitchen angrily. Well, I was in trouble whether I finished the food or not, so I dug in even though it stopped tasting good.

In the end, I decided to just wait for the bill, pick it up off the table, then just walk out of the restaurant with it, and see if anyone noticed.

So, that was how it played out. I got the bill and headed for the door. No one seemed to notice. I got to the door and suddenly there was a hand on either one of my arms. My head jerked up. Holding one of my arms was the bartender and the man holding my other arm was none other than Dudley—the real one this time.

“Sweeper!” he gasped, totally breathless and sweaty. Where had he run from to look like that?

“Hey, you haven't paid,” the barkeeper said crossly.

“Sorry, I was just coming to the door to see if my friend was here. He came to bail me out. Hey, Dudley,” I said, turning toward him. “Can you lend me twenty bucks? I’m a little shy today.”

Dudley opened his wallet and the bartender took him over to the cash machine to square the bill.

“Man alive! You saved me. Thanks for showing up, but how did you know I was here?” I said, leaning my back against the bar and resting my elbows behind me.

“You’re awfully relaxed,” he commented. His forehead was deeply furrowed in fury and worry, but he kept his voice relatively level as he went on. “I suppose you didn’t know I’ve been searching everywhere for you. Where the hell did Schroder take you?”

“I don’t know.”

“And why didn’t you contact me when you got back?”

I looked at him with wide eyes and wet my bottom lip. “I didn’t know you were looking for me. Schroder and I just got back to the city yesterday and today was the first day he let me out. I would have come to see you, but he’s been looking for you. He knows who you are.”

Dudley frowned, took his receipt from the barman, and pulled me out of the lounge. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” I whispered in his ear, “he knows who you are as Tate Dudley, P.I., local vampire hunter, who recently shot him in the head. It also means he doesn’t know you’re the same Tate Crosswood who beheaded him all those years ago. He has been looking for you for ages and I know he wants revenge for what you did to him, but he hasn’t made the connection yet.”

“Doesn’t he want revenge on you?”

“Me, he’ll forgive, but the point is I don’t want him coming after you. I didn’t want him to see me with you, so I went and talked to Pierce. He told me you were looking for London and Garth, but he didn’t mention you were looking for me, too. Thanks.”

Dudley frowned, and it seemed like his face had too many lines for a twenty-six-year-old. “Thanks? You have no idea what I’ve been through since Schroder kidnapped you. Did he drink your blood?” He was looking around my neck to see if he could see any bite marks.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Did he act all pathetic and somehow make you feel sorry for him? Why are you so calm?”

“Right now, I’m calm because he said he’d leave me alone for the time being. At the very least, I expect to go the rest of the day without seeing him.”

The only reason I was composed was that Dudley had worried about me when no one else did. My mother didn’t even know I was missing and Pierce didn’t seem overly concerned, but here was someone who actually cared what happened to me.

“One day? Where can I take you in one day where that monster can’t find you?” Dudley demanded, staring deep into my eyes.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to run away from him either. I want to find London and get her story sorted.”

Dudley looked confused. “You want to find London?”

“Didn’t you say you’d help me? Didn’t you say you were already looking for her?” I reminded him sharply.

“I did,” he agreed. “But, I thought maybe you would have changed your mind.”

“Why?”

He chuckled in a desolate sort of way. “I was hoping if I ever saw you again, your self-preservation instincts might have kicked in.”

“Well, they haven’t,” I said crisply. “I feel the same way I did before. I want to save her from that awful man and bring her home.”

“Sweeper, she’s not going to want that.”

Now I was getting mad again. This was just what Pierce and Schroder had said. I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t stand by and allow my only sister to be murdered by a sack of crap loser guy just because it was a vampire’s nature or some such baloney.

“Are you going to help me, or not?” I snapped.

He sighed deeply. Then he took a gun out of one of his side holsters and gave it to me. “I already found London.”

“You didn’t report it to Pierce?” I asked indignantly.

“Why would I do that? He’s not in charge of me. Besides, there’s been so much to do with you missing and those other two coven members on the run. They’ll find a new vampire to drink from soon if we don’t stop them. London has been the least of my worries. She’s been holed up with Garth two cities over. I haven’t bothered going after them, because—Sweeper! There’s no point. She’s not coming back.”

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously as I took a step backward.

Dudley held onto my arms and made me listen to him. “She’s dead. She’s not a human. It has been too late for her for eight years. You have been living with a corpse for eight years and it’s only in your head that she’s there with you. She’s gone.”

“No! No! No!” I screamed. I couldn’t listen to him. I had to go on. I had to save her. But now I was starting to cry.

Dudley looked at me, me with my red blotchy face and burning eyes. Then he sighed and whistled for a taxi. “Fine. Have it your way. You’re going to see exactly how much you mean to her.”

He opened the door for me and helped me into the cab.

Chapter Fourteen

The Blood that Flows

Rain splashed on the cracked cement under my feet as I traversed my way to the backdoor of the apartment complex Dudley showed me. The building was made of slimy gray cinder blocks and looked no less than a hundred years old. Actually, it looked close to demolition. I expected to see a ‘danger’ sign around each corner, but one never came. Finally, a ‘proceed at your own risk’ sign hung over doors taped in bright orange caution tape. I was satisfied that no one lived here, or rather; no one was supposed to be here.

I tried opening the door. It didn’t budge.

Dudley came up behind me, took a look at the lock, the tape, and the yellow battered door. He turned to me and asked for the last time, “Are you sure you want to do this? What you see in there may scar you for life.”

“I have to save her,” I explained desperately. As if I wasn’t traumatized already.

Keeping his eyes on me, he took out his gun and blew a hole through the window of the door. A cat screeched and bolted.

I gave him a disapproving look.

“You thought we were going to get in without them noticing?” Dudley scoffed. “You need to learn a thing or two about vampire hunting. They always know you’re coming.”

“We’re not vampire hunting!” I exclaimed.

Dudley reached into the hole and undid the lock. He pulled on the handle and asked seriously, “Didn’t you come here to hunt Garth?”

I tilted my head back in annoyance. Why did he keep questioning me? I couldn’t think about what I had to do. I just had to do it. If I hesitated, London would die. No thinking! Just moving!

“Yeah! I guess so,” I said noisily and I took out my gun.

He looked at me suspiciously. Then, shaking his head drearily, he twisted his wrist and dropped one of his long knives out of his sleeve. “Then you’re going to need this.” Handing it to me, he advised, “You don’t have to hide it. They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming?” I asked, jerking my head past him to see through the apartment doors and down a ruined hallway. He was right. A figure moved toward us. The lights in the building were off and I could only see him as a shadow against the light cast against the back wall. It was a man, but I couldn’t tell if it was Garth.

“Whatever you’re selling, we don’t want any,” the shadow called through the doors.

Dudley adjusted the hat on his head politely with his free hand. His other hand held his gun. “We came to visit London. Could you tell us which floor she’s living on?”

The shadow was at the door now, and it wasn’t Garth. It was a vampire with gray hair and black eyes. The anorexic bloodsucker wore a leather vest with the zipper done halfway up his chest and a dribble of red was running down his chin. Wet hair clung to his face in sticky strands.

I recoiled slightly.

Dudley stood his ground without a trace of discomfort. “Finished your transformation like what, five minutes ago? Three minutes ago? You look like shit.”

“Have we met?” the vampire sneered. Clearly, he had expected his appearance alone to scare off any intruders and he was annoyed it had so little effect.

“Did London change you because you monsters tied her up again, or are you her new lover? Or maybe you were sucking from Garth?”

The vampire was so offended by what Dudley said that for a moment he was rendered speechless.

“I repeat, what floor is London on?” Dudley pointed his gun at the vampire’s head.

“Shoot him already!” the vampire in front of Dudley shrieked, calling to someone else.

Another one of them was perched on a balcony. He had a shotgun in his arms, but it didn’t look like he knew how to use it and he was fumbling with loading it until the vampire on the ground shouted. The sniper grasped the gun and threw himself over the railing where he sprang like a monkey to another balcony railing, then to the tiny roof sheltering the door, and then to the ground in front of us. He wound up to strike Dudley with the gun, but Dudley ducked under the arc and discarded his hat in a nearby shrub.

Dudley slid out his sheathed sword and planted a hit on the sniper’s gun arm, making him drop the gun.

Then without warning, the shadow vampire came at me from behind and clasped his arms around my middle, pinning my arms to my sides. Off guard, I accidentally dropped my knife. I tried to break away by moving my arms, but he was too strong and he was maneuvering his new fangs toward my neck. I had the gun in my hand, but I wasn’t sure if I could shoot him. When you killed a vampire, you had to move beyond violence and into the realms of gore only seen in zombie-slasher video games. I wasn’t ready to do it until I felt his teeth scratch my skin. Putting my gun in my armpit, I aimed the barrel at his rib cage, and I pulled the trigger.

He blew off me and slammed against one of the cinder block walls. I saw him flail for a moment before getting his bearings. “You thought that would kill me?”

Touching my neck, I felt that he had sunk his teeth in and there was a small amount of blood oozing out two tiny puncture wounds. I screamed, “Schroder was harder to kill than you’ll be.”

“You’re bluffing. You’re shaking in your boots, princess.” He came at me again.

Suddenly, a vision of pulling Schroder’s bullets out of his head gave me purpose and conviction. I aimed for the vampire’s head and pulled the trigger. I missed. Then I jumped out of his way and smacked right into Dudley who was busy enough with the sniper.

“These are the last two humans we didn’t arrest from the coven,” Dudley explained as he suddenly grabbed me and shoved me out of the way of the shadow vampire, who was reaching for me. In one swift movement, he unsheathed his sword and cut across my vampire’s chest. Dudley didn’t even watch where he fell before he turned back to the sniper.

The whole thing reminded me of something Dudley had said, back at Marshall’s. He said I would be the kind of woman who wouldn’t have a problem slaughtering a pig. That’s exactly what this was. I could fight this vampire and risk him seriously injuring me, or I could just kill him. Schroder told me how to do it. I had a license to do it. I had come here believing I was prepared.

I took two steps in front of the vampire Dudley sent sprawling on the ground, and pointing my gun properly, shot him in the head. Oddly enough, the bullet went exactly where Dudley had shot Schroder.

The vampire was completely unconscious, just as Schroder had been. I walked up and did the dirty work I had made Dudley do when I was fifteen. I put my knife to his throat and cut, but it was harder work than it seemed. I had cut hams apart before and this was harder and bloodier.

Dudley came and stopped me. “I’ll finish,” he said, touching my shoulder tenderly.

I noticed he wasn't caked in blood—not like me. I looked like I'd been doing dishes in blood with red smeared up to my elbows. The sniper was unconscious and handcuffed to a nearby fence.

“What stopped you from ending his legacy?” I asked gruffly.

“I'm not sure if he's a vampire.”

“Oh? Does he have a pulse?”

Dudley smirked and took my knife away from me. “There's no doubt that he's consumed a lot of vampire blood. The fact is some of them have pretty slow pulses before they're transformed. I don't want my record blackened over something like this. He won't be bothering anyone and I can get the police to check him out when you've finished here. Don't worry—this guy had definitely finished transforming.”

I noticed that he didn't say, ‘When you've saved London’. He said, ‘when you've finished here’. Then he brought the knife over his head like he was about to behead the vampire for me.

“Stop!”

“Why?” he said, quitting his stroke in mid-swing.

“I want to do it,” I insisted as I reached to take the handle from him.

Dudley weakly handed over the knife and showed me what to do. The spinal column snapped and I picked up the head by the hair and headed into the building. “Schroder told me we have to take the head as far away from the body as we can. We don't want his body to be able to pick it up again.”

“Actually, you have to deliver it to the police and tell them where the body is, to prove you're not a murderer or a vampire blood trafficker. Even after you present your license, they have to be able to account for all of the vampire's blood, but they're okay with it spilling all over the place.”

Dudley and I checked out the first floor and found nothing. Then we checked the second floor, even though Garth and London were probably on the third floor where the second vampire had appeared.

Inside, the cinder blocks were painted a hideous yellow, but the paint stopped when you got to the third floor. Up there, the walls were plain gray, like the color of sixty-year-old tombstones. Darkness and light came in patches—here—there—as if to remind us of a world outside. It was the world inside that was hidden. Though hidden by the prevailing shadow, I had to find the one thing that made coming to this place explicable.

I had to find her.

The air was thick with moisture. I could hear a tap running. I could hear a fan whirring. I could hear London breathing.

I pointed down to a room with gray sunlight streaming through vertical blinds. There was a pattern on the floor where the light hit.

Dudley and I paused outside the door and listened.

I could hear a man's voice. “We have to get out of here.”

Then I heard London, her voice trembled like she was afraid. “What do you think happened to Five and Jerome?”

“I don't know. We can't worry about them. We kept our deal with them as best we could. We're done.”

“I think Jerome needed more,” London whispered.

“Really?” the male voice said sarcastically. “I think Five went too far.”

“Why was he called Five again?”

I heard an exasperated sigh. “Because it took him five vampires’ blood to get him changed.”
“Does that mean we should call you Two?”

I set down the severed vampire head and used my free hand to steady myself against the door frame. Then I put one eye around the corner of the door, but I didn’t see anything except a fan moving at an impossibly slow speed. Then I looked in the crack between the door and the frame. There was a bed, and Garth was lifting London off the blood sprayed sheets.

London was wearing a black tank top and long silky white pajama pants. Garth was putting her in a wheelchair and pushing her toward Dudley and me. I glanced at Dudley. He wasn’t moving. I jerked my chin toward them in an effort to get him to come out at the same time as me.

He shook his head and put his gun back in its holster. Then he mouthed the words, “I’m only following *you*.”

I was vexed and confused. Dudley was a vampire hunter, wasn’t he? And here was a perfect example of vampire sleaze. Garth had actually used my sister to change himself and two other people into vampires. Why wouldn’t Dudley help me kill him?

Peering around the door, I saw Garth cover London with a blanket. Then he grabbed a bag that bore a resemblance to luggage and got behind the wheelchair to push her out of the room—toward us.

Okay. I had to do this myself. I put my gun in the back of my pants. I didn’t want London to see me with a gun. It was already bad enough I was caked in dead blood and didn’t have the time to wash it. Then I came into the room with my hands up.

The impact of my appearance was monumental.

Garth saw my bloodstains and looked like he was going to faint or throw up. London looked like she didn’t understand what Garth did. I had killed one of their friends.

“London,” I said, my voice full of relief. “I’m so glad you’re all right.”

Her lips were hideously dry. They were cracking and she eyed the cuts on my neck rather than looking at my face. “Sweeper?” she asked like she hardly knew who I was. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to bring you home,” I explained, taking a few slow steps toward her. She was white as a ghost from the roots of her hair to her lips to her fingertips. Any sudden movements might scare her.

“You came to help me?” she asked, rephrasing my sentence to suit her.

“I came to bring you home,” I corrected.

She stood up in the wheelchair. Her movement was so fluid it was like she was a puppet on a string that was suddenly jerked up. Her eyes stared straight in front of her—at my neck. She was parched. She needed blood.

Dudley grabbed my wrist and pulled me backward. Clutching me to his chest, he put his hand over my puncture wounds and whispered in my ear, “Let’s go. It’s not safe. She doesn’t have enough blood to resist drinking yours.”

“We can’t leave. We have to take her with us.” I rooted around in my mind for a way to take her safely and the only answer I could think of was to shoot her in the head and tie her up. Then we could take the bullet out and everything would be fine. I’d even shoot her under her hairline so no one would be able to see it.

“No,” Dudley said, manhandling me toward the door and keeping one eye on London whose head was now cocked to the side and turning strangely. She took a couple of steps forward. She

wasn't going to let Dudley and me leave. Good, she was going to come with us. I disentangled myself from him and, standing alone, held my hand out to her.

Dudley went to grab me a second time when suddenly, a fifth person entered the room, via the balcony the sniper had jumped down from. His head was bare as he was sans a ridiculous costume. It was Schroder. He walked with bold strides to where Dudley and I were standing, but he too kept his eyes on London. He planted his feet behind me, but spoke to London smoothly, "Do you remember me?"

She looked confused but interested in identifying him through whatever fog blood deprivation created.

Meanwhile, Schroder put one of his hands into the back pocket of my capris and squeezed. I jumped and was about to pipe up when he pulled the gun out of the back of my pants. Kissing the top of my head he threw London the gun.

Miraculously, she caught it, though she still moved like a marionette.

Then Schroder took a syringe out of the inside pocket of his coat and removed the protective cap. Then he pricked his index finger and one tiny drop of blood surfaced. Then he rubbed it between his fingers and said, "You remember that, don't you?"

Suddenly, London's face filled with color, and her eyes shone brighter than the stars. Her confusion vanished and she became a being full of vitality and understanding. "Schroder! I thought you were dead!"

He inclined his head toward Dudley and me. Then he said, "Those two only thought they killed me. Well, do you like my new look?"

Her whole face was full of wonder and possibility, like the horror story she had just endured didn't matter anymore. It was gone.

Garth was crumpled up on the floor and held his stomach like he was nursing a terrible digestive problem.

Then I realized something horrible. Schroder had pieced it together. He knew Dudley was Tate Crosswood. I glanced at Dudley's face. His jaw was set tight, but he wasn't running away.

"Darling London, listen to me carefully," Schroder said, his voice turning to milk and butter. "You know how jealous I get. I'll forgive you, but you have to shoot that little plaything of yours."

London turned around and without a breath of indecision shot Garth who was crouched on the floor. The bullet hit his temple and within seconds his eyes filled with red tears that fell on the cement flooring.

London didn't even look bothered by the sight.

"Good girl," Schroder praised. "Now tell our guests goodbye. You need to drain him and they don't need to watch."

London turned and pointed the gun at Dudley and me.

"London, you don't want to do this," I said, trying to get her to understand.

London didn't say anything but shot the floor in front of us. Dudley backed away and tried to pull me along with him, but I wouldn't move.

"London!" I screeched.

She pointed the gun at my head and pulled the trigger.

Dudley jerked me out of the way and the bullet hit the wall behind me.

Schroder laughed as I tried to make my way toward my sister. Was it funny to him? Was making my sister act like this hilarious for him? If he hadn't taken away my gun I would have put a sixth bullet in his head. For groping me, too!

"Enough," Dudley shouted. Grabbing me by my waist like he was tackling me, he hauled me out of the room bodily as I kicked and screamed. "You can't do this!" he told me. "You don't understand. She's a vampire. She'll kill you. Stop fighting me!"

"Let me go!" I screamed.

Schroder's laugh was ringing between my ears, disturbing my thinking.

Once we were around the corner, Dudley set me down and I slapped him across the face as hard as I could.

He stopped for one second and looked at me gravely. "I don't care."

"You'll let me go back?" I huffed, still standing in one place. I couldn't move. His fist was still clenched around my wrist.

He rubbed his cheek where I'd struck him with his gun hand. "No. I don't care if you hate me, but you are giving this up right now even if you hunt me for what I'm about to do. You don't understand what's happened. She doesn't love you. She doesn't want to be with you. The only thing she cares about is her lover and— you saw it. A drop of Schroder's blood was enough to make her forget Garth. How much do you think you mean to her?"

In my anguish, my bottom lip shriveled up and my eyes were as hot as blisters. I closed them, shook my head, and tried to shut him out. But I couldn't block out his words, because I was nothing more than food to her now.

Dudley pushed me to the stairwell and led me down the steps.

It was like a replay of that terrible day where Dudley burst in and helped me kill Schroder, except this time, he didn't help. This time, he put his arms around me, pulled me from the house, and told me I had to let the vampire kill my sister. Schroder and London would figure out between them who would live and who would die. I convulsed slightly as I realized, as I never had before, that London didn't want to be saved. She wanted to let him kill her if that was what he wanted.

Her future fate had nothing to do with me.

I was like a straight-jacketed mental patient as Dudley took me outside, just in time to run into Pierce and The Scissor Man. Dudley leaned my despondent frame against the apartment complex wall and spoke to Pierce. Everything was like a foggy nightmare, but I saw Kelly take out a pair of scissors and jam them into the leg of the vampire corpse I had beheaded, letting a fresh stream of blood flow. Dudley was telling him about the head I had left in the hallway, the guy handcuffed to the fence, London, Schroder, and Garth.

Then I was maneuvered into the backseat of a car. I heard the rumbling of an engine igniting and then I suppose I felt what hell must feel like.

Chapter Fifteen

The Trapdoor might lead Outside

The city lights flickered on. Rows and rows of street lights lit as the sky moved from dark mauve to navy to black. There was a strange yellow light that settled around the outskirts of the horizon to the west. A nightclub's purple neon sign came on. A fast-food joint's lights went out. Someone ran a red light and a horn blared.

I had fogged up the glass of the window I was pressing my face against.

I rubbed my cheek and crawled back into bed.

A week had passed since I had last seen London. Back in my apartment, I rolled around everything that had happened in my head. The thing that cut the deepest was the time I had devoted to London—all the things I had given up for her sake—five years of teen years and three years of womanhood weren't worth anything to her in the end. She didn't care. Did she even have a glimmer of affection for me left? Had it ever existed? Did she even love me before she became a vampire? I couldn't remember her behavior clearly. She certainly didn't thank me for killing Schroder to keep her alive. And all that time we lived together I guessed we didn't grow any closer. I supposed if she had known Roan was Schroder when he had her tied up in his cellar she would have turned me and Dudley over to him without a qualm and given him all the blood he wanted.

My brain just kept printing out the same documents—it wasn't my choice to make. I couldn't make decisions for my sister. It didn't matter that I loved her. I couldn't be that one person in her life that she needed.

Now I didn't know what to do with the rest of *my* life. Before, I was living only to take care of her. It wasn't like my life with her had been a jar of rose petals, but all alone with the darkness stretching out ahead of me... that was something different.

I closed down her internet business. Then I threw her computer down the fire escape into the open dumpster. The keys flew apart when the keyboard hit the lip. The computer was the only thing left in the apartment that had belonged to her; the last thing she had paid for with her own money. Everything else was mine. In the last week, I had let the place go to ruin. It was mine to ruin if I wanted to.

There was a tap on my apartment door every night at eight o'clock. It was Dudley every time, coming by to see if I was okay. I never opened the door or answered his call, but I had begun using him as an alarm clock, so I knew when to get up. It reminded me of when I used to set an alarm on my phone to let me know when I needed to get London out of bed. I kept her hours now.

On the eighth night, he picked the lock and came in anyway.

"Sweeper," he called. "Are you here?"

I heard him, but I didn't move from the cocoon of my bed. I didn't make a sound until he turned on the light in my bedroom—then I shivered and moaned.

He flicked the lights off. "Vampires aren't usually affected by electric light after dark," he said, his voice heavy with sympathy.

"I'm not a vampire," I croaked.

"Of course, you're not. However, have you bothered to have those cuts on your neck checked?" he asked as he sat down on the corner of my bed.

I propped myself up on my elbows and stretched the side of my neck for him to see. “I’m fine. I wrapped them up and when I took the bandage off, there was no blood on it. Okay? You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I can’t help being worried about you. I’ve been worrying about you for eight years. It’s not a habit I can break.”

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth grouchily.

“I came to tell you the end of the story,” he said.

“What?”

“Don’t you want to know what happened?”

A nervous fluttering spread out through my whole skeleton like a newly changed butterfly unfurling its wings for the first time. “There’s more to know?”

“Well, what do you think happened?”

“Schroder killed her,” I said, believing that was the only possible ending after leaving Schroder and London alone in the same room.

“No. Well, maybe,” he stuttered. “We don’t know for sure.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that when Pierce and The Scissor Man went upstairs they were gone.”

I was tongue-tied. I didn’t know if that meant I had reason to hope Schroder hadn’t murdered her, or if they had just gone someplace else to do the deed.

A few seconds passed before Dudley said, “Did you hear about the fire?”

“What fire?”

“There was a fire down in the valley. The police were doing a raid on a vampire draining operation and an explosive detonated. A couple of police officers were hurt.”

“Is Pierce okay?”

“Yeah. He was outside waiting in a car, but The Scissor Man burnt his hands.”

“That’s too bad. I hope it isn’t serious.”

Dudley took a deep breath in. “It was. He and Pierce were planning to take the bullet out of Garth’s head tomorrow... if the raid went well, but since the accident, it doesn’t look like The Scissor Man will be available to do it for a few weeks—maybe months.”

“Wait. London didn’t kill Garth? I thought she was going to drain him dry.”

“I guess she didn’t. The police have him. Except the interesting part is that Pierce had a conversation with Schroder before he joined us upstairs.”

“Really? What did they talk about?”

“Schroder wanted to tell Pierce that his way of falling in love without blood loss was crap and that you had removed the bullets from his head, so he didn’t have to chase him anymore. He was sane enough to keep out of trouble.”

I nodded.

“Of course, Pierce didn’t think you removing his bullets negated the fact that he had arranged for the biggest vampire draining operation we’ve ever heard of and chased him anyway. That’s why we met Pierce at the apartment building after everything.”

“Oh,” I said lifelessly.

“Since The Scissor Man is out of the picture, for the time being, Pierce was wondering if you wouldn’t mind taking the bullet out of Garth.”

I smirked. “Why would I do that?”

Dudley scooted closer to me on the bed and said, “Garth used to work in the blood transfusion program Pierce started. Did he explain it to you? They take people who have consumed a portion of vampire blood and draw their blood until all the vampire blood has been removed, all the while exchanging their blood for clean human blood. Garth was in charge of disposing of the old vampire blood. At first, he was good at scorching it in a pot so it became unusable, but eventually, he got greedy and began selling it. Two of the humans from the coven were customers of his. Their names were Jerome...”

I perked up. That was the guy Dudley had fought and eventually handcuffed to the wall.

“And Raymond,” Dudley finished. “Raymond was the vampire you killed. Garth and London called him Five.”

“Hmm...”

“The thing was Garth had built up a store of over thirty liters and he and his two buddies were consuming it slowly. Garth was caught and fired for misuse of materials. They tested him to see if he’d drunk any, but he knew how to fudge the test. They let him go, not knowing he had started the two-month timer on himself. If he didn’t get more vampire blood, he’d die. That was when he met Schroder.” Dudley paused. “That was how I found him in that rotted apartment complex—by trailing along after hearing that story from Pierce. You see, Garth thought he could be immortal without having a vampire lover at all. If he drank the blood drained off the wannabe vampires at the training center, then no one would have to die. He wouldn’t have to kill anyone and no one would be after him, and if he sold the blood, he could make megabucks. When he was found out, if he admitted what he had done, they would have put him in the same program with those at the training center and put him in prison. Instead, he opted to try to find a vampire before it was too late.”

“And you feel sorry for him?” I questioned, bewildered.

“How could I feel sorry for him? He still took two of his old customers to drain London after he rescued her from Schroder’s coven. He wouldn’t have won my support unless he kicked everyone off and ran away with her alone. Garth had already given each of those guys seven liters, which should have taken a lot of the pressure off London, but she was still a mess when we got there. No forgiveness. We need to take the bullet out so he can give us some accurate information about his old blood trafficking operation. It seems he sold enough vampire blood to turn eight humans before he started drinking any himself. I’m going to find those vamps and end them. Will you help me?”

I turned onto my side and put my back to Dudley. “I don’t want anything else to do with jilted vampires.”

“Right,” Dudley said quietly.

I compacted into a ball and shivered miserably. I didn’t want to think of the horror that might come from another eight vampires unleashed on the world.

“It’s just one bullet,” Dudley’s soft voice persisted.

“Why can’t you do it?” I growled. “You seem to be fine with the sight of blood.”

“Because I have crappy fine motor skills and you have more experience.”

I groaned. “Will I have to see him walking and talking and moving or just on ice for the operation?”

“Just on ice,” Dudley reassured me.

“All right. I’ll do it, but someone has got to pay me something for it. They’re going to shut off my electricity next week if I don’t pay the bill.”

“Sure,” Dudley said, getting off the bed and going into the bathroom. He shuffled around in there for a bit before he came back. “You have no clean towels,” he informed me.

“Well, I’ve been a little lacking in the motivation department.” I smiled wanly.

“Hey, Sweeper, why don’t you give this place up? You could move to a new apartment and start again.”

I stretched my arms over my head and listened to him while he walked around the room picking my clothes off the floor. “You could start by getting rid of these,” he said, showing me the clothes Schroder had given me, now irrevocably stained with dried blood. “Where’s the garbage?”

“Oh, just chuck them in the dumpster. I’m right above it. Those clothes weren’t even mine. They were just some duds Schroder gave me when I ran out of clean clothes.”

“Schroder gave them to you?” he asked, suddenly rooting around in the pockets. “Did he leave this for you, too?” He pulled out a white piece of paper and held it between two of his fingers.

“There was a note in there? I didn’t see a note!” Then I remembered Schroder sliding his hand in my back pocket when he took the gun off my back. “I thought he was just grabbing my ass. He was giving me a note!” I got out of bed and leaped across the room to snatch it out of Dudley’s fingers.

He moved the note out of my reach and commented coldly, “If only you had been this anxious to hear from me when I came by yesterday, or the day before, or the day before.”

“It wasn’t personal,” I quickly explained. “It was only because I couldn’t...”

“It’s okay,” he said mercifully, giving me the note. “I understand. You needed time to digest.”

I unfolded the paper. It was written in messy black ink that was smeared and blotted all over the page. It read:

Sweeper,

You didn’t give me much time to make a decision before coming here and forcing me. I’m leaving. Before I go, I want to tell you something. I think it was only the bullets in my head clouding my reasoning that made me believe I could be with you without drinking your blood.

There’s more. I wanted to kill London eight years ago, not because of vampire instincts, but because I knew I had made the wrong choice. If I wanted you so much, I shouldn’t have compromised.

What I am about to do is only for you. I’m going to take London back to my island. I’m not saying I’m going to let her kill me, but I’m going to follow through with her until the end. I’m going to find out if there’s a way for both of us to live. If there is—expect me to come for you. If it’s possible, nothing will hold me back.

Leave your window open and use this time to become the Sweeper that I will love forever. Don’t disappoint me. There’s still plenty of life left to live.

By the way, after you took the bullets out, I remembered which one was my name. It’ll be our secret.

Yours Forever,

Roan

P.S. Don’t worry about Tate. I’ll take care of him when I come back.

I finished and folded up the paper with a sick grimace. I crumpled it a little and felt my whole body droop. It was honestly the most I could have hoped for. Now I was going to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder expecting Nosferatu.

“Can I read it?” Dudley asked.

“No,” I said, feeling around my body to see if I had a pocket on me. I didn’t, so I stuffed it down the front of my shirt.

“Is it that dear to your heart?” he scoffed.

“No,” I said, feigning its importance. “You just won’t come down my shirt for it.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?” he asked wickedly.

I covered my chest with my hands defensively.

Dudley rolled his eyes. Then he continued picking up my room. “I wanted to ask you. Were you planning to go back to work for Marshall?”

“Is there a job still waiting for me after I stopped going to work?”

“Not really. Marshall is retiring. He sent his creditor files to a cut-off-your-ears style collection agency, so there really wouldn’t be anything for you to do.” Dudley turned his back to me and continued, “Actually, I’ve taken over his office space. My partner and I need an assistant.”

“And you want me for the job?” I asked dubiously.

He looked into my eyes meaningfully. “It won’t be like working for Marshall. They’ll be fieldwork to do, and I might need the occasional vampire carved up.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure I wanted in on all that vampire slaying. “I don’t know...”

“I’m just trying to think of a way to keep you with me,” he said quietly.

It was his eyes, or maybe his lips, or maybe his voice that caught me hook-line-and-sinker, but... I didn’t want to leave him either. I nodded and said flippantly, “Well, if you’re that desperate, I guess I can fill in for the time being.”

His arms came around me in a hug and I couldn’t move, breathe, or swallow. Suddenly, clamped in that vice-grip embrace, I felt like life could go on. It was just as that wacko vampire, Roan or Schroder, said, there was still plenty of life left to live.

The next Monday, I showed up for work in a crisp new black suit. Dudley had paid me a little something in advance for getting the bullet out of Garth and to keep the lights on in my apartment. My hair was straight and shining. I’d been to the salon. My stomach was full of blueberry waffles thanks to Dudley and mine’s my new relationship. He took me on a breakfast date for my first day. He was super nervous when he came to pick me up. I could tell. He’d forgotten to tie his tie and it hung around his neck, completely undone.

We strolled into the office, with my high heels making a racket on the tiling.

“So, you haven’t told me yet,” I reminded him. “Who’s your partner?”

“I think you’ve met him,” Dudley said playfully, slipping his arm around my waist.

Then a voice came from inside the empty office, “If you two are going to be all lovey-dovey, I’m leaving right now,”

“Like you have anything better to do,” Dudley retorted.

I pushed off Dudley's hand and went to the office door. Standing next to the filing cabinet in a leisurely way was Pierce Wagner.

I gawked.

He flashed his green eyes at me and said, "Did you fail to hear that I was sacked?"

"Yeah. I must have missed that. Why?"

"I was supposed to be helping with the raid when the building went up like a Roman candle? When I was in the third phase, I could stomach anything, but ever since I entered phase four I cannot stand the sight of blood," he said pompously.

"So?"

"So the city decided they would rather not leave their community in the hands of a man who might be tempted to lick blood off the floor. Their loss really."

I turned from Pierce, dressed to kill and looking as upright as a pencil in his pinstripe suit, to Dudley—looking a trifle shabby, but a little golden around the edges nonetheless.

"You guys want me to be your assistant? Is this a real job?"

Dudley was gruff and mildly impatient. "It's legitimate."

I didn't know what to say when the ringing of the phone snapped me out of it. Pierce answered it, looked surprised, and handed me the phone.

I took it and was no less gob-smacked than Pierce when I heard the voice on the line. It was my mother. I'd sent her a text with my new work number in it the night before, but I didn't expect her to make use of it so quickly.

"Hi," I said, pulling a face for only Dudley to see.

He chuckled and turned away to give me privacy.

"Sweeper, I was just calling to see if you were all right," she said.

I looked at Dudley. His hair was coming off his ears in tiny ski jumps and his toe was tapping cheerfully. Actually, he was dismantling the file Marshall had made up for London and running the pages through the shredder.

"I'm all right," I said, feeling at greater ease with myself than I'd felt in a long time.

"That's a relief," my mother said. "Have you heard from London?"

"No," I said slowly. "She never called me back."

THE END

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading this book! It means a lot to me.

Let me tell you a bit about this novel. This is the sixteenth novel that I wrote to completion. It was also the first time I tried to get a book published with a traditional publishing company. I started sending out inquiries and I landed a publisher on the third try. I felt like a star.

Obviously, I did not continue to feel like a star. This book was not a success and for many years, I couldn't look at it. What had gone wrong? Was it me? Was it my publisher? Had vampires gone out of fashion or was a book that wasn't a romance novel simply doomed?

I still don't know exactly what went wrong. It's not important.

Ten years after writing it, I picked it up, brushed it off, and started posting it on a freebie website. I found myself looking at the chapters and reading little bits. I was surprised to see that I thought it was good. Whether it could enjoy commercial success was no longer a concern.

I like it, which led to the updated version you just finished reading.

I hope you enjoyed it too.

If you did, please give it a five-star rating. A review is nicer, but if you'd rather not write anything, a five-star rating is very helpful.

All the love in the world,

Stephanie Van Orman

Novelist

Virtualventures