

THE GIRL WHO WAS INFATUATED WITH DEATH

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This short story occurs in the interval between *BLUE MOON* and *OBSIDIAN BUTTERFLY*.

IT was five days before Christmas, a quarter 'til midnight. I should have been asnooze in my bed dreaming of sugarplums, whatever the hell they were, but I wasn't. I was sitting across my desk sipping coffee and offering a box of Kleenexes to my client, Ms. Rhonda Mackenzie. She'd been crying for nearly the entire meeting, so that she'd wiped most of her careful eye makeup away, leaving her eyes pale and unfinished, younger, like what she must have looked like when she was in high school. The dark, perfect lipstick made the eyes look emptier, more vulnerable.

"I'm not usually like this, Ms. Blake. I am a very strong woman." Her voice took on a tone that said she believed this, and it might even be true. She raised those naked brown eyes to me and there was fierceness in them that might have made a weaker person flinch. Even I, tough-as-nails vampire-hunter that I am, had trouble meeting the rage in those eyes.

"It's alright, Ms. Mackenzie, you're not the first client that's cried. It's hard when you've lost someone."

She looked up startled. "I haven't lost anyone, not yet."

I sat my coffee cup back down without drinking from it and stared at her. "I'm an animator, Ms. Mackenzie. I raise the dead if the reason is good enough. I assumed this amount of grief was because you'd come to ask me to raise someone close to you."

She shook her head, her deepbrown curls in disarray around her face as if she'd been running her hands through what was once a perfect perm. "My daughter, Amy, is very much alive and I want her to stay that way."

Now I was just plain confused. "I raise the dead and am a legal vampire executioner, Ms. Mackenzie. Howdo either of those jobs help you keep your daughter alive?"

"I want you to help me find her before she commits suicide."

I just stared at her, my face professionally blank, but inwardly, I was cursing my boss. He and I had had discussions about exactly what my job description was, and suicidal daughters weren't part of that description.

"Have you gone to the police?" I asked.

"They won't do anything for twenty-four hours, but by then it will be too late."

"I have a friend who is a private detective. This sounds much more up her alley than mine, Ms. Mackenzie." I was already reaching for the phone. "I'll call her at home for you."

"No," she said, "only you can help me."

I sighed and clasped my hands across the clean top of my desk. Most of my work wasn't indoor office work, so the desk didn't really see much use. "Your daughter is alive, Ms. Mackenzie, so you don't need me to raise her. She's not a rogue vampire, so you don't need an executioner. How can I be of any help to you?"

She leaned forward; the Kleenex waded in her hands, her eyes fierce again. "If you don't help me by morning she will be a vampire."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She's determined to become one of them tonight."

"It takes three bites to become a vampire, Ms. Mackenzie, and they all have to be from the same vampire. You can't become one in a single night, and you can't become one if you're just being casual with more than one."

"She has two bites on her thighs. I accidentally walked in on her when she was getting out of the shower and I saw them."

"Are you sure they were vampire bites?" I asked.

She nodded. "I made a scene. I grabbed her, wrestled with her so I could see them clearly. They are vampire bites, just like the pictures they passed around at the last PTA meeting so we could recognize it. You know one of those people lecturing on how to know if your kids are involved with the monsters."

I nodded. I knew the kind of person she meant. Some of it was valuable information, some of it was just scare tactics, and some of it was racist, if that was the term. Prejudiced at least.

"How old is your daughter?"

"She's seventeen."

"That's only a year away from being legal, Ms. Mackenzie. Once she turns eighteen, if she wants to become a vampire, you can't stop her legally."

"You say that so calmly. Do you approve?"

I took in a deep breath and let it out, slow. "I'd be willing to talk to your daughter, try to talk her out of it. But how do you know that tonight is the night? It has to be three bites within a very short space of time or the body fights off the infection, or whatever the hell it is." Scientists were still arguing about exactly what made someone become a vampire. There were biological differences before and after, but there was also a certain level of mysticism involved, and science has always been bad at deciphering that kind of thing.

"The bites were fresh, Ms. Blake. I called the man who gave the lecture at our school and he said to come to you."

"Who was he?"

"Jeremy Ruebens ."

I frowned now. "I didn't know he'd gotten out of jail," I said.

Her eyes went wide. "Jail?"

"He didn't mention in his talk that he was jailed for conspiracy to commit murder—over a dozen counts, maybe hundreds. He was head of Humans First when they tried to wipe out all the vampires and some of the shape-shifters in St. Louis."

"He talked about that," she said. "He said he would never have condoned such violence and that it was done without his knowledge."

I smiled and knew from the feel of it that it was unpleasant. "Jeremy Ruebens once sat in the chair you're in now and told me that Humans First's goal was to destroy every vampire in the United States."

She just looked at me, and I let it go. She would believe what she wanted to believe, most people did.

"Ms. Mackenzie, whether you, or I, or Jeremy Ruebens, approve, or not, vampires are legal citizens with legal rights in this country. That's just the way it is."

"Amy is seventeen, if that thing brings her over under age it's murder and I will prosecute him for murder. If he kills my Amy, I will see him dead."

"You know for certain that it is a he?"

"The bites were very, very high up on her thigh." She looked down at her lap. "Her inner thigh."

I would have liked to have let the female vamp angle go, but I couldn't because I was finally beginning to see what Ms. Mackenzie wanted me to do, and why Jeremy Ruebens had sent her to me. "You want me to find your daughter before she's got that third bite, right?"

She nodded. "Mr. Ruebens seemed to think if anyone could find her in time, it would be you."

Since Humans First had also tried to kill me during their great cleansing of the city, Rueben's faith in me was a little odd. Accurate probably, but odd. "How long has she been missing?"

"Since nine, a little after. She was taking a shower to get ready to go out with friends tonight. We had an awful fight and she stormed up to her room. I grounded her until she got over this crazy idea about becoming a vampire."

"Then you went up to check on her and she was gone?" I made it a question.

"Yes." She sat back in her chair, smoothing her skirt. It looked like a nervous habit. "I called the friends she was supposed to be going out with and they wouldn't talk to me on the phone, so I went to her best friend's house in person and she talked to me." She smoothed the skirt down again, hands touching her knees as if the hose needed attention; everything looked in place to me. "They've got fake ID that says they're both over twenty-one. They've been going to the vampire clubs for weeks."

Ms. Mackenzie looked down at her lap, hands clasped tight. "My daughter has bone cancer. To save her life they're going to take her left leg from the knee down, next week. But this week she started having pains in her other leg just like the pains that started all this." She looked up then, and I expected tears, but her eyes were empty, not just of tears, but of everything. It was as if the horror of it all, the enormity of it, had drained her.

"I am sorry, Ms. Mackenzie, for both of you."

She shook her head. "Don't be sorry for me. She's seventeen, beautiful, intelligent, honor society, and, at the very least, she's going to lose a leg next week. She has to use a cane now. Her friends chipped in and got her this amazing Goth cane, black wood and a silver skull on top. She loves it, but you can't use a cane if you don't have any legs at all."

There was a time when I thought being a vampire was worse than death, but now, I just wasn't sure. I just didn't have enough room to cast stones. "She won't lose the leg if she's a vampire."

"But she'll lose her soul."

I didn't even try to argue that one. I wasn't sure if vampires had souls, or not; I just didn't know. I'd known good ones and bad ones, just like good and bad people, but one thing was true: vampires had to feed off of humans to survive. No matter what you see in the movies, animal blood will not do the job. We are their food, no getting around that. Out loud, I said, "She's seventeen, Ms. Mackenzie, I think she probably believes in her leg more than her soul."

The woman nodded, too rapidly, head bobbing. "And that's my fault."

I sighed. I so did not want to get involved in this, but I believed Ms. Mackenzie would do exactly what she said she would do. It wasn't the girl I was worried about so much as the vampire that would be bringing her over. She was underage and that meant if he turned her, it was an automatic death sentence. Death sentences for humans usually mean life imprisonment, but for a vamp, it means death within days, weeks at the most. Some of the civil rights groups were complaining that the vampire trials were too quick to be fair. And maybe someday the Supreme Court would reverse some of the decisions, but that wouldn't make the vampire "alive" again. Once a vamp is staked, beheaded and the heart cut out, all the parts are burned and scattered on running water. There is no coming back from the grave if you are itty-bits of ashy fish food.

"Does the friend know what the vampire looks like, maybe a name?"

She shook her head. "Barbara says that it's Amy's choice." Ms. Mackenzie shook her head. "It isn't, not

until she's eighteen."

I sort of agreed with Barbara, but I wasn't a mother, so maybe my sympathies would have been elsewhere if I was. "So you don't know if the vampire is male or female."

"Male," she said, very firm, too firm.

"Amy's friend told you it was a guy vampire?"

Ms. Mackenzie shook her head, but too rapid, too jerky. "Amy would never let another girl do that to her, not... down there."

I was beginning not to like Ms. Mackenzie. There's something about someone who is so against all that is different that sets my teeth on edge. "If I knew for sure it was a guy, then that would narrow down the search."

"It was a male vampire, I'm sure of that." She was working too hard at this, which meant she wasn't sure at all.

I let it go; she wasn't going to budge. "I need to talk to Barbara, Amy's friend, without you or her parents present, and we need to start searching the clubs for Amy. Do you have a picture of her?"

She did, hallelujah, she'd come prepared. It was one of those standard yearbook shots. Amy had long straight hair in a rather nondescript brown color, neither dark enough to be rich, or pale enough to be anything else. She was smiling, face open, eyes sparkling; the picture of health and bright promise.

"The picture was taken last year," her mother said, as if she needed to explain why the picture looked the way it did.

"Nothing more recent?"

She drew another picture out of her purse. It was of two women in black with kohl eyeliner and full, pouting lips, one with purple lipstick and the other with black. It took me a second to recognize the girl on the right as Amy. The nondescript hair was piled on top of her head in a casual mass of loose curls that left the clean, high bone structure of her face like an unadorned painting, something to be admired. The dramatic makeup suited her coloring. Her friend was blond and it didn't match her skin tone as well. The picture seemed more poised than the other one had, as if they were playing dress-up and knew it, but they both looked older, dramatic, seductive, lovely but almost indistinguishable from a thousand other teenage Goths.

I put the two pictures beside each other and looked from one to the other. "Which picture did she go out looking like?"

"I don't know. She's got so much Goth clothing, I can't tell what's missing." She looked uncomfortable with that last remark, as if she should have known.

"You did good bringing both pictures, Ms. Mackenzie, most people wouldn't have thought of it."

She looked up at that, almost managed a smile. "She looks so different depending on what she wears."

"Most of us do," I said.

She nodded, not like she was agreeing, but as if it were polite.

"How old is Barbara, her friend?"

"Eighteen, why?"

"I'll send my friend, the private investigator over to talk to her, maybe meet me at the clubs."

"Barbara won't tell us who it is that's been..." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

"My friend can be very persuasive, but if you think Barbara will be a problem I might know someone who could help us out."

"She's very stubborn, just like my Amy."

I nodded and reached for the phone. I called Veronica (Ronnie) Sims, private detective and good friend first. Ms. Mackenzie gave me Barbara's address, which I gave to Ronnie over the phone. Ronnie said she'd page me when she had any news, or when she arrived at the club district.

I dialed Zerbrowski next. He was a police detective and really had no reason to get involved, but he had two kids and he didn't like the monsters, and he was my friend. He was actually at work, since he belonged to the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team and worked a lot of nights.

I explained the situation, and that I needed a little official muscle to flex. He said it was a slow night, and he'd be there.

"Thanks, Zerbrowski ."

"You owe me."

"On this one, yeah."

"Hmm," he said, "I know how you could pay me back." His voice had dropped low and mock seductive. It had been a game with us since we met.

"Be careful what you say next, Zerbrowski , or I'll tell Katie on you."

"My darling wife knows I'm a leech."

"Don't we all. Thanks again, Zerbrowski ."

"I've got kids, don't mention it," he said, and he hung up.

I left Ms. Mackenzie in the capable hands of our nighttime secretary Craig, and I went out to see if I could save her daughter's life, and the "life" of the vampire that was a close enough personal friend to have bitten Amy twice on the very upper thigh.

THE vampire district in St. Louis was one of the hottest tourist areas in the country. Some people credit

the undead with the boom we've experienced in the last five years since vampires were declared living citizens with all the rights and privileges that entailed, except voting. There was a bill floating around Washington that would give them the vote, and another bill floating around that would take away their new status and make it legal to kill them on sight again, just because they were vampires. To say that the United States was not exactly united in its attitude toward the undead was an understatement.

Danse Macabre was one of the newest of the vampire-run clubs. It was the hottest dance spot in St. Louis. We'd had actors fly from the West Coast to grace the club with their presence. It had become chic to hob-knob with vampires, especially the beautiful ones, and St. Louis did have more than its fair share of gorgeous corpses.

The most gorgeous corpse of them all was dancing on the main floor of his newest club. The floor was so crowded there was barely room to dance, but somehow my gaze found Jean-Claude, picked him out of the crowd.

When I first spotted him, his long pale hands were above his head, the graceful movement of those hands brought my gaze down to the whirl of his black curls as they slid over his shoulders. From the back with all that long hair the shirt was just scarlet, eye-catching but nothing too special, then he turned and I caught a glimpse of the front.

The red satin scooped over his bare shoulders as if someone had cut out the shoulders with scissors; the sleeves were long, tight to his wrists. The high red collar framed his face, made his skin, his hair, his dark eyes look brighter, more alive.

The music turned him away from me, and I got to watch him dance. He was always graceful, but the pounding beat of the music demanded movements that were not graceful but powerful, provocative.

I finally realized, as he took the woman into his arms, as she plastered herself against the front of him, that he had a partner. I was instantly jealous and hated it.

I'd worn the clothes I'd had on at the office, and I was glad that it was a fashionably short black skirt with a royal blue button-up shirt. A long black leather coat that was way too hot for the inside of the club and sensible black pumps completed the outfit, oh, and the shoulder holster with the Browning Hi-Power 9mm, which was why I was still wearing the coat. People tended to get nervous if you flashed a gun, and it would show up very nicely against the deep blue of the blouse.

To other people it must have seemed like I was trying to look cool, wearing all that leather. Nope, just trying not to scare the tourists. But nothing I was wearing compared to the sparkling, skintight dress and spike heels the woman had on; nope, I was woefully under-dressed.

It had been my choice to stay away from Jean-Claude for these last few months. I'd let him mark me as his human servant to save his life and the life of the other boyfriend I wasn't seeing, Richard Zeeman, Ulfric, wolf-king of the local pack. I'd done it to save them both, but it had bound me closer to them, and every sexual act made that mystical tie tighter. We could think each other's thoughts, visit each other's dreams. I'd fallen into Richard's dreams where he was in wolf form chasing human prey. I'd tasted blood underneath a woman's skin because Jean-Claude had been sitting beside me when he thought of it. It had been too much for me so I'd fled to a friendly psychic who was teaching me how to shield myself metaphysically from the boys. I did okay, as long as I stayed the hell away from both of them.

Watching Jean-Claude move like he was wed to the music, to the room, to the energy, anticipating not just the music but the movements of the woman who was in his arms made me want to run screaming,

because what I really wanted to do was march over there and grab her by her long hair and punch her out. I didn't have that right, besides they were only dancing. Sure.

But if anyone would be able to tell me who was about to bring Amy Mackenzie over to be the undead, it would be Jean-Claude. I needed to be here. I needed the information, but it was dangerous, dangerous in so many ways.

The music stopped for a few seconds, then a new song came on, just as fast, just as demanding. Jean-Claude kissed the woman's hand and tried to leave the dance floor.

She took his arm, obviously trying to persuade him to have another dance. He shook his head, kissed her cheek and managed to extract himself, leaving her smiling. But as she watched him walk toward me, the look was not friendly. There was something familiar about her, as if I should have known her, but I was almost certain I didn't know her. It took me a second or two to realize she was an actress, and if I ever went to movies I would have known her name. A photographer knelt in front of her, and she instantly went from unpleasant to a perfect smile, posing, choosing another partner. A second photographer followed after Jean-Claude, not taking pictures, but alert for a photo opportunity. Shit.

I had two choices. I could either stand there and let him take pictures of Jean-Claude and myself, or I could flee to the back office and privacy. I wasn't news, but Jean-Claude was the vampire cover boy. The press had been amused that the woman the other vamps called the Executioner, because she had more vamp kills than any other vampire hunter in the country, had been dating the Master of the City. Even I could admit it was nicely ironic, but being followed around by paparazzi had gotten old very fast. Especially when they tried to take pictures of me while I was working on preternatural murders for the police. For the American media if you stood next to the gruesome remains they wouldn't air the pictures, or print them, but European papers would. Some of the European media makes American media look downright polite.

When I stopped dating Jean-Claude, they drifted away. I was not nearly as photogenic, or as friendly. I didn't have to worry about winning the press over; there wasn't a bill in Washington that was trying to get me killed. The vamps needed the good press, and Jean-Claude was tagged as the one to get it for them.

I decided not to watch Jean-Claude walk toward me because I'd seen what my face looked like when I did—in color on the front of the tabloids. I'd looked like some small prey animal, watching the tiger stalk toward it; that explained the fear, but the fearful fascination, the open... lust, that had been harder to see in print. So I kept my eyes on the circling photographer and tried not to watch Jean-Claude glide toward me, as I leaned against the far wall, right next to the door that would lead into the hallway that led to his office.

I could have fled and avoided the press, but it would have meant I would be alone with Jean-Claude, and I didn't want that. All right, truth, I did want that, and that was the problem. It wasn't Jean-Claude I didn't trust, it was me.

I'd been concentrating so hard on not watching him come toward me that it was almost a surprise when I realized I was staring into the red satin of his shirt. I looked up to meet his eyes. Most people couldn't meet the gaze of a vampire, let alone a master one, but I could. I was a necromancer and that gave me partial immunity to vampire powers, and I was Jean-Claude's human servant whether I wanted to be, or whether I didn't, and that gave me even more immunity. I wasn't vampire-proof by any means, but I was shut up pretty tight to most of their tricks.

It wasn't vampire powers that made it hard to meet those midnight blue eyes. No, nothing that... simple.



He said something, and I couldn't hear him over the beat of the music. I shook my head, and he stepped closer, close enough that the red of his shirt filled my vision, but it was better than meeting that swimming blue gaze. He leaned over me, and I felt him like a line of heat, close enough to kiss, close enough for so many things. I was already flat against the wall; there was nowhere else to go.

He had to lean his mouth next to my face, a fall of his long hair moving against my mouth, as he said, "*Ma petite*, it has been too long." His voice, even over the noise, caressed down my skin as if he'd touched me. He could do things with his voice that most men couldn't do with their hands.

I could smell his cologne, spicy, exotic, a hint of musk. I could almost taste his skin on my tongue. It took me two tries to say, "Not nearly long enough."

He laid his cheek against my hair, very lightly, "You are happy to see me, *ma petite*, I can feel your heart trembling."

"I'm here on business," I said, but my voice was breathy. I was usually better than this around him, but three months of celibacy, three months of nothing, and being around him was worse. Damn it, why did it have to be worse?

"Of course, you are."

I'd had enough. I put a hand on that satin-covered chest and pushed. Vampires can bench-press small trucks, so he didn't have to let me shove him, but he did. He gave me some room, then his mouth moved, as if he were saying something, but I couldn't hear him over the music and crowd noise.

I shook my head and sighed. We were going to have to go back into the office so I could hear him. Being alone with him was not the best idea, but I wanted to find Amy Mackenzie and the vampire she was going to get executed. I opened the door without looking at him. The photographer took pictures as we went through the door. He had to have been taking pictures when Jean-Claude had me practically pinned to the wall, I just hadn't noticed.

Jean-Claude shut the door behind us. The hallway was white with harsher lighting than anywhere else in the club. He'd told me once that he had made the hallway plain, ordinary so if a customer opened the door they'd know instantly that it wasn't part of the entertainment.

A group of waiters, vampires all, came out of the left-hand door, wearing vinyl short-shorts and no shirts. They'd spilled out of the door in a cloud of excited talk; it stopped abruptly when they saw us. One of them started to say something, and Jean-Claude said, "Go."

They fled out the door without a backward glance, almost as if they were scared. I'd have liked to think it was Jean-Claude that they were afraid of, but I was the Executioner, their version of the electric chair, so it might have been me.

"Shall we retire to my office, *ma petite*?"

I sighed, and in the silence of the hallway with the music only a distant thrum, my sigh sounded loud. "Sure."

He led the way down the hallway, gliding ahead of me. The pants were black satin and looked as if they'd been sewn on his body, tight as a second skin. A pair of black boots graced his legs. The boots

laced up the back from ankle to upper thigh. I'd seen the boots before; they were really nice boots. Nice enough that I watched the way his legs moved in them rather than the way the satin fit across his butt. Very nice boots, indeed.

He started to hold the door for me, then smiled, almost laughed, and just walked through. It had taken me awhile to break him of opening doors for me, but I'd finally managed to teach a very old dog a new trick.

The office was done in an Oriental motif complete with framed fans around a framed kimono. The colors in all three ran high to reds and blues. A red lacquer screen had a black castle sitting atop a black mountain. The desk was carved wood that looked like ebony and probably was. He leaned against that desk, long legs out in front of him, ankles crossed, hands in his lap, his eyes watching me as I shut the door.

"Please, be seated,*ma petite* ." He motioned to a black and silver chair sitting in front of the desk.

"I'm fine where I am." I leaned against the wall; my arms crossed under my breasts, which put my hand comfortably close to the gun under my arm. I wouldn't really shoot Jean-Claude, but the gun being close made me feel better. It was like a small, lumpy security blanket. Besides, I never went anywhere after dark unarmed.

His smile was amused and condescending. "I do not think the wall will fall down if you cease to lean against it."

"We need to figure out who the vamp is that's been doing Amy Mackenzie."

"You said you had pictures of the girl. May I see them?" The smile had faded round the edges, but his eyes still held that amusement, faint and condescending, which he used as a mask to hide things.

I sighed and reached into the pocket of my leather coat. I held the two pictures out toward him. He held his hand out for them but made no move to come to me.

"I won't bite,*ma petite* ."

"Only because I won't let you," I said.

He gave that graceful shrug that meant everything and nothing. "True, but still I will not ravish you because you stand a few feet in front of me."

He was right. I was being silly, but I could taste my pulse in my throat as I walked toward him, the new leather coat sighing around me, the way new leather always does. It was a replacement coat for one that a vampire had ripped off of me. I held the pictures out to him, and he had to lean forward to take them from me. I even sat down in the chair in front of the desk while he looked at them. We could be civilized about this. Of course we could. But I couldn't stop looking at the way his bare shoulders gleamed against the scarlet cloth, the way the high collar made his hair a pure blackness almost as dark as mine. His lips looked redder than I remembered them, as if he were wearing a light lipstick, and I wouldn't have put it past him. But he didn't need makeup to be beautiful; he just simply was.

He spoke without looking up from the pictures. "I do not recognize her, but then she could come here occasionally and I would have no reason to." He looked up meeting my eyes, catching me staring at his bare shoulders. The look in those eyes said he knew exactly what I'd been looking at. The look was

enough to make me blush, and I hated that.

My voice came out angry, and I was pleased. Anger is better than embarrassment any day. "You said on the phone that you could help."

He laid the pictures on his desk and clasped his hands back in his lap. The placement of his hands was utterly polite, but they also framed a certain area of anatomy, and the satin was very tight, and I could tell that other things were tight as well.

It made me blush again, and it made me angrier, just like old times. I'd have liked to be a smart Alec and say something like, that looked uncomfortable, but I didn't want to admit that I'd noticed, so out of options that were polite, I stood up and turned away.

"None of my vampires would dare bring over anyone without my permission," he said.

That made me turnaround. "What do you mean?"

"I have ordered a... how will you say... hiring freeze on, until that nasty bill in Washington is defeated."

"*Hiring freeze*," I said, "you mean none of your vamps can make more of you until Senator Brewster's law goes down in flames?"

"Exactement."

"So you're sure that none of your vamps is doing this?" I said.

"They would not risk the punishment."

"So you can't help me. Damn it, Jean-Claude, you could have told me that over the phone."

"I called Malcolm while you were en route," he said.

Malcolm was the head of the Church of Eternal Life, the vampire church. It was the only church I'd ever been in that had no holy objects displayed whatsoever, even the stain glass was abstract art. "Because if it's not one of your vamps, then it's one of his," I said.

"Oui."

Truthfully, I had just assumed it was one of Jean-Claude's vampires because the church was very strict on when you brought your human followers over to the dead side, and the church also checked backgrounds thoroughly. "The girl's friend said she'd met the vampire at a club."

"Can you not go to church and go to a club on the weekends?"

I nodded. "Okay, you've made your point. What did Malcolm say?"

"That he would contact all his followers and give strict orders that this vampire and the girl are to be found."

"They'll need the picture," I said. My beeper went off, and I jumped. Shit. I checked the number and it was Ronnie's cell phone.

"Can I use your phone?"

"Whatever I have is yours, *ma petite* !" He looked at the black phone sitting on the black desk and stood to one side so I could walk around the desk without him leaning over me. Considerate of him, which probably meant he was going to do something else even more irritating.

Ronnie answered on the first ring. "Anita?"

"It's me, what's up?"

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Your detective friend convinced Barbara that if Amy got herself killed she'd be charged with conspiracy to commit murder."

"I don't think Zerbrowski could make that stick."

"Barbara thinks he can."

"What did she tell you?"

"The vampire's name is Bill Stucker ." She spelled the last name for me.

"A vamp with a last name. He has to be really new," I said. The only other vamp I'd ever met with a last name had been dead less than a month.

"Don't know if he's old or new, just his name."

"She have an address for him?"

"No, and Zerbrowski pushed her pretty hard. She says she's never been there and I believe her."

"Okay, tell Zerbrowski thanks, I'll see you Saturday at the gym."

"Wouldn't miss it," she said.

"Oh, and thanks to you, too, Ronnie."

"Always happy to save someone from the monsters, which reminds me, are you with you know who?"

"If you mean Jean-Claude, yes, I am."

"Get out of there as soon as you can," she said.

"You're not my mother, Ronnie."

"No, just your friend."

"Good night, Ronnie."

"Don't stay," she said.

I hung up. Ronnie was one of my very bestest friends, but her attitude toward Jean-Claude was beginning to get on my nerves, mainly because I agreed with her. I always hated being in the wrong.

"The name Bill Stucker mean anything to you?" I asked Jean-Claude.

"No, but I will call Malcolm and see if it means something to him."

I handed him the phone receiver and stepped back out of the way, i.e., out of touching distance. His side of the conversation consisted mainly of giving the name and, saying, "Of course," and "Yes." He handed the phone to me. "Malcolm wishes to speak to you."

I took the phone, and Jean-Claude actually moved away and gave me some room. "Ms. Blake, I am sorry for anything my church brethren may have done. He is in our computer with his address. I will have a deacon at his doorstep within minutes."

"Give me the address and I'll go down and check on the girl."

"That will not be necessary. The church sister that is attending to this was a nurse before she came over."

"I'm not sure what Amy Mackenzie needs is another vampire, no matter how well-meaning. Let me have the address."

"And I don't believe that my vampire needs the Executioner shooting down his door."

"I can give the name to the police. They'll find his address, and they'll knock on his door, and they may not be as polite as I would be."

"Now that last is hard to imagine."

I think he was making fun of me. "Give me the address, Malcolm." Anger was tightening across my shoulders, making me want to rotate my neck and try and clear it.

"Wait a moment." He put me on hold.

I looked at Jean-Claude and let the anger into my voice. "He put me on hold."

Jean-Claude had sat down in the chair that I'd vacated; he smiled, shrugged, trying to stay neutral. Probably wise of him. When I'm angry I have a tendency to spread it around, even over people who don't deserve it. I'm trying to cut down on my bad habits, but some habits are easier to break than others. My temper was one of the hard ones.

"Ms. Blake, that was the emergency line. The girl is alive, but barely, they are rushing her to the hospital. We are not sure if she will make it. We will turn Bill over to the police if she dies, I give you my word on that."

I had to take his word, because he was a centuries-old vampire and if you could ever get them to give their oath, they'd keep it.

"What hospital, so I can call her mom?"

He told me. I hung up and called Amy's mother. One hysterical phone call later I got to hang up and

now it was my turn to sit on the edge of the desk and look down at him.

My feet didn't touch the ground and that made it hard to look graceful. But then I'd never tried to compete with Jean-Claude on gracefulness; some battles are made to be lost.

"There was a time, *ma petite*, that you would have insisted on riding to the rescue yourself, questioning the girl's friend, and refusing to bring in the police at all."

"If I thought threatening Barbara with violence or shooting her would have made her talk, I'd be perfect for the job. But I'm not going to shoot, or hurt, an eighteen-year-old girl who's trying to help her best friend save her leg, if not her life. Zerbrovski could threaten her with the law, jail time, I can't do that."

"And you never threaten anything that you cannot, or will not do," he said, softly.

"No, I don't."

We looked at each other. He at ease in the straight-backed chair, his ankle propped on the opposite knee, fingers steepled in front of his face so that what I mostly saw of him were those extraordinary eyes, huge, a blue so dark it treaded the edge of being black, but you never doubted his eyes were pure, unadulterated blue, like ocean water where it runs achingly deep and cold.

Ronnie was right, I should leave, but I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay. I wanted to run my hands over his shirt, to caress the naked surprise of those shoulders. And because I wanted it so badly, I hopped off the desk, and said, "Thanks for your help."

"I am always willing to be of assistance, *ma petite* ."

I could have walked wide past his chair, but that would be insulting to both of us. I just had to walk by the chair and out the door. Simple. I was almost past the chair, almost behind him, when he spoke, "Would you have ever called me if you hadn't needed to save some human?" His voice was as ordinary as it ever got. He wasn't trying to use vampire tricks to make the words more than they were and that stopped me. An honest question was harder to turn my back on than a seductive trick.

I sighed and turned back to find him staring straight at me. Looking full into his face from less than two feet away made me have to catch my breath. "You know why I'm staying away."

He twisted in the chair, putting one arm on the back of it, showing that flash of bare shoulder again. "I know that you find it difficult to control the powers of the vampire marks when we are together. It was something that should have bound us closer, not thrust us farther apart." Again his voice was as carefully neutral as he could make it.

I shook my head. "I've got to go."

He turned in the chair so that he leaned both arms on the back, his chin resting on his hands, his hair framing all that red cloth, that pale flesh, those drowning eyes. Less than two feet apart, almost close enough that if I reached a hand out I could have touched him. I swallowed so hard it almost hurt. I balled my hands into fists, because I could feel the memory of his skin against my hands. All I had to do was close that distance, but I knew if I did, that I wouldn't be leaving, not for awhile anyway.

My voice came out breathy, "I should go."

"So you said."

I should have turned and walked out, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do it. Didn't want to do it. I wanted to stay. My body was tight with need; wet with it, just at the sight of him fully clothed, leaning on a chair. Damn it, why wasn't I walking away? But I wasn't reaching for him either; I got points for that. Sometimes you get points for just standing your ground.

Jean-Claude stood, very slowly, as if afraid I'd bolt, but I didn't. I stood there, my heart in my throat, my eyes a little wide, afraid, eager, wanting.

He stood inches away from me, staring down, but still not touching, hands at his sides, face neutral. He raised one hand, very slowly upward, and even that small movement sent his fingertips gliding along my leather coat. When I didn't pull away, he held the edge of the leather in his fingertips inside the open edge of the coat at the level of my waist. He began to slide his hand upward, above my waist, my stomach, then the back of his fingers brushed over my breasts, not hesitating, moving upward to the collar of the coat, but that one quick brush had tightened my body, stopped my breath in my throat.

His hand moved from my collar to my neck, fingers gliding underneath my hair until he cupped the back of my neck, his thumb resting on top of the big pulse in my neck. The weight of his hand on my skin was almost more than I could take, as if I could sink into him through that one hand.

"I have missed you, *ma petite* ." His voice was low and caressing this time, gliding over my skin, bringing my breath in a shaking line.

I'd missed him, but I couldn't bring myself to say it out loud. What I could do was raise up on tiptoe, steadying myself with a hand on his chest, feeling his heart beat against the palm of my hand. He'd fed on someone, or he wouldn't have had a heartbeat, some willing donor, and even that thought wasn't enough to stop me from leaning my face back, offering my lips to him.

His lips brushed mine, the softest of caresses. I drew back from the kiss, my hands sliding over the satin of his shirt, feeling the firmness of him underneath. I did what I'd wanted to do since I saw him tonight. I passed my fingers over the bare skin of his shoulders, so smooth, so soft, so firm. I rolled my hands behind his shoulders, and the movement let our bodies fall together, lightly.

His hands found my waist, slid behind my back, pressed me against him, not lightly, hard, hard enough that I could feel him even through the satin of his pants, the cloth of my skirt, the lace of my panties. I could feel him pressed so tight and ready that I had to close my eyes, hide my face against his chest. I tried to let my feet flat to the floor, to move away from him, just a little, just enough to think again, but his hands kept me pinned to his body. I opened my eyes then, ready to tell him to let me the hell go, but I looked up and his face was so close, his lips half-parted, that no words came.

I kissed those half-parted lips almost as gently as he'd kissed me. His hands tightened at my back, my waist, pressing us tighter against each other, so tight, so close. My breath came out in a long sigh, and he kissed me. His mouth closing over mine, my body sinking against his, my mouth opening for his lips, his tongue, everything. I ran my tongue between the delicate tips of his fangs. There was an art to French kissing a vampire, and I hadn't lost it; I didn't pierce myself on those dainty points.

Without breaking the kiss, he bent and wrapped his arms around my upper thighs, lifted me, carried me effortlessly to the desk. He didn't lay me on it, which is what I half-expected. He turned and sat down on the desk, sliding my legs to either side, so that he was suddenly pressed between my legs with only two pieces of cloth between us. He lay back on the desk, and I rode him, rubbing our bodies together

through the satin of his pants and my panties.

His hands rubbed up my leg tracing my hose, until his fingers found the top lace of the thigh-high hose. I pressed myself into him hard enough for his body to arch, spasming our bodies together. And there was a knock on the door. We both froze, then Jean-Claude said, "We are not to be disturbed!"

A voice I didn't recognize said, "I am sorry, master, but Malcolm is here. He insists that it is urgent."

Evidently Jean-Claude did know the voice, because he closed his eyes and cursed softly under his breath in French. "What does he want?"

I slid off of Jean-Claude, leaving him lying on his desk, with his legs dangling over the end.

Malcolm's smooth voice came next. "I have a present for Ms. Blake."

I checked my clothing to make sure it was presentable; strangely it was. Jean-Claude sat up, but stayed on the edge of his desk. "Enter."

The door opened and the tall, blond, dark-suited figure of Malcolm walked through. He always dressed like he was a television preacher, conservative, immaculate, expensive. Compared to Jean-Claude he always looked ordinary, but then so did most everyone. Still, there was a presence to Malcolm, a calm, soothing power that filled every room around him. He was a master vampire and his power was a thrumming weight against my skin. He tried to pass for human, and I'd always wondered if the level of power he gave off was his version of toned-down, and if this was the toned-down version, then what must his power truly be like?

"Ms. Blake, Jean-Claude." He gave a small bow of his head, then moved from the door and two vampires in the dark suits and white shirts of his deacons came through carrying a chained vampire between them. He had short blond hair and blood drying on his mouth, as if they'd chained him before he'd had time to clean himself.

"This is Bill Stucker ; the girl, I am sorry to say, passed over."

"She's one of you then," I said.

Malcolm nodded. "This one tried to run, but I gave you my word that he would be punished by your law if she died."

"You could have just dropped him off at the police station," I said.

His eyes flicked to Jean-Claude, to me, to my leather coat forgotten on the floor. "I am sorry to interrupt your evening, but I thought it would come better if the Executioner delivered the vampire to the police rather than us. I think the reporters will listen to you when you say we did not condone this, and you are honorable enough to tell the truth."

"Are you saying the rest of the police aren't?"

"I am saying that many of our law enforcement are distrustful of us and would be only too happy to see us lose our status as citizens."

I'd have liked to have argued, but I couldn't. "I'll drop him off for you and I'll make sure the press knows



you delivered him."

"Thank you, Ms. Blake." He looked at Jean-Claude. "Again, my apologies; I was told that the two of you were no longer dating."

"We aren't dating," I said, a little too quickly.

He shrugged. "Of course." He looked back at Jean-Claude and gave a smile that said more than anything that they didn't quite like each other. He liked interrupting Jean-Claude's evening. They were two very different kinds of vampire and neither really approved completely of the other.

Malcolm stepped over the struggling, gagged form of the other vampire and went out the door with his deacons. None of them even looked back at the vampire chained on the floor.

There were a flock of waiters and waitresses in their skimpy uniforms, huddled in the doorway. "Take this vampire and load him in *ma petite*'s car."

He looked at me, and I got my keys out of the leather coat and tossed it to one of the vampires. One of the women picked the chained vamp off the floor and tossed him over her shoulder like he weighed nothing. They closed the door behind them without being told.

I picked my coat off the floor. "I have to go."

"Of course, you do." His voice held just a little bit of anger. "You have let your desire for me out and now you must cage it again, hide it away, be ashamed of it."

I started to be angry, but I looked at him sitting there, head down, hands limp in his lap, as dejected as I'd seen him in a while, and I wasn't angry. He was right, that was exactly how I treated him. I stayed where I was, the coat over one arm.

"I have to take him down to the police station and make sure the press gets the truth, not something that will make the vampires look worse than they already do in all this."

He nodded without looking up.

If he'd been his usual arrogant self I could have left him like that, but he was letting his pain show, and that I couldn't just walk away from. "Let's try an olive branch," I said.

He looked up at that, frowning. "Olive branch?"

"White flag?" I said.

He smiled then. "A truce." He laughed, and it danced over my skin, "I did not know we were at war."

That hit a little too close to home. "Are you going to let me say something nice, or not?"

"By all means, *ma petite*, farbe it for me to interrupt your gentler urges."

"I am trying to ask you out on a date."

The smile widened, his eyes filling with such instant pleasure that it made me look away, because it made

me want to smile back at him. "It must have been a very long time since you asked a man out; you seem to be out of practice."

I put on my coat. "Fine, be a smart Alec. See where it gets you."

I was almost to the door when he said, "Not a war, *ma petite*, but a siege, and this poor soldier is feeling very left out in the cold."

I stopped and turned around. He was still sitting on the desk trying to look harmless, I think. He was many things: handsome, seductive, intelligent, cruel, but not harmless, not to body, mind, or soul.

"Tomorrow night, pick a restaurant." One of the side effects of being his human servant was that he could taste food through me. It was the first time he'd been able to taste food in centuries. It was a minor power to share but he adored it, and I adored watching him enjoying his first bite of steak in four hundred years.

"I will make reservations," he said, voice careful again, as if he were afraid I'd change my mind.

Looking at him, sitting on his desk all in red and black and satin and leather, I didn't want to change my mind. I wanted to sit across the table from him. I wanted to drive him home and go inside and see what color of sheets he had on that big bed of his.

It wasn't just the sex; I wanted someone to hold me. I wanted some place safe, some place to be myself. And like it, or hate it, in Jean-Claude's arms I could be perfectly who and what I was. I could have called Richard up and he'd have been just as glad to hear from me, and there would have been as much heat, but Richard and I had some philosophical differences that went beyond him being a werewolf. Richard tried to be a good person, and he thought I killed too easily to be a good person. Jean-Claude had helped teach me the ultimate practicality that had kept me alive, helped me keep others alive. But the thought that Jean-Claude's arms were the closest thing I had to a refuge in this world was a sobering thought. Almost a depressing one.

He slid off the desk in one graceful movement as if his body were pulled by strings. He started to glide toward me, moving like some great cat. Just watching him walk toward me made my chest tight. He grabbed each side of the leather coat and drew me into the circle of his arms. "Would it be pushing the bounds of our truce too far to say, that it is hours until dawn?"

My voice came out breathy, "I have to take him to the police and deal with reporters, that will take hours."

"This time of year dawn comes very late." He whispered as he bent to lay his lips against mine.

We kissed, and I drew back enough to whisper, "I'll try to be back before dawn."

It was four days before Christmas, an hour before dawn, when I knocked on Jean-Claude's bedroom door underneath the Circus of the Damned, one of his other clubs. His voice called, "Come in, *ma petite*."

An hour. It wasn't much time, but time is what you make it. I had stopped by the grocery store on the way and picked up some ready-made chocolate icing in one of those flip-top canisters. He could taste

the chocolate while I ate it, and if it just happened to be on him while I was eating it, well... The silk sheets on his bed were white, and we laughed while we covered him in chocolate and stained the sheets. But when every inch of him that I wanted was covered in thick, sweet chocolate, the laughter stopped, and other noises began, noises even more precious to me than his laughter. Dawn caught us before he could take a bath and clean himself of the sticky sweetness. I left him in a pile of chocolate-smearred white silk sheets, his body still warm to the touch, but his heart no longer beating. Dawn had found him and stolen his life away, and lifeless he would remain for hours; then he would wake, and he would be "alive" again. He truly was a corpse. I knew that. But he had the sweetest skin I'd ever tasted, candy-covered or plain. He had no pulse, no breath, no movement, dead. It should have made a difference, and it did. I think the siege, as he called it, would have been over long ago if he'd been alive, or maybe not. Being a vampire was too large a part of who Jean-Claude was, for me to separate them out. It did make a difference, but I laid one last icing coated kiss on his forehead, and went home. We had a date tonight, and with the feel of his body still clinging to mine, I could hardly wait.

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