

# NECURATUL

Sheri Lewis Wohl

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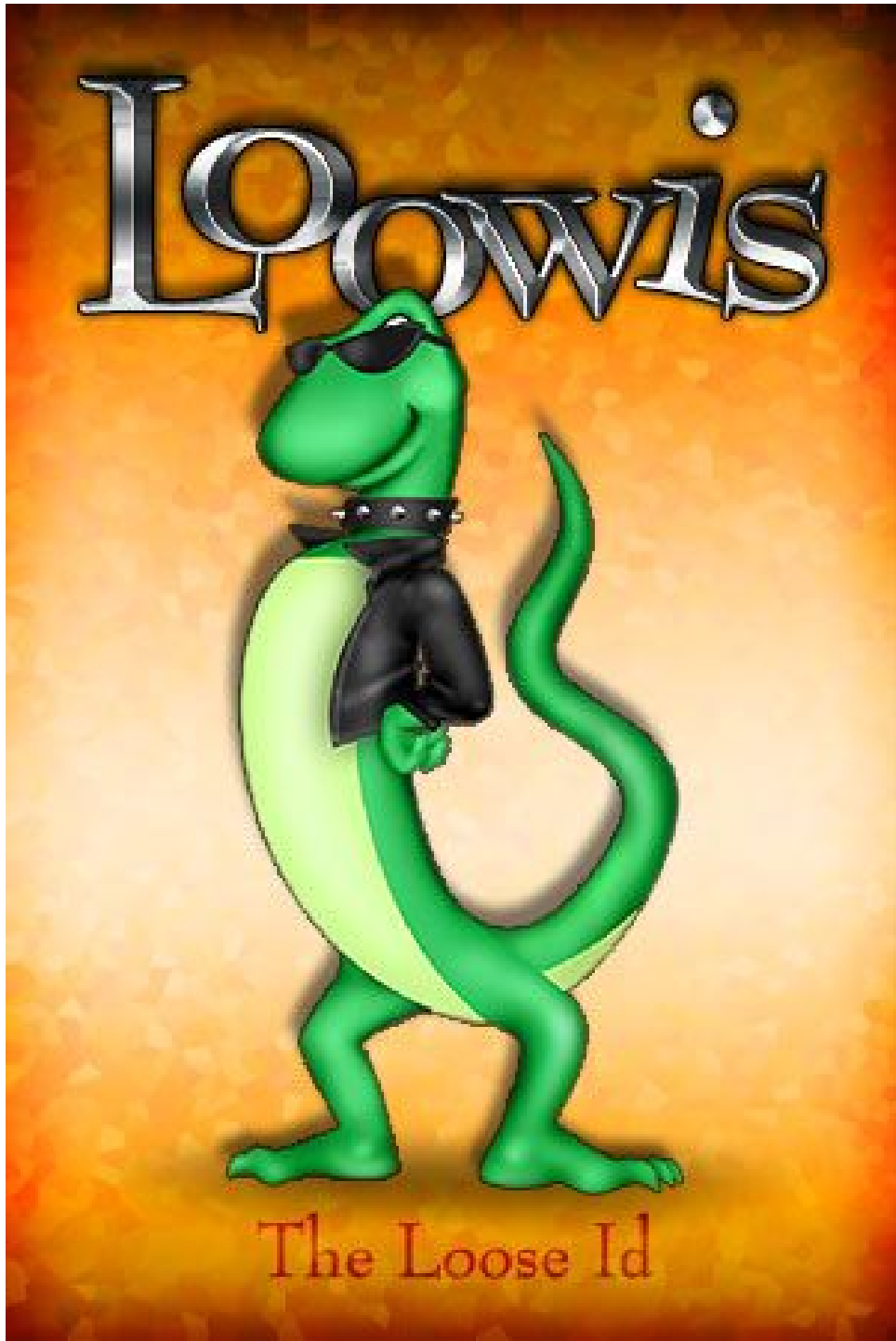
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## Prologue

*August 14, 1613*

Perched on the tiny window ledge that was little more than an open hole letting in a sliver of daylight, the rat stared. Time was running out.

The ink dried within seconds of being coaxed from the well with saliva that didn't want to pass her cracked lips. Her fingers ached as she signed her name with a flourish, the E circled and beautiful, the B large and bold. Satisfied she folded the parchment first in half and then over once more before laying it in the center of the petite writing desk. Her hands were trembling when she stood the limp and broken quill in the mouth of the inkwell.

There were no more words left to write, and she didn't need to sit in the uncomfortable chair any longer. Pushing away she shuffled to the tattered mattress against the wall. It had never been soft but now it was so flat the coldness of the stone beneath chilled it even on warm days. From its tattered top she picked up a tarnished silver brush, a gift from another lifetime. Her hair had been lush, black and beautiful the day they'd walled up the door. It had been the envy of every woman she'd known. They had all begged to know her secret and then despised her when they did. Now what was left of her luxurious mane fell well past her waist, a mantle of dull white cotton. She ran the brush through it, no longer noticing the acrid smell of urine and feces, yet wishing as she had a thousand times that she could wash it with warm water and that special soap scented with the finest of lavender.

The only thing of beauty not stolen from her was the string of pearls. Even in the dim light they glowed against her gray skin. Nothing, not even this hell on earth, could tarnish the luster of each pearl. Against her fingertips they were cool and smooth.

Comforting.

Closing her eyes as she fingered the pearls, she thought of the five years that had passed, each one an eternity. Her wealth, her beauty, her pleasures, had all been stripped from her by a system as flawed as it was unjust. She had to believe that in the end vengeance would be hers.

Laying the brush on what were the threadbare remains of a crimson velvet pillow, she slid the short distance from the mattress to the floor. A smile pulled at the corners of her mouth making the cracks in her lips widen and trickle with blood. Her cheek flat against the icy stone floor thick with years of waste and filth, her breath slowed. She didn't move her head at the sounds coming from the window, the quiet tick tick tick of tiny feet gathering and waiting. Many pairs of round black eyes watched, small bodies inching closer as the minutes passed.

Within the hour her china blue eyes grew cloudy as her heart stilled and a final thready breath passed her lips.

Eternity began.

Light and darkness, left and right, are brothers of one another;  
they are inseparable.

Because of this, neither are the good good, nor the evil evil,  
nor is life life, nor death death.

Therefore each will dissolve into that from which it first came,  
the Undivided.

But those who are exalted above this world,  
are indissoluble, eternal.

-- The Gospel of Philip, Nag Hammadi Library, p. 142

## Chapter One

### Present Day

It was not as simple as God and Satan and nobody knew that better than Cat Lohr. She'd faced evil once and lost. Now she hunted.

The first time Cat laid eyes on one of the Anima Mundi hunters, she had been holding on to her sanity by the thinnest of threads, her face covered in blood, her heart ready to explode. The world as she knew it had been destroyed in the proverbial blink of an eye and to say she'd been in shock was an understatement. She still hadn't recovered from that little mind-altering experience, and she wondered if she ever would. Reality had taken a permanent shift to the left.

Her place in the world had changed, too. Oh, not in the literal sense. Rather it was like a dimensional shift that she alone felt and yet was as real as the nose on her face. The sole answer she came up with to explain it was that she had been spared for an important purpose. The Anima Mundi was now as much a part of her life as the air she drew into her lungs. Sounded corny but that didn't make it any less true. She could not exist without it and barely remembered her life before it.

A sound rattled the morning air outside the kitchen storm door. Sensing trouble about to explode, Cat walked to the door and pushed it open enough to see the wide green yard.

"Falco," she yelled, stepping out the door as the young German Shepherd prepared to jump on the sleeping St. Bernard. "Leave her alone."

Pausing at the sound of her voice, sort of, Falco poured himself into a leap that cleared the sleeping Molly and then barreled straight towards Cat, hell bent for election. All hundred and ten pounds hit her at full tilt.



“What an ass you are,” she told him, her hands braced on the doorframe to counter the blow. Falco wagged his tail and pushed against her legs. She reached down and scratched the top of his head. “An ass.”

Sinking next to him on the steps, Cat put an arm around his neck. He smelled of grass, wildflowers and dog, a heady, comforting mixture of scents. How she loved the mutt and the life she had in these quiet moments. It was simple and uncomplicated. The sun warmed her face as Falco pushed his lithe body against her side and Molly stretched out in the sunshine, peaceful and contented.

Peaceful. Like a fairytale.

She had to take these moments of satisfaction when she could because like all the hunters she lived two lives. One came in the form of the public version familiar to friends and family. The other was as a hunter of evil as old as the planet and so dangerous no movie could do it justice. She knew all about that because she'd looked that kind of evil straight on and it had come close to taking her life. She escaped as the old saying goes, by the hair of her chinny, chin, chin. That was the good part. The bad part was that she lost the one closest to her in the world and for that she would hunt for as long as her heart continued to beat in her breast.

Despite the warmth of the sun on her face, a few seconds later a knot began to form in the pit of her stomach. A rolling stomach in her world didn't mean a bad lunch either.

“Crap,” she muttered against the thick, rich fur of Falco's head. “Here we go again, buddy.”

Being part of an ancient order that had worked to keep evil in check for millennia was a twenty-four/seven kind of gig. So much for a lazy day with the dogs; there were demons to stop and necuratul to catch. Come to think of it, being in the Order was kind of like the military. What was it the Americans liked to say? It's not just a job -- it's an adventure. Yeah, that was it, an adventure where she learned cool new words like necuratul, the Romanian word for the unclean ones and got to use nifty weapons like silver bullets and ancient swords.

Then again, work was work whether it was the old-fashioned sit behind a desk kind or the cloak-and-dagger type that defined her world these days. On the whole the Order was great. The only regret she had was that she wished she'd have found them or rather that they would have found her sooner. If they had maybe, just maybe, Michael would still be alive. It was entirely possible it would have turned out the same for brilliant and beautiful Michael. Believing the Order could have made a difference was probably nothing more than wishful thinking on her part.

Hindsight being twenty-twenty, she could see that Michael had been in so deep that it was doubtful anyone, hunter or not, could have saved him. What he'd become had changed her as well and she would never be the same. That wasn't all bad either. While she wasn't

fond of what she saw and felt these days, she did know that she was making a difference and there was something to be said for that.

The rumble in her gut rolling in dark and unknown pushed her up and off the stairs. Something was rising again somewhere and lives were going to change. It was starting as it always did with the feelings that roared through her body. The visions would not be far behind. Some would live through this; some would die.

In the bedroom, she packed the medium-sized black suitcase with the tuck-away handle and wheels that meant she wouldn't have to carry it. Once zipped up tight, Cat took the heavy bag out to the garage and put it into the back of the Escalade. She didn't know where she was headed yet but would soon enough.

## Chapter Two

God almighty, this place was so deep with filth and dust that a single step sent dirt particles whirling like gnats through the dim light of the single bulb hanging from a wire in the middle of the room. Talk about a fall from grace. Amanda had a doctorate, for Christ's sake, and here she was in the basement of the church cleaning out dead mice, broken boxes, and dirt-encrusted statues. It made her want to puke.

Amanda had to stop and remind herself that it was at least a job that gave her a room in the parish house. It wasn't like she had a home to go to anymore. Legal fees had taken care of that faster than she could flunk a moronic freshman. Her weasel of a parole officer had been more than pleased to put her in the hands of the minister and his flock. They could help her with her problem or so he'd told her all the time eyeing her with beady black rodent eyes. Not that she would have argued, even if she could, by that point she'd have agreed to anything just to get the hell out of that place.

As much as she hated it, the church was a good place to hide. She was like Hester with a big "A" emblazoned across her chest. She'd lost her teaching credentials, her family had turned their backs on her in shame, and in her own stubborn way, she'd refused to lower herself to the role of waitress or bartender. With a Ph.D. in physics, she did not wait tables or mix drinks! Dirty and menial as it was here in the dank church basement, she'd rather work in this filthy hole. At least the solitude of the ancient room kept her fall from being broadcast any more publicly than it already had been.

"Amanda?"

Christ, she moaned inwardly, Reverend John was coming down the stairs. What a great way to spoil an afternoon of solitude. The last person she wanted to see was that self-righteous ass. Every time she was with him all she could do was smile sweetly and pretend she was grateful for his help during her time of reformation while trying not to throw up on

his shiny little wingtips. His round face glowed with his own self-importance, his straight teeth abnormally white against his ruddy skin. The fool was convinced he was bringing the Lord into her life and helping the convicted pedophile become a saved woman.

And pigs could fly.

Relax, she told herself and then turned towards the stairs. "Reverend."

He was smiling the sort of sly smile she'd seen a thousand times before just not, as a general rule, on the face of a man of the cloth. His close-set eyes peered out at her from behind thin-rimmed black glasses. The conservative shirt and tie were tools of his trade, designed to inspire trust. For anyone else the whole package might come off as sympathetic and helpful. Not to her. There was something up the man's crisp white sleeve, and she had a pretty good idea it wasn't an innocent afternoon prayer meeting.

"I thought perhaps you'd like to come up for a glass of iced tea, you know take a little break." His smile crawled up his face.

The dread that swept through her had as much to do with the fact that she could feel the leer all the way to her soul as with the fact that men didn't float her boat. He was hitting on her just as surely as if they were standing in a smoky pick-up joint, clicking the tops of beer bottles together and exchanging phone numbers on torn bits of napkins. Until she'd come to this place she hadn't given thought to ministers and preachers as sexual creatures. Except, that is, for the priests. Stories of their naughty ways she'd heard from her Catholic friends long before the names of those wayward emissaries started making national news and captions in indictments.

Johnny-boy hitting on her was a new mindset for her. In her world she was the one who made the moves. Still she couldn't afford to be rude so she chose to feign ignorance; it was just easier for a whole lot of reasons. When the time was right she'd be in a much better position to let him know she was on to him. Maybe make a little trouble for the good reverend who seemed to be harboring less than good intentions towards her.

For the moment she gave him her most innocent smile. "Reverend, as much as I'd like to I promised myself to get this room put in order today come hell or high-water. Oh, my!" She clapped her hand to her mouth. "That wasn't appropriate now, was it?" She looked at him with her ice blue eyes and batted her eyelashes.

His smile stayed though the light in his eyes dimmed. "You don't have to work your fingers to the bone you know. We don't want people to think we're working you to death. Giving to the church is only part of the reason you're with us."

*Thanks for the subtle reminder.* Like she wasn't hit face first each and every day with the reason she was in this awful place. God, she couldn't look at him anymore, she was certain that her disgust had to be written across her face. Turning away, she leaned down and picked up one of the dust-topped boxes stacked against the far wall where shadows fell deep and dark.

“Reverend, while I appreciate everything you’re doing for me and your kind offer, I do want to finish up in here today. Makes me feel as though I’m doing something useful and positive when I can work.”

“Yes,” he sighed. “That’s important.”

Resignation rang in his voice. This skirmish was hers.

“Well another time perhaps.”

“Another time,” Amanda echoed, trying with some effort to keep the relief from spilling out into her words. Sometimes shaking him was an event of Olympic proportions.

He paused on the bottom step for another few seconds, his dark eyes lingering on her face, before turning with a sigh and disappearing up the stairs.

Once he’d left Amanda brushed the dirt off the top of another box and sank down. Relief made her almost giddy. Looking around at the stacks of boxes and cluttered shelves she cocked her head. Grimy and dank as the place was there was something about the room that welcomed her. Maybe it was just the absolute solitude, the relief from the pressures of the real world that made her want to hide here. It wasn’t the filth. That was not her style at all. Still as she continued to look around the old room there was a sense of belonging that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Funny but she liked it here.

The church itself was very old, here since the earliest beginnings of the city. This basement section was part of the original structure built almost two hundred years earlier. The foundation was constructed of native rock and mortar giving it a cool and damp feel. The air held that musty scent particular to a windowless and closed up room.

The newer parts of the church had grown around the original until it became one of the largest churches in the city. It grew while at the same time keeping the old as an integrated part of the whole. It was easy to see why this room was a dusty mess. Few would spend time in the old section, it was cold and creepy, not to mention there was something about the centuries’ old room that made it spooky even though it was the heart and soul of the church. Maybe, she thought, it was that the soul of this church was black, which would explain the presence of Reverend Lecherous. That made her smile.

The longer she sat on the creaky old box the more peaceful she became. The rocks imbedded in the walls seemed to speak to her, whispering of a past that held promise for the future. Yes, it was good to sit here and reflect. Perhaps that old goat of a PO had been right after all. Maybe this place was changing her.

Shaking her head, Amanda stood. More than likely it was a case of her breathing too much dust and it was making her crazy. It was a musky old basement that needed to be sorted through and cleaned up. Nothing more.

Against the east wall was the obvious starting point. The large stack of ancient wooden boxes had her name written all over them. Like grading poorly written term papers, one pile at a time, and she’d have it done. There was a better than average chance that nobody would

notice or care but it gave her some sort of purpose and for the moment that was enough. Besides the longer she stayed down here the longer she was away from the Reverend and the rest of his annoying staff.

She pulled a clip out of her pocket and brushed her long hair back with her hand. Securing it with the clip, she bent down and picked up the first box, taking it to the center of the room where the poor light was a tiny bit better. Inside the box were old church bulletins and a few hymnals. The bulletins were a good forty years old and not worth much although she had a hunch that Mary, the pudgy church secretary with a fondness for gaudy eye shadows, would find endless delight in reading and cataloging this wondrous discovery. She took the box and set it by the stairs. She'd take it up to Mary a little later.

The next two boxes held moth-eaten linens that once upon a time were used in the chapel and in the rectory but were now so destroyed they weren't worth saving. She carried both boxes out to the dumpster, peeking around each corner during the journey to make certain that she didn't come face to face with Reverend John.

Back in the safety of the basement she picked up the bottom box and started to turn once again towards the light when she noticed the black metal ring that the box had covered. It was so dark against this wall and the ring in the floor was covered with enough years of dirt and dust that it was close to impossible to see without getting down on hands and knees. Setting the box on the floor behind her, Amanda squatted and brushed the years of filth away from the ring. Closer examination revealed that the metal ring had been set into the floor with deliberate care. It was about six inches in diameter and made of strong though pitted steel.

Rocking back on her heels she looked around the room trying to determine its purpose. Nothing jumped out at her. The walls were solid as was the floor. So what was the ring for?

"What the hell," she murmured as she put her fingers through the cold metal, enclosing it in her palm before giving it a strong pull. It moved less than inch yet it caused her pulse to jump.

"Well now. What have we here?"

Eyeing it for a moment she decided that with a little effort she could get it to break free. Bracing her feet solid on the floor, Amanda pulled harder, using whatever leverage she could generate. Her reward was a creaking sound that rose from the floor beneath her feet. One more time ought to do it. With a deep breath she pulled the ring, the muscles in the back of her legs screaming in protest. At first, nothing, and then it gave way with a screech, sending her backwards to fall unceremoniously on her behind. She scrambled back to her feet and gazed down.

"I'll be damned."

It was a door set into the floor, hidden by layers of dust, and craftsmen who had possessed the skill to make the door all but invisible. She walked around to the opening and looked down. Brushing the dust off her back end she leaned over and tried to adjust her eyes.

There were steps that led down into a blackness that obscured whatever it was the ring had opened to reveal. A little darkness wasn't going to deter Amanda.

There was a lantern in the church garage; she'd seen it days ago when she'd gone shopping with Mary. Sneaking out to the garage, once again hoping not to be seen, she was able to snag the lantern and get back to the basement without so much as a single person stopping her. For a change luck seemed to be going her way.

The light of the lantern broke through the blackness as Amanda made her way down the old wooden steps, testing each one for solidity before putting her full weight on it. All she needed to do was break an arm or ankle by crashing through rotted steps. Like the rest of the basement this place looked as old as Moses. On second thought, it looked older than Moses.

Reaching the bottom she swung the light around in a large arc. It was a passageway and like the upper basement was constructed of rocks and mortar. The walls themselves were about six feet high, giving her plenty of room to stand straight though she wasn't sure how long the passageway was because her light didn't penetrate far enough to show where it ended. The smell of old dirt, rot and seeping dampness made her gag. She closed her eyes and gave herself a moment to adjust to the smell and feel of the place. With a few shallow breaths she was ready. The smell didn't improve, just her tolerance to it.

As she stood there with her eyes closed, it occurred to her that it was more than just dirt, rot and dampness. There was something else in the air, light yet pungent enough to linger. She knew the smell and given enough time, she'd be able to name it. Right now she was more curious about what was down here than the source of the smell. Opening her eyes she took one more deep breath and started walking.

Not more than six feet away from the entrance the wall structure changed. Into the walls were built large shelves where coffins had been placed with care. Scattered throughout were smaller shelves holding items that someone had thought too valuable to leave above. Gold candleholders, engraved crosses with precious stones and in one a tarnished silver chalice. She picked up the chalice turning it in her hands. Curious item to be found here. Not that crypts with precious cache were unusual in Europe, maybe, or even New England, but the Pacific Northwest? It was odd and she would wager, a bit of a surprise to local scholars as well.

Of course, she had no intention of sharing this with any of the snobbish intellectuals who once upon a time had declared themselves to be her friends. Some friends they turned out to be. Once that indictment had been filed they'd turned their backs on her, just as if she'd been afflicted with leprosy. This was her little secret, and they could all just go to hell. Setting the chalice back on the shelf she shone her light down the corridor of the long-buried crypt.

Amanda judged that she'd walked about twenty more yards when she came to a door, solid wood and adorned with a death's-head symbol. Shining the light on the marking she

studied it with narrowed eyes. It wouldn't have struck her as odd had it not been for the fact that her lover in college had been an anthropology major, studying graveyard symbols. If memory served her right, the use of death's-heads began to fade away at least a hundred years before anyone even thought about building this church. That bit of trivia made her wonder why there was one here?

Her heart racing, Amanda laughed, this was most excitement she'd experienced since, well, since the incident that put her in prison in the first place. That little tryst had been worth it in so many ways and she had the distinct sense that whatever it was that lay beyond that death's-head was going to be worth it, too. Ten minutes ago this had been just another boring day. Things were beginning to look up.



### Chapter Three

“Adam,” Martin Ludlum called as he hurried down the tiled walkway to where the tall man stood just beyond the gates of the secured area. He was easy to spot in the throng, at least a head taller than everyone else and the only man with foot-long braids.

“Welcome,” Adam told him as he reached for Martin’s bag.

Ignoring Adam’s outstretched hand, Martin dropped the bag to the floor and embraced the younger yet much bigger man. It never failed to fill his heart with joy when he could see them fit and healthy. Too often the flight took a toll, lining their faces with pain and a wisdom born of knowledge no one should have to carry in their eyes. In Adam Bell’s case, his Native American heritage blessed him with smooth latte-colored skin and high regal cheeks that would have distinguished him easily as a chief in days gone by. A good six-foot-six, with broad shoulders and long legs, Adam stood out in the small crowd for more than his impressive height.

A deep scar ran down the right side of Adam’s cheek, marring an otherwise perfect complexion and reminding Martin how close Adam had come to losing his initiation battle. Fortunately for both Adam and the Order, he had walked away the victor. Scarred, but the victor nonetheless. Like all members of the Anima Mundi, membership had not been through invitation. Adam hadn’t made the choice to join the Order. It had chosen him.

“It’s close,” Adam told him as they ambled across the skywalk suspended between the terminal and the parking garage. Below them cars circled the multilane corridor, unable to park and wait at the curb because of post 9/11 security. It was like watching a circle race in slow motion.

“I can feel it.”

“We’re going to have call in others.”

“Agreed. Any suggestions?”

Not that he needed them. Martin knew who was called for in this hunt. What he was, was curious about what Adam would suggest, knowing all too well what had happened in Romania six months ago. It didn't surprise him when Adam wasn't quick to answer. Martin was more than willing to wait him out.

They were alone in the concrete parking garage when Adam hit the remote that unlocked the Tahoe and opened the back. He put Martin's bag in the cargo space then walked to the driver's door.

"Catherine," Adam said once they were both buckled into their seatbelts and he was circling around the spiral down ramp.

Martin turned his face to the side window and smiled. "Yes, I think so, too."

Good man. Martin had hoped that Adam would make just this suggestion. It was important for a number of reasons that he not let the Romania incident cloud his better judgment.

The ride to town was punctuated by small talk and Adam's brief introduction to the eastern Washington city that he called home. The airport that faded in the rearview mirror was sprawled on tumbleweed ground his father would have called scrubland. Great for runways and long distance visibility but not what he'd describe as picturesque. It almost had a desert look and feel to it that surprised Martin, considering Washington was called the evergreen state. Americans did have a funny way about them.

Not far from the airport an abundance of pine trees broke up the monotony of the landscape but it wasn't until Adam negotiated a curve that took them from the highway and onto the interstate that the city of Spokane appeared as if a veil had been lifted. Without notice the miles of bland flatness gave way to an impressive hill that provided a breathtaking view of the city below. Sitting in a valley and ringed with mountains it was a beautiful mixture of nature and man. At first blush Martin understood why this place held Adam, and he had to retract his earlier thoughts on American naming conventions. Before him, spread far and wide, were the evergreens that were nature's kiss upon the city.

It was even better the closer they moved towards the city. Adam pulled off the freeway at the first off-ramp marked "Maple Street Bridge." He turned before they crossed the bridge itself, heading instead towards a populated area not far from the freeway. A lettered wooden sign posted on the grassy knoll that served as the official entrance to the historic neighborhood declared the area, "Browne's Addition established 1882." Martin guessed it was a block and half past the entrance sign to Adam's hundred-year-old three-story beauty. It seemed to fit Adam, who pulled into a narrow driveway that wasn't designed for this century's crop of SUVs. That fact didn't faze him as he maneuvered the big vehicle alongside the house pulling in front of a restored carriage house. Adam hit the garage door opener on the console and the big door of the carriage house slid open to reveal a large open area with plenty of room for the Tahoe.

Adam insisted on carrying Martin's suitcase in from the garage and deposited it at the bottom of the staircase. He motioned for Martin to follow him into the study that was off to the right of the main room and hidden behind two polished wooden doors. It didn't escape his notice that an eagle feather was mounted over the door casing.

Inside was the heartbeat of the house. Three computers glowed with light, one on a corner desk configuration and two on a long skinny table that was set up against a wall hosting a large and much cluttered corkboard. Push pins in many different colors held up an array of printed research with varying dates and locations, newspaper clippings and photographs. A rich leather sofa was angled in one corner and like the theme of the corkboard was covered with files, papers and notebooks. It seemed like a random jumble of information tossed aside, as if Adam was in a perpetual hurry.

Martin knew better.

A single ergonomic desk chair sat before the main computer with two smaller versions pushed up against the far wall. Life throbbed in this room. Martin's skin tingled as he stood one foot inside the doorway, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. What most people never quite realized was that energy stayed in a place, whether it was in the soil, the trees, or the painted walls of a house. It lingered, giving every house a spirit life that a few, like Martin, had the ability to feel in full force. It was alive and kicking here.

Slipping off the jacket he'd had on since he'd left London almost twenty-four hours ago, he was grateful for the small shift in weight off his shoulders. Rolling his head first left then right, the pops were so loud he'd be surprised if Adam couldn't hear them. By all rights he should be tired except he wasn't. From the moment he'd stepped foot inside this room all the fatigue that had been pushing against his old bones and weary eyes fled, replaced by a renewed energy and purpose. All he wanted to do now was sit down and get started. There was no time to waste. Then again, there never was.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, well, well." Amanda looked around the room lit by the lantern in her hand. "What have we here?"

Moving the lantern from right to left, the light trailed from empty space to a black coffin positioned on risers pretty much smack dab in the middle of the room. Dust mites danced in the beam of her light; each step she took ratcheting up the frenzy of the dance a little more. She stopped a few feet away from what had once been a beautiful and shiny bed of death, now clouded by decades of dust. Unlike the caskets lining the halls of the crypt, this one was different.

It didn't take a brain surgeon to figure out this was a special room, translating to whoever was in the coffin had to have been someone very special as well. The work that had gone into the coffin, not to mention the artwork on the outside of the door, was intriguing.

Particularly when considering the lengths that had been taken to avoid discovery of the place. But why?

Someone had taken a great deal of time and effort to build the crypt then to conceal its existence for God only knew how long. Outside the door were the treasures that were important enough to hide away, to protect and horde. In this room, without any treasures or adornment of any kind, was one very dead body. Or at least she guessed there was a dead body in the coffin, it wasn't like she'd looked.

A thrill ran up her back at the idea. She, the devil's own as one of the newspaper reporters had dubbed her, stumbling across an old mystery and intriguing secret that hadn't meant to be found. Seemed appropriate somehow. But what the hell, whoever was in the coffin didn't matter so much as the fact that she now had a place to go and no one would be able to bother her. It was exciting.

Flashing the light around the room she decided it had to be about twelve by twelve. With the coffin pushed to the side, some pillows and candles brought in, it could be cozy in a gothic sort of way and if nothing else thrilling in a "been deprived of sex too long" kind of way. Oh, yes indeed, she envisioned herself making love to some sweet little thing in this hideaway. Excitement came in any manner of macabre packages. That was what made it all the more enthralling.

Amanda ran a finger across the coffin top, leaving a trail in the brown dust that revealed a shiny surface beneath. The wood underneath her fingertip was silken to the touch, hiding under the years of accumulated dirt a coffin made for a queen. Who was the mystery person bundled into such a gorgeous piece of work, then left to rot in the dungeon of an obscure church? It would be easier if she had more light and it might not be a bad idea to wait until she did. Then again, deferred gratification never had been her style, and there was no sense in starting new behaviors now. She wanted to meet the mystery tenant right now.

Holding the lantern under her chin Amanda used both hands to push at the top. It was heavier than she anticipated and not attached by the hinges she had expected. Tucking the lantern into her jeans pocket she put all her weight into pushing the lid off the coffin. It took three hefty pushes before it gave way, sliding with a thunderous bang to the dirty floor.

She got her breath and wiped the dust from her hands onto the sides of her jeans before bringing the lantern back up. Holding the light high, she trained the beam inside the coffin. As the light illuminated the interior, giving a ghost-like glow to the ancient satin lining, Amanda gasped and stumbled back, tripping over her own feet.

\* \* \* \* \*

It hit her while she was sitting at the kitchen table making notes for the house sitter. Cat slid like warm Jell-O from her chair onto the floor. Pinpricks of light flashed before her eyes, spirals of pain flowing from inside her head to the backs of her eyes. Laying flat on her

back she should have been seeing the ceiling, instead a curtain of red flowed before her eyes, fluid and moving, a deep crimson wave that blotted out everything else. A metallic taste bit into her mouth making her nose wrinkle in disgust. A roar flooded her ears.

Then she heard the laughter.

“Oh, my God,” she managed to spit out at the same time she put her hands down on each side of her hips so she could push herself up to a sitting position. Even upright it took a few seconds before her vision cleared enough that the details of the kitchen came back into focus. She sat in the middle of the floor staring into nothing, trying to make some sense out of what had just happened. She knew she looked ridiculous, sitting with her legs stretched out on the tile like a beached whale only she was too stunned to move. She was accustomed to visions; she’d had them for as long as she could remember. This was different. It was pain, color and stench, all rolled up together in a creepy mixture. Even the taste lingered in her mouth. What the hell was that about?

“Oh, my God,” she said again, the words bouncing around the room.

At the back door, Falco butted against the closed storm door, his hyper senses tuned into the distress of Cat’s body. He was an ass but he was one intuitive ass. He would let nothing, either in this dimension or another, hurt her.

“Falco, stop.” She turned her head towards the door. “I’m all right.”

His battering stopped as he gazed at her with intense black eyes through the glass of the door. His calculating gaze focused on her face.

“I’m all right,” she repeated.

He sat down and continued to stare, his square black head pointed right at her.

Ignoring Falco, she concentrated on what had just happened. Cat couldn’t quite get over how strong the feeling was. She’d been fighting visions or warnings her entire life but this was different. She tried to remember if she’d had one this intense before and came up blank. Nothing that she could remember had ever been this powerful. *It was going to be bad*, was the single phrase that kept rolling through her mind over and over again like a CD stuck on a scratch.

Dear Martin had predicted way back in the beginning that a day would come when she’d find herself face to face with her true nemesis. Since then, if he’d told her once, he’d told her the same thing a hundred times. It was the Ying and Yang philosophy, or for every action there’s a reaction law. In many ways that particular concept was hard to comprehend, even given all that she’d learned to accept in the last few years. The crux of the idea, at least according to Martin, was that each of the hunters came into their powers in another life and in another time. Because of that initial battle, each was linked for eternity to that original demon, that one true evil that would come back for each hunter and must be defeated through a million lifetimes. Each time it arose, she must defeat it -- whatever *it* turned out to be.

She'd tried to wrap her mind around Martin's theory as she worked each hunt. Until now she hadn't been able to do it. The demons had been too far removed to feel a connection. Just your basic bloodsuckers, soul stealers, and devils. Cat wasn't convinced what she was feeling now was any different in that respect. Granted, this was different but was it different enough to be that evil soul mate Martin predicted she would find? It could be her nemesis and then again it could be just another pain-in-the-ass out to destroy good people. What did frighten her about what she was feeling was that she had yet to encounter an instance where Martin wasn't correct. That alone scared the crap out of her. It could be the Ying to her Yang and truth be told, she wasn't sure she was up to a task that enormous.

In the other room the ping of her computer was alerting her to incoming email. The bell chime sound propelled her up and off the floor. The second she was upright, dizziness pushed at her eyes, residuals of the vision still rattling around inside her head. Blinking hard, she gave it a few seconds to pass before she moved. Walking out of the kitchen Cat rubbed at the throbbing in her temples. Falco jumped up, his face pressed to the glass of the door the minute she'd gone upright and his eyes still followed her from the other side of the door. One of these days the dog was going to figure out how to open that door. Once more she looked at Falco and repeated, "I'm okay."

He still wasn't buying what she was trying to sell. Anyone who said dogs were dumb needed to have their own IQ checked.

At her desk she tapped the key to open the newest email and smiled a little. Martin was just across the border in Washington State. On the east side rather than closer her way in Seattle or Tacoma, but close just the same. It should surprise her. It didn't.

His nearness might explain why her reaction was strong. Spokane was only about a nine-hour drive from Vancouver, give or take. Sometimes traffic was a snap and other times the damn freeway slowed to a crawl if not a full-out stop, leaving her to twiddle her thumbs for an hour or two. She was anxious to get started. Thank goodness her favorite house sitter was on her way. Cat could almost smell the border. It was any easy flight into Spokane that would save quite a bit of time as well as wear and tear on her butt except she wanted her car within easy reach in case she needed to move in a flash. There were times when the wait at the border was a pain and passports were pretty much a necessity these days. Still, driving was the option that appealed to her at the moment.

She'd like to say that it was for mobility in the case of an out and out battle, chasing down evil and all. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, depending upon how she looked at it, there was a little more to it than that. In fact, there was about six feet six inches of all male, all testosterone to it, in the form of one Spokane Indian named Adam Bell.

Adam was great. No, scratch that, he was fabulous and that was the problem. He was the kind of intriguing and insightful man who shook her right down to the bottom of her little black heart. Five years ago her life before had been a roller coaster ride with huge ups and hell-like lows. Finding the Anima Mundi had helped to level it out. It gave her focus and

purpose, explaining her life and the strange gifts in such a way as to make her feel centered for the first time ever. And it was working great until about six months ago when she and Adam were called to Romania.

She'd known of Adam; everyone in Anima Mundi knew of him. Despite their relative geographic closeness, Cat hadn't seen him before, let alone worked with him.

Or touched him.

Or kissed him.

Romania turned out to be quite a trip in more ways than one. Killing a vampire old enough that she couldn't even begin to imagine when he first came into the world was an experience that defied any rational explanation. She had been flying high on adrenaline after that kill and Adam had been there to share the triumph. Even today she couldn't isolate the moment their working relationship shifted into something different. All she knew for sure was that falling in bed with Adam had put a whole new spin on everything. And she did mean everything.

If it had just been the lovemaking, that alone would have been quite a novel experience for Cat. There had been more. She'd seen Adam shift from a striking man into a magnificent wolf, the silver of his fur catching the moonlight. His wolf eyes had held hers and something had passed between them that she was still trying to decipher. Bottom line was it had been unforgettable.

What was more of a mystery to her was how she'd reacted to that odd bit of revelation. Adam's transformation from man to wolf hadn't scared her, and it hadn't even come close to pushing her away. In fact, if anything, it made her want him even more. It had been the most incredible thing she'd ever witnessed and that was saying a lot. Top that off by making love with him, the sex wild and raw, like the wolf she'd seen him become and bam, she'd had the experience of a lifetime.

There wasn't so much as an ounce of shape shifter in her skinny body, but the moment he'd touched her, like the wolf that mated for life, she sensed a connection that went deeper than their skin. It was as if she'd found her soul mate and that had scared the hell out of her. She could face down evil, just not her own insecurities.

True to form she ran and had been hiding ever since. It had been a stupid move, not to mention childish. But the damage had been done the minute she'd stepped on the plane heading home. She couldn't undo what she'd done and so she opted for hiding. The chicken still lived.

Now Martin's e-mail was forcing her out of the safe comfortable nest and back into the fray, complete with a man who made her want to drop her clothes and run for the bedroom the minute she saw him. What a way to hold on to her oh-so-precious dignity. She had to remind herself that the reality was that there was a job to do and sooner or later she was bound to come face to face with Adam again. She didn't doubt that he thought her a fool or even the kind of woman with a fondness for one-night stands, that being the polar opposite

of her true nature. She couldn't fault him if he did think the worst of her. She had set him up to believe that very thing, and she had to live with the consequences of her own actions. She only wished she didn't still feel like her heart would burst.

She only wished she didn't want him so much.



## Chapter Four

Amanda dropped the lantern and clapped both hands over her mouth stifling the screams that were rising in her throat. She willed her breathing to calm and tilting her head towards the open door, listened until she was sure there were no footsteps heading her way.

After what seemed like an hour in the dead silence, she leaned down and picked up the lantern, grateful it hadn't broken in the drop. She moved back towards the open coffin caution keeping her steps slow and easy. What she'd seen inside that glossy black box didn't make sense.

Her eyes narrowed as she moved the light from top to bottom again and again. It didn't matter where she moved the light, the evidence remained the same -- the woman's body had not decomposed; it looked as though she had died yesterday. The impossibility of that scenario didn't escape her. Who knew the last time this room had been entered, let alone how many years it had been since the coffin had been placed here. The untouched nature of the room and the coffin told her it was no time in the recent past.

Moving the beam away from the serene face, she trained it on the dress, a style that Amanda couldn't place. It had to be from a period long before the settling of the Pacific Northwest, suggesting that the dress had been brought in from somewhere else. Europe maybe? But the real question was why? Why was this woman so well preserved, and why was she dressed like a medieval royal? Better yet, why was her body hidden away instead of in a cemetery?

Amanda loved mystery.

Curiosity was stronger than fear and she reached in to touch the magnificent black velvet that still appeared silken soft. As her fingers brushed the fabric it crumbled into a fine powder, falling around the body in a dark grainy halo. She yanked her hand back, holding it close to her chest, her fingers tingling and her breath coming in short, quick bursts. By all

rights she should back out of the room and head straight for the light of day, except it wasn't that easy. There was something about this woman that made her hand drift from her own body and back towards the corpse. Crazy as it seemed she wanted to touch the woman's skin and to feel the texture of the long white hair that looked as soft as a package of new cotton balls. Hesitant after the crumbling fabric, she stood, her hand suspended over the body for long minutes, not frightened or appalled as she should be, only curious. A full five minutes of inaction came to an end when the curiosity got the better of her. Leaning closer her fingers touched the white skin of the woman's hand.

The temptation was overpowering. No, she decided, that wasn't it. It wasn't temptation -- it was need. The need to touch was great enough that even her head dropped towards the reclining figure. The moment her fingers came into contact with the body a shock ripped up her arm, causing her heart to race as if she was in the throes of congestive heart failure. Once again the urge to shriek rose but the sound stuck in her throat. Her mind was screaming at her to back away. She didn't. Amanda found herself frozen in place with her hand still on the icy white flesh.

It couldn't be her imagination, could it? It seemed real; it felt real when the crinkled, cold fingers of the corpse curled around hers with a strength that kept Amanda from pulling her hand free. Still stunned, Amada watched in silence while the lifeless body rose in the coffin, eyelids opening to reveal blue eyes the same mysterious and heart-stopping shade as her own.

\* \* \* \* \*

Martin stretched his arms above his head and yawned. He'd spent the last three hours on the computer while Adam dug through piles of old books and copies of ancient manuscripts. It was always a guessing game, at least in the beginning. They didn't appear to be making much ground and were still in the territory of guessing. It could be frustrating.

There were times when he wished he could return to his life before the Anima Mundi, to the days he looked at the world through those proverbial rose-colored glasses. There was a time when he believed that evil could be destroyed with little more than a wing and a prayer. It had been a simpler time. Ignorance tended to be that way.

It seemed like centuries ago that his mother had dressed him in a fine wool jacket, crisp white shirt and striped tie and walked with him to the elegant old church week after week. He'd learned his verses, uttered his prayers and tried to ignore the visions that haunted not just his slumber but his waking hours as well. He'd tried hard to believe that faith, strong and true, would lead him through a peaceful and productive life. Of course he'd learned that faith alone was not enough and now he'd come too far over to the other side to return to that simpler time. Today, he was old, sick and more than anything, knew too much. Going forward didn't promise much and going back was impossible.

He closed his eyes and tried to catch the essence of what was happening in this place. Evil was such a fluid thing that refused to give up the ground in which it took a deep and rooted hold. It wasn't just the living breathing flesh that harbored the evil; it went much deeper than that. Evil lived in the mind and the flesh; it lived in the bones and the dust; it lived in the essence of a vessel ripe for its harbor. Most frightening thing of all, at least in his mind, was to what lengths evil would go to preserve itself. Given protection, it could lie dormant for hundreds, even thousands of years waiting for the right time, place and host to give it breath and substance. It waited for the precise moment it would be granted entrance back into the world. He had seen it time and time again. Buried away in a secret room, a hidden crypt or a guarded tomb, it waited dormant and resting. Its patience was beyond human understanding as it waited for its chance to roam the earth once again.

"You feeling all right?" Adam's voice cut into Martin's whirling thoughts.

He opened his eyes and looked over at the other man. "As fine as can be expected."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm old."

Adam leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. His long black braids hung over the back of the chair and a pair of reading glasses was perched on the top of his head. "Explanation but not an excuse."

"Hell of an excuse in my book."

"My great-grandfather turned one hundred last year. He continues to garden and is an honored member of the tribal council."

"Your point, young man?"

Adam dropped his feet to the floor and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "My point is, something besides age is making you look as though the weight of the world rests on your shoulders."

He couldn't argue with that. Members of the Order of Anima Mundi spent their lives protecting against the rise of evil, keeping it from multiplying and impeding it in its attempt to rule the world with darkness and chaos. It was a never-ending battle that often left him feeling weak and dispirited not to mention discouraged and exhausted. He did feel as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders alone far more than he should.

Yet each time a new hunter came onboard, fresh hope filled his heart. There were those who were good, kind, and gifted in the world. There were even enough of them to keep the fight from being lost. It was often a tiresome game, but if he were to sit back and give it serious thought, he couldn't imagine doing anything else with his life. As the years marched by, his life before the Order was becoming nothing more than a shadowy and distant whisper of a memory.

True, the sands of time were running with speed though his hourglass of life. He was no longer the young man he'd been when the Order called him into service. He'd been naïve

and happy as he'd gone about his studies at University. He'd had a beautiful girlfriend he'd thought he would marry and a perky little spaniel named Clive who followed him everywhere. Then he'd been strong, tall and vital, just as Adam was now. That was before Marta and Clive both died, his hair turned white, his knees cracked each time he rose, and his energy fled without warning. Before the cancer wrapped its spiderlike webs around his pancreas, its grip tight and unrelenting. "Borrowed time" was the phrase that kept running through his mind.

He pushed himself up from the chair and gave Adam a weak smile. "It just might be on my shoulders," he said as he patted Adam on the shoulder.

"First rule of the Order," Adam responded, his eyes narrowing. "It's never personal."

"I'm afraid it might be this time."

"First rule," Adam repeated his eyes narrowing.

Martin had told no one that this could be his last hunt. The sense of urgency that pushed him now was as much a result of the gut instinct that horror had to be stopped before it could take root as his own rush against time. In the corners of his eyes he could just catch the black curtain of death drawing together with something familiar whispering behind it. He couldn't quite put a finger to whom or what it was only that he had to stop it before it shut out the light.

"Sometimes," Martin returned Adam's steady gaze. "Rules have to be broken."

## Chapter Five

Elizabeth opened her eyes and prepared to take stock of her latest body. The lantern had gone out when Amanda had dropped it to the floor so that now the room was in total darkness. She couldn't even make out the frame of the door or the coffin. The dankness of a room closed too long without movement or life to give it the freshness it needed assailed her nose. It didn't matter though, not the darkness or the smell. She concentrated instead on the buzzing in her body that was very close to orgasmic. She knew it well, had felt it a dozen times over and it meant only one thing. She was alive again.

In the darkness she ran a hand down her face, over her breasts and across her belly. The skin was soft and supple, the breasts full and warm, the belly with just enough rise to be attractive but not fat. Wonderful and best of all, it was hers.

Bending down, Elizabeth felt around on the floor until she located the lantern and then tried the switch. It burst to life, the light once again casting a yellow glow into the dank old room and creating shadows that danced on the walls the moment she moved. Her casket sat in the middle of the room and she stared at it, her thoughts on the lovely young woman who had just given up her flesh.

"A bright one," she said aloud in the English that was natural in the body that she now claimed as her own. "Yes, Amanda, you were very bright, and I thank you for that."

Inside her head the world of Amanda flashed by like a speeding train filling Elizabeth with all the knowledge her host possessed and preparing her to enter the world of the twenty-first century. She smiled as she saw the possibilities that this century offered an adventurous soul like her. Amanda had been a very bad girl, Elizabeth realized, and that made her warm all over.

Elizabeth leaned towards the coffin that had been her home for a mere fifty years this time. It had served her well, this beautifully crafted bed of rich mahogany, decorated with

gold medallions and lined with the finest of fabrics. How many lifetimes had she slept away in its pillowed satin with the scent of lavender lingering for decades? She was beginning to lose count, not that it mattered in the big picture. They could attempt to destroy her once more, and they would fail because she'd just come back again. There was always another open door and all she had to do was walk through. It never failed. Souls like Amanda would find her regardless of how long she slept. The kiss of life was her key to immortality.

The blood was rushing through her veins and anticipation began building in her body. It was time to emerge from the darkness and face the sunshine. Eternity was once again hers for the taking.

\* \* \* \* \*

The long drive didn't go far towards soothing Cat's nerves. On one hand, there was an overpowering urge to get to Spokane as quickly as possible. Something strong was pulling at her heart and mind, pressing her to reach the city by the mighty falls. It was out there coming awake, stretching its arms and flexing its muscle. It was waiting to kill, and it was waiting for her.

On the other hand, she was reluctant to walk into the lion's den, or rather the wolf's den. What was she going to say? *Hi? Sorry? How are you? Make love to me?*

What?

She'd rehearsed a hundred things out loud while driving along I-90 and up through Snoqualmie Pass. By the time she hit the feedlots in Ellensburg her speech was as putrid as the manure filled pastures. By the time the tumbleweeds blowing across the road at Vantage smacked the side of the Escalade, she had to admit the truth. She had nothing. Until the pine trees started sprinkling the landscape at the Spokane County line she was convinced that the best course of action would be to just shoot herself and get it over with. She might be able to stake a vampire but she sucked at facing up to a lover she'd done wrong.

It might help if she'd had some experience on the playing field. Casual sex was not her thing. Never had been and never would be. Without emotion involved what was the point? At least that was the way she thought about it. That was all fine and dandy except that it made this situation even more complicated. She hadn't jumped in bed with Adam any more casually than she had her few other lovers.

The scene outside the window changed as she drove but the words were not as fluid as the landscape. Even as gray as she felt, she kept searching and hoping the right words would pop into her head by the time she got there.

How could she find polite words to excuse herself after she'd made an unqualified fool of herself? Adam was a great guy, a proud Spokane Indian, a decorated marine, a former police detective, and now a respected attorney. He'd done it all, including becoming a hunter who had spent the last ten years fighting the dark forces pervading the world with silent and

deadly intent. He'd been keeping the unsuspecting safe without acknowledgment or reward. Yeah, this was the guy she had run out on when the worst thing he'd done was keep her alive and then make to love to her so thoroughly that it took weeks for her heart not to race every time she thought about it. Some kind of bad guy all right.

The dark of night wrapped the city in a shroud, the streets quiet as the wee hours of morning settled in. She found her way to the house without much trouble, a full moon lighting the way. She liked the irony of a full moon rising. It was creepy and, if she gave it much thought, stereotypical, but at the same time it gave her the illusion of power. Right now she could use all the power she could get, illusory or not.

The darkness didn't diminish the beauty of the house. She wasn't sure what she was expecting she just knew it wasn't old and elegant. Perhaps an apartment or a tasteful spec house in the suburbs? It was not this late-nineteenth-century house with wide front steps and a wrap-around porch. Green grass flowed down the slight incline from the base of the porch to the sidewalk next to where she parked and tiny lights glowed at the base of the tidy shrubs.

She sat staring at the house without moving, her nerves stretched like piano wire. Even the night air seemed to spark, as if it were picking up static electricity from her breath. She could sit in the car until the morning light pondering what to do about both the hunt and Adam. She might too, except that the lights were on in the house and Adam's imposing frame had been filling the doorway since moments after her car had pulled up to the curb. She should have known he'd be watching for her. It made sense for a host of reasons. What didn't make sense was sitting here in the street like a teenager coming in after curfew and too afraid to face an angry parent.

If the decision were hers alone, Cat would have turned tail and raced back to British Columbia. Instead she slid out of the driver's seat and pushed herself up the green mile to where Adam stood watching. It didn't have anything to do with the embarrassment that burned in her cheeks or even what Adam thought of her. It boiled down to something simpler than that. She was worried about what Martin would think of her if he knew what she'd done.

Oh, hell, who was she kidding? Martin knew. He knew everything about all of them. The chance he didn't was pretty much slim to none, meaning that all she could do now was get it over with. She didn't want to disappoint him any more than she already had with her professional lapse.

"Catherine."

His voice was deep, rich, and full of music, sending ripples up her arms. That single word was like a warm blanket wrapping around her shoulders. She loved the sound of his voice, good, bad, or even ugly. She'd heard it turn menacing, a tone that could turn even the hardy to ice, and damned if that didn't do it for her, too. There wasn't a thing about him that didn't set her on fire and that was what had confused her so much in Romania. She hadn't

come up against that before, and she didn't know what to do with it. That was one of the reasons why she had run away. She had to deal with the world's problems head on; her own, well that was a different story.

She didn't know why she did it but the moment she stopped in front of him, she reached up and touched the long scar on his face. Her words came without thought. "I'm sorry."

So much for all the beautiful speeches she'd struggled with on the way to Spokane. Bottom line was she sucked at personal relationships and all the little niceties that came along with them like apologies for poor post-sex etiquette. Even given that level of self-realization she didn't look away from Adam's beautiful, serious face. Being near him again made her want to touch him.

Adam nodded and took her hand in his, pulling it close to his broad chest. His eyes searched her face before he leaned close and touched his lips to hers in a deep, soulful kiss. His tongue flicked against hers, sending a fire to roar through her body. Her free hand came up and pulled his head closer. It was like she wanted to be one with him right there on the porch. After a moment, he broke the passionate kiss and straightened back up. Still as serious as ever, it seemed to her that just a hint of fire danced in his eyes.

"Come in." He tugged on her hand.

His easy way and inner strength calmed her as much as the beautiful house. Her body was still on fire, the touch of his lips igniting the kind of craving a person never got over and yet she was calm at the same time. There was some intangible quality about the man that soothed the beast inside her. She didn't get it and right now didn't care. She decided it was a better idea to just go with the flow. It sure seemed to be working better than any of the lame speeches she'd come up with during the drive.

Looking around she was impressed. The colors and the comfort were put together in a way that didn't surprise her. Adam had an inner source of strength that spoke of harmony with himself and his surroundings. In the same way he sensed evil, he restored harmony in a disharmonious world. It was just as often Adam who made the calls to her counterparts, knowing what hunter was needed for any given chase.

Martin had the sight too, and she guessed she'd known since the first time she'd met Adam that he was bound to take Martin's place someday as the leader of Anima Mundi. It was at this moment though that she understood how important Adam was not only to her but to all of them. Greatness came in the least expected places. She realized at the same time that they were alone.

"Martin?"

Adam put a finger to his lips. "Sleeping. He had a long flight from London and then we worked for a few hours after he landed here."

"So we're down here all alone?"



A tiny smile pulled up the corners of his mouth as he turned to pull her close. That fire was definitely in his eyes.

“Yes.”

## Chapter Six

It hadn't taken long to take stock of her new surroundings. In some ways it reminded her of the ordeal in her first life. Amanda was being imprisoned just as Elizabeth had been. Rather than the stone and mortar prison of Elizabeth's castle room, Amanda's was built of prying eyes and pious hypocrites. Elizabeth understood hypocrisy better than most. There was a reason Amanda had been sent to her.

Tonight things were going to be different. Amanda had been resigned to denial, to waiting through her period of confinement before she reclaimed the pleasures that belonged to her. That was fine for Amanda. Elizabeth had no intention of waiting for anything. She'd been in that box for five decades and that was five decades too long. If that damnable man hadn't stumbled on her that night, she'd still be taking her pleasures where and when she wanted. He'd ruined a good lifetime, condemning her once again to what seemed at times to be an endless wait.

But that was before this afternoon's kiss. Everything was different now. The world was hers once more, and she had precious time to make up for. The immediate task was maintaining her power and beauty. It carried a price she was more than willing to pay. In fact she delighted in it. Some called her evil for what she had to do for her treasures and they were mistaken. She'd never been evil, only driven. Her needs were critical and the universe had given her the opportunity to fulfill them. The forces of the universe created the opportunity; she availed herself. Evil never played into it.

At the moment she had to put her house in order so to speak. The face of the man lingered in her mind even as she planned her night's adventures. If he still lived, she would find the devil that had imprisoned her at the height of her glory and he would pay. For the moment, however, her needs took precedence over anything else including revenge.

There was work to do first. This room must be put in order and prepared for the night. By rights there should be staff to do her bidding. A woman of her birthright did not clean. The unfortunate part of her return was it would take time to gather the proper staff leaving her alone. There was no remedy for that at the moment. She looked down at her hands and sighed; she would have to do the work herself.

More time had passed than she realized and the afternoon was fading when she emerged a final time from the depths of the crypt. The church itself was quiet but then it was a Thursday afternoon and one of the slowest days around the church. Things would pick up tomorrow and through the weekend but today belonged to her.

Surveying her handiwork, Elizabeth smiled. Pillows, blankets, and candles made a cozy nest of the crypt or at least as cozy as one could expect a crypt to be. The only thing missing was a nice bottle of wine. After the long wait in the endless black nights in the casket she deserved at least that much. The sun was setting when she walked to the nearby grocery store and picked out a bottle of Robert Mondavi red. The glasses the store carried were cheap yet sturdy and perfect for tonight's party. Twilight had descended by the time she walked back to the church.

Unnoticed Elizabeth returned and stashed her sack of treasures under her bed. She stood in the kitchen and looked across the yard. The lights were on in Reverend John's rooms. He was a problem that would have to be dealt with. For tonight she was safe. Like every other man of religion she'd known through the years, he'd have his prayers to say and promises to make. There would be no time for her. That and Amanda's earlier rebuff would keep her safe.

As the night deepened it was a simple matter to slip out the backdoor and into the darkness unnoticed. It was going on midnight and few lights burned in the windows of the scattered, dreary houses she passed. It was quiet in this neighborhood but where she was heading, life was just getting started.

A mere half a mile away, men and women roamed conspicuously up and down the street, their business faces on. The stores lining the street were closed. The thick doors were bolted and windows were barred. The nine-to-fivers had long since headed off to suburbia. In their place were the men and women of the night. The purveyors of flesh littered the sidewalks once the streetlights pulsed to life and the action was in full swing when Elizabeth turned the corner.

Conversation and laughter rippled through the air. Elizabeth walked along, nodding to women here and there who were leaning against lamp poles and parking meters. She scanned their faces while searching for the right one. They were dressed in everything from short skirts and low cut tops to faded jeans topped by grubby t-shirts. The clothes didn't matter. The skin did, which was why she gave little notice to the men and boys who likewise gave little notice to her. Young as some of the boys were who were peddling their flesh, her needs ran in another direction.

Blemishes and obvious drug use turned her away. Elizabeth wasn't deterred. This wasn't her first walk around the block and the face she was searching for would be here hiding between the skeletal and the fat, the black eyes and open sores. The times changed, as did the cities and the cultures. The streetwalkers and their stories didn't. What that meant for her was that among the blighted she would find the one budding rose.

It didn't take long to spot her. A youngster, maybe nineteen or twenty, with ample breasts and pale skin, she was still young enough to be little marked by the ravages of street life. Her hair was long and wild, her jeans torn and the buttons of her shirt straining against her full, firm breasts. Her eyes had the look of a domestic cat let loose to fend for itself. Wild and alert but not quite feral.

Watching her with silent appraisal, Elizabeth noticed a striking resemblance to one of the servant girls of her homeland. Hundreds of years had passed, yet she recalled the look of wildness that had spoken to her strength and hot-blooded passion. Sweet then, it would be sweet now.

"Hi," Elizabeth said as she walked towards the girl.

"Hi." The girl ran the tip of her tongue over her red-painted lips.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed as she looked her up and down. Once again her instincts were perfect. Up close this girl was even prettier in a raw and unpampered way. Elizabeth reached over and touched the girl on her cheek. "A hundred?"

The girl's eyes lit up. "Yeah," she breathed. "Follow me."

"No."

The girl had started to turn towards the side street and stopped at Elizabeth's command, bringing her wild eyes back to search Elizabeth's face. "No?"

Elizabeth smiled, her blue eyes soft. She knew how trustworthy the blue eyes made her look. "I'd rather go to my place."

The girl hesitated. Elizabeth suspected her instincts were urging her not to go. She hesitated with her eyes locked on Elizabeth's, a battle raging behind the dark lashes.

"Ah, I don't, I don't usually go ..."

Elizabeth took her hand and caressed her fingers with a feather touch. "It'll be good, trust me. I'll even go another fifty if it's really good."

That was the magic that turned a frown into delight on her young face. "Okay, sure."

Elizabeth took her hand and walked her away from the busy street. The laughter and chatter faded behind them. The streetlights became fewer and farther between the more distance they put between the busy avenue and the quiet street of the church. Elizabeth talked softly, with the kind of reassurance reserved for those of noble birth. "What's your name?"

"Brandy."

“Really? Or is that just your street name?”

The girl’s throaty laugh spoke volumes. “My name’s really Susan, but when I came here I changed it to Brandy. Sounds more professional, don’t ya think?”

“I like Susan.”

Susan shrugged. “Yeah, whatever. You’re paying the bill after all.”

“Yes, I am.”

At the church Elizabeth picked up the flashlight she’d left by the door and ushered Susan inside.

“Okay this is getting way kinky,” Susan said in a stage whisper. “I never done nobody in a church before.” The last came out in a hushed giggle.

Elizabeth touched Susan’s cheek with her finger and sliding it to her mouth said, “Shh, we wouldn’t want to wake anyone, now would we?”

“Nope,” Susan agreed in a good-natured whisper.

Guiding Susan down into the old basement, Elizabeth moved the boxes away from the trap door, pulling the ring to open the invisible door. The dark mouth opened in welcome.

“Cool,” Susan said.

Taking her hand, Elizabeth guided her to the bottom of the steps. She then went back up the steps until she could reach the trap door to pull it closed. With the boxes stacked in front of the metal ring if anyone were to look into the old basement they wouldn’t notice the ring unless they walked near enough to the boxes to get a clear view. That wasn’t likely to happen any time soon so the two of them would have perfect solitude in the crypt.

Inside the far room Elizabeth settled Susan onto the blankets she’d arranged earlier and went about the task of lighting the candles and pouring the wine. Susan watched in rapt silence, seeming to be awed by the strange room. In the flickering light of the candles shadows glided on the walls in an erotic dance. The scent of lavender pushed out the suffocating stench of decay.

“Is that a coffin?”

“Yes.”

“Whoa, chick, I don’t know what your trip is, but bitch, it’s some kinky shit.”

Susan’s language brought the hackles up on Elizabeth’s neck. She pushed it down. She wouldn’t have to listen to her gutter talk much longer.

“But ...” Elizabeth let the word trail off.

Susan took the glass of wine Elizabeth offered her and laughed again. The sound was throaty with the telltale residue of a habitual tobacco user. She tipped the glass to her lips and drained the crimson fire in a single gulp. Her eyes glittered in the candlelight and one hand reached up to loosen the buttons on her shirt.

“Yeah, I know.” Susan ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. “You be paying the bill.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, all righty then. So it was going to be like that, was it? No matter which way she came at it there was no way in hell she could fight fire with fire right now. That being the case, what she really needed at this second was to pour ice water on his glowing embers before they had a chance to burst into a full-blown conflagration.

Deciding that distance was the better part of valor, Cat took a step away. “I owe you an apology.”

“No, you don’t.”

Damn him, it was hard to be strong when his eyes were alive with promise. He didn’t need to be so frigging agreeable, too. She was going to marshal her concentration and get through this.

“Adam,” she tried once more. “I ran out on you and that was chicken shit.” She was a smooth talker when she was under stress, wasn’t she?

His eyebrows raised a fraction before he replied. “No, I scared you into running, and that’s understandable given everything that happened between us. I’m an alpha and we tend to do that to people. It’s a common reaction when we choose our mate. I’ve seen it happen a dozen times. All you needed was time and here you are.”

It took a second for that one to sink in. She chose to ignore the latter part of his explanation, concentrating on the former. “A mate?”

The fire that had started to back off during his calm and, at least in his mind, rational explanation, began to dance in his eyes again. He was enjoying himself and at her expense. Payback was indeed a bitch.

“Do you think I would have made love to another Anima Mundi if it wasn’t for life?”

She even tried to explain that she’d been trying to figure that one out all the way over. She’d also given her best shot at figuring out what he’d been thinking about her in the six months since that little tryst. What he’d just said was about the last thing she’d counted on. Or it would have been the last thing if she had considered it all. Sure the moment they’d touched skin to skin the sensation had been overwhelming in that kick-the-breath-out-of-you kind of way. Afterward it had taken her a little while to make sense out of it and then she recognized it for what it was. It had come as one of those “oh, shit” moments that seemed to define her life more and more these days. She hadn’t stopped long enough to even consider whether or not it was mutual. She’d written it off to another case of her overreacting and had taken off at a dead sprint.

Standing in front of him all these months later, it stunned her to grasp the import of his words. It was apparent in a heartbeat that the time he’d given her to digest this was over.

Adam closed the gap between them with a single stride. Leaning down, his lips were soft and warm against her cheek. "Mine," he whispered while inhaling, his fingers curling into her hair.

God, he smelled good and felt wonderful. This was what pulled her in before when the danger was past and the full moon was looming. His power and presence, his heady male scent had brought her to place she'd never been before. Someplace she wanted to go again and again. But wait a minute, she was getting sidetracked. *Not a good idea.*

"Whoa." She put her hands against his chest, pushing back to create some distance between their bodies.

"Okay, I'll buy the part about not taking sex with another member lightly but mate for life? That's a bit of stretch, Adam. Besides, do you think maybe I can have a say in that?"

His comeback was as simple as it was firm. "Alphas pick their mates."

"Okay, okay, okay," she muttered, both annoyed and flattered all at the same time. "Maybe that's true in your werewolf, shape shifter, tribal, pack thing or whatever it is, but I'm just your basic Canadian psychic, eh, and it's a little more complicated than that in my world."

"I don't think so."

Her hours of practiced speeches had all been chock full of logic and so far nothing had gone even close to how she'd imagined. In fact, things were beginning to border on crazy. Granted, Adam was a guy who didn't waste words and he was holding true to form tonight. This whole mate for life thing he was throwing her way was taking things too far, regardless of how her body was reacting, traitor that it was. It was close to impossible to be logical and practical when she was fighting the urge to rip off all her clothes. Even so, she had to give it the old college try. There was much at stake here that involved many more than her and wolf boy.

"I think I've got some say in this," she tried again, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt.

He smiled that annoying smile that damn him, lit her on fire and said, "I think you did."

"Oh, hell," she muttered giving up. "Damn you, Adam."

The tiny space she'd forged out was gone the second he folded her into his arms. "We're already damned, Cat; we just have to make the best of it."

He was impossible like this. Who would guess the tall, dark professional he presented to the rest of the world could make a tough girl like her melt with nothing more than a sly smile? This she didn't need and yet there it was whether she liked it or not. She was in a heap of trouble.

Cupping his face in her hands she searched for any sign of doubt. "Are we, Adam? Are we really?"

“Damned.” He touched his lips to hers at the same time pressing his hips close.

His kiss was hot with six months of desire welling up and overflowing. Her pulse roared as she answered the press of his body to hers, remembering the beauty of that night half a year ago. It all came back in a flash of strong memory. She could feel the beast roaring within him, her own ardor rising to meet his. Nothing else existed in the moment except the two of them. Could it be that Adam was right? Were they soul mates? Was this thing between them forever?

Or was she just kidding herself?

She started to pull him to the sofa when it hit so hard again that she gasped, doubling over and grabbing her midsection. Bullets of white-hot pain shot through her body. A scream tore at her throat and she started to shake.

Her knees buckling, Adam caught her before she slammed to the floor.

“It’s happening.”

Once more a veil of red dropped before her eyes, blotting out the golden light of the living room and Adam’s reassuring face. She blinked and then looked around, noticing the flicker of candlelight that was making shadows jump on the walls of a small and dusky basement room.

*The room was shrouded in silence, and she didn’t need to look around to know she was alone. Her ragged breathing was the only sound that broke the uneasy silence. In the corner was a casket. Old and black, it sat upon risers like the bed of a fallen queen. Cat was surprised to see that inside there wasn’t a body resting in eternal slumber but rather a layer of dust so fine it looked like talcum powder. It wasn’t the dust that wrinkled her nose and narrowed her eyes; it was the taste that filled her mouth. The strong and metallic bitterness was disgusting and familiar. It was also overpowering. Her stomach lurched, and she tried not to vomit.*

*Cat turned on her heel towards the source of the smell. What she saw wrenched a sob from her throat while the bile rose again. She had been young and once perhaps even pretty.*

*Now she was dead.*



## Chapter Seven

Soon the ones who would serve her would tend to these details. For now she was forced to do what must be done alone. Menial perhaps, necessary just the same. It wasn't that she lacked the physical ability. On the contrary, strength flowed through her arms and legs with a vigor that defied normal explanation. The centuries had given her ample time to become accustomed to the power.

Walking through the inky darkness with the river flowing beside her in a soothing ribbon of sound and scent, Elizabeth carried the limp girl as if she was little more than an empty sack. That was closer to reality than not.

Pine needles crackled under her feet while a full moon shot silver bullets of light through the canopied path that wove from the church towards the western edges of the city. It seemed to her that the entire city slept, missing the magic of the night. Only the light tap tap tap of her shoes against the path broke the stillness of the night.

At last she stopped and surveyed the stretch of riverbank. Lowering her burden to a small rise beneath an impressive and mighty pine tree, Elizabeth straightened up and inhaled. Tendrils of silvery moss snaked down the massive tree trunk, reflecting the moonlight in a way that made it stand apart like a king in a forest of peasants. Elizabeth bent down again and grabbed the girl under her arms. She pulled her up until her back was against the moss-covered bark. Elizabeth took the girl's hands and arranged them in her lap, one on top of the other. She stood up and tilted her head studying her work. Though the girl's chin tipped down to meet her chest, it seemed to Elizabeth that she appeared to be sleeping. She took another step back and smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, my God,” Cat whispered through the tears that flowed down her white cheeks. The red curtain was fading and her eyes were once again able to focus on the man who held her in his arms. Her world was coming back.

“It has started.” She struggled to regain her bearings while at the same time holding his hands tight enough she was surprised she hadn’t broken one of his fingers.

Adam helped Cat to the sofa and settled beside her, an arm around her shoulders. She wanted to tell him what she’d seen. First she had to make sense of it in her own mind. It had been bizarre and surreal all at the same time. It was hard to know where to start.

“She’s dead,” she started by way of explanation. The horrible image of the dead girl was burned into her memory. She didn’t like what she’d seen and wished she could wipe it clean from her memory. Cat knew what she did was important even if she did want to wipe her memory clean of the horror each and every time it intruded on her life. Like she had every time in the last five years, she sucked it up and opened her mind instead. The devil was in the details, nobody had to tell her that. She needed to remember each and every one of them if they were to track and stop the devil that had committed this hideous deed.

“Start at the beginning.”

Cat leaned her head against the back of the sofa and closed her eyes again. Where was the beginning? It rolled together in a flash of blood and death that still had her stomach rolling in a way that let her know it wasn’t too late to puke.

“It’s a jumble.”

“All right then. Take it slow and tell me about the room,” Adam coaxed. “Maybe we can get a better feel for where the body is.”

She kept her eyes closed and focused on picturing the room in detail.

“Not much to tell. The room is old and dirty. Ancient looking with walls made from stones and the kind of bumpy concrete floor you find in buildings where the original floor was only dirt. You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yes, go on.”

“It is cold and damp. Dreadful. The smell of blood was so strong I knew she hadn’t been dead long.”

“She?”

A sob caught in Cat’s throat and her eyes opened. She turned her head to look at Adam. “She was young, Adam, not more than twenty if she was a day.”

“How was she killed?”

“She’d been ravaged, as though she’d been through a dog fight. There were bite marks and blood. She was tossed aside like a broken doll, only she was a flesh and blood woman. It was awful.”

Adam squeezed her hand and spoke in a low voice. "We can't help her but we need to find her. Concentrate again on the room."

"Old is the main thing that struck me about the room."

"That narrows down where we want to look because there aren't many areas in Spokane old enough to have stone basements so that's helpful."

Her body still buzzed even though the vivid images were fading to shadows. "Do you feel it too?" Cat didn't want to be the only one picking up on the charge of electricity that crackled through the air. She didn't want to be alone in this.

Adam squeezed her hand again. "I've felt the presence for the last several days. Not strong at first, it was more like a nagging headache I couldn't shake. The past twenty-four hours it's been almost suffocating. I called Martin at the first inkling and that's why he's upstairs asleep. We're all on the same sheet of music here. Martin sensed it before the plane even landed, which is why he paged you as soon as his feet hit the ground."

It was comforting to know they were each sensing the evil. What wasn't comforting was the sudden sense that maybe things between her and Adam weren't as hunky dory as he was letting on. Maybe Adam would have preferred that Martin call in Dambray from New Orleans or even Galena from Moscow. Galena was almost as strong as Cat when it came to seeing what others couldn't. *Almost* being the operative word. Of all the current members of the Anima Mundi, Cat seemed to have the corner on that one. In particular when it came to foreseeing things. Galena was quite good at seeing what had already happened, while Cat had the ability to see both what had happened and what was going to happen, barring any intervention. That's what the earlier vision had been all about. The curtain of red, she now realized, was blood, and lots of it. Still, some of the others could be just as effective hunters and not bring as much baggage along with them.

"Is Galena coming?"

His hands never let go of hers. "No."

Might as well push the issue a little; after all, what did she have to lose? "She might be better for this one."

"I don't think so."

"Look Adam ..."

He squeezed her hand hard enough to make her wince. This was not a touch of comfort. "I know where you're trying to head with this, and do you really want to talk about this more now?"

Whether he liked it or not, talking was a necessary evil that was going to have to happen. On the other hand, he did have a point; who said they had to do it right this second? She kind of liked that train of thought. She was having enough trouble trying to make sense of the complicated relationship under normal circumstances. They were in the middle of the hunt for an old and wicked killer. Throwing in the heart-to-heart over their personal

feelings? Adam was dead on, now was not the time. Her heart calmed at least a little as she looked up into his face.

“No.”

“Neither do I. What is between you and me will work itself out, but for the moment we have other more important things to do. Martin wants you for this hunt and whether you believe it or not, so do I. Whatever you think of me, Catherine, you are the most important person to have come into the Order in the last hundred years. I won’t let my personal feelings for you jeopardize that.”

“But the baggage,” she persisted. She just couldn’t quite let it go. Not a new problem for her.

Adam leaned away from her, his eyes on the ceiling. “Yours or mine? You want to go into the gay ex-wife, the shape-shifting or just the normal cultural things like me being an Indian and you your basic white girl?”

He returned his gaze to her on the last comment, giving her a wry smile.

Damn, but he could make her smile, even when she was trying with Herculean strength to be serious. The man did have a way with the few words he chose to share. She didn’t know who else could make those things sound less like baggage and more like stand-up.

“Hadn’t really thought of any of those, although yeah, I’m going to want to hear about them. Didn’t know about the gay ex-wife. That’s a story I don’t want to miss. But in my more typical narcissistic style I was thinking in terms of the trunk-size baggage I like to carry around with me.”

“I can deal with whatever you’ve got in that trunk, beautiful. I promise. Right now let’s take a raincheck on the psychoanalysis and deal with the very real psycho we’re here to track.”

Once again he was dead-on. There would be time enough after the hunt to put to rest all the secrets and open up the baggage for inspection. Adam was right, they would work it out one way or the other, only later rather than sooner.

“Does the Division know?” Rather than admit out loud that he was right yet again she decided to take a different path. It was past time to put the conversation back on neutral ground. That was easier for her to deal with than the roller coaster ride her emotions took the second she touched him.

Much had changed the world in the last few years. People like Cat weren’t quite the oddity they used to be. Somewhere along the line in the twenty-first century the concept of parapsychology had gotten the respect those with the gifts always believed it should. It wasn’t quite mainstream technology. Colleges and the universities weren’t busting loose to create departments of parapsychology, but it was around. The skills of people like her were being both acknowledged and utilized as never before. One step at a time was the way Cat

looked at it. A couple hundred years more and those with the paranormal gifts would be as mainstream as a schoolteacher or store clerk.

The Division was one of the responses to the new acceptance of the seen and unseen forces that created so much havoc and discontent in the world. Evil wove its way in and around the everyday lives of most people without their even being aware of its existence. The Division, like the Anima Mundi, did its best to stop that evil using whatever resources it could find. Cat and her counterparts had been working with the federal agency for the past decade. The Anima Mundi tended to be the proactive private side while the Division was the reactive federal group. The difference between the two groups was in both method and tools.

Cat's group used every means at their disposal, both their God-given talents and any man-made weapons that came in handy. If they could, they tried to stay within the law. If what they needed to do fell outside the boundaries of the law then so be it. They didn't stop to question whether it was legal or not. What needed to be done was. The feds didn't quite have that latitude or freedom or expression.

"I called Hank the minute I first knew it was stirring," Adam told her. "Either Hank or one of his people will keep in touch."

"Do they have anything?"

"It's been business as usual around here. The typical drug murders and domestic violence you would expect to find. No new serial killers and odd occurrences that would point to the supernatural element."

"You would think he would show his hand."

"You know as well as I do they don't play by the rules."

"Screw the rules, I want to kick ass. You didn't see what I did."

"I won't argue the point with you, Cat."

Cat shrugged and tried to relax. "I know, I know. There's nowhere to go so we wait."

"Yes and no. Martin and I spent all evening searching the database, trying to trace if any suspicious remains might have been relocated here in the west. We haven't stumbled on any promising leads yet, but I haven't given up. It's out there and we'll find it."

"The coffin," she blurted out when she realized she'd forgotten to share an important detail with Adam. "There's a coffin in the room."

"You said that earlier."

"That's not the important part."

"You also said there were no remains in it."

"No, Adam, I said it was covered with a layer of fine powder or dust. It occurred to me that the dust crap has to be the remains of one of them and all we have to do is figure out which one."

The Order discovered long ago that evil remained even after the so-called death of a person. Some could retain their bodies, like the undead and yes, vampires did exist. For many others, the pure evil ones like Adolph Hitler or Ted Bundy or John Gacy, the body faded while the essence of their evil lingered. It waited for someone, the right someone to carry it back into the light to wreak havoc and malevolence. Evil recognized itself and could wait for years, even centuries, for the perfect host. She'd seen it with her own eyes.

"Who died in Spokane or even Washington, for that matter? Who might have been tucked away in that room?"

Adam shook his head, standing up to touch her arm and draw her towards his office. "That's the million-dollar question, not to mention the first thing I checked. I was able to account for everyone who might be a candidate or at least an obvious candidate."

"Damn."

"Damn indeed."

"So now what?"

"We keep looking."

She frowned and stared at the computers, the flickering lights of the screensavers a kaleidoscope of colors. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course, I am." He threw an arm across her shoulders. "I'm always right."

"So you say," she replied absently her eyes still studying the dancing lights on the computers.

"I'm a doctor, remember?"

That got her attention. She turned away from the mesmerizing light show and looked at him, raising her eyebrows. "Yeah, yeah, a Ph.D. doesn't count."

\* \* \* \* \*

Much later, alone in the front room, Cat's footsteps were muffled by the thick oriental carpet, maybe that was why the buzzing in her body was at a low roar. It had to be the house with its century's worth of life that flowed through and around her so that she felt more alive than before. She put her palms against the cool glass of the large picture window and leaned her forehead against it. Streetlights winked at her through the paned glass windows while the scent of the lilacs sitting in the large vase on the table filled the room. It had to be the magic of the house that had her prowling alone in the wee morning hours, as wired as a lit-up Christmas tree sans caffeine. It had to be the house. What other explanation could there be?

The wind blew softly outside, making the bushes sway and the tree boughs bend. Despite being close to the core of the city, the streets were silent and the city itself seemed to be in a deep slumber. It was as if she were alone on the planet.

Alone with a killer she had a distinct feeling only she could stop.

## Chapter Eight

The next morning Adam was at the counter, leaning against it with an oversized ceramic mug in his hand, looking really good, even with a whooping three hours of sleep. Martin was seated at the table, his hands wrapped around a mug identical to the one Adam was holding. Her breath caught in her throat and not because sleep looked good on him. She stopped in the doorway and stood very still, her eyes focused first at his brow chakra, moving down to his throat and then his heart. Around Martin like a cocoon was a glow of light, white and flowing, like an early winter snowstorm.

Sure of what she was seeing, Cat brought her eyes to meet Martin's, an eyebrow raised.

"How long?"

He shrugged tilting his head towards his shoulder at the same time. Between his hands he turned the coffee mug around and around in slow circles. He looked away from Cat and towards the mug.

From his spot at the counter Adam looked first at Martin and his eyes narrowed as he looked at her face. "How long what?"

Cat moved from the doorway to take the chair next to Martin. Putting her hand over one of his she stopped the compulsive turning of the mug. She waited until he was ready to talk.

"What is going on between you two?" Adam asked, moving to sit at the table. "What am I missing?"

"Martin?" She ignored Adam, focusing instead on the older man.

His faded blue eyes were weary as he said, "Six months, give or take."

Adam was looking at both of them with narrowed eyes. "Is somebody going to explain the conversation to me or do I just get to guess? I'm not all that fond of playing third wheel."



She glanced up to include Adam. "Martin's dying." There wasn't a nice or easy way to put it. Death wrapped around her dear friend like a shrink-wrapped figurine.

"Excuse me?"

Martin's voice sounded old and tired. "Believe her, Adam, Catherine's powers of perception are not failing her. Pancreatic cancer is wrapping its ugly little tentacles around my internal organs. As the doctor put it, it's killing me from the inside out for lack of a more detailed explanation."

"Why in God's name didn't you tell me?"

"I would have."

"When? At the funeral?"

"Simmer down, mate." Martin chuckled without amusement. "It's not the end of the world. The end of my mortal existence perhaps, but the end of the world? Not bloody likely."

The tears started to well up in her eyes at that even though she understood what Martin meant. After all, when a man spent his lifetime hunting down monsters of one sort or another, not just killing them but destroying them for eternity, death took on another dimension. And Martin wasn't by any stretch of the imagination a young man. He was the most spry eighty-two year old she'd ever met, but he was still in his ninth decade of life, and it had not been a quiet life either.

Martin Ludlum had found himself inducted into the Order at barely twenty years old and at the top since he'd been in his mid-forties. After sixty-some years of hunting, it wasn't a big stretch to grasp why Martin viewed cancer as an annoying complication far more than a death sentence. That didn't make it any easier for Cat. She'd had a mere five years with Martin and that wasn't enough by a long stretch.

Not that her personal feelings made a bit of difference. The brutal truth was that for all who hunted, a death sentence was part of the deal the day they became Anima Mundi. There was one way in and one way out. They sold their souls just not to the devil.

Rubbing a hand across his eyes, Adam's face darkened though he said nothing. Cat wondered what was going through his mind.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

Martin touched her hand and smiled. "No child, my life is in the hands of a higher power."

Shaking his head Adam pushed back the chair he was sitting in and stood up. "You want some coffee?" he asked Cat.

She squeezed Martin's and then leaned back until her chair tipped on two back legs.

"Pardon me if I'm wrong, but am I or am I not in the great state of Washington, the espresso capital of the world? An espresso stand on every corner. Espresso running in the veins. Latte pal, I want a latte."

Adam gave her a look. "Should have stopped off in Seattle before you got here, missy. I serve coffee, black and strong. You want anything more, I'm sure you can find one of those corners with a stand somewhere downtown."

"Party pooper."

"Well every party's got to have one, baby. Now coffee or not?"

"Yeah, okay, plain is better than none, eh?"

"Keeps the brain buzzing."

His fingers brushed against hers as he handed her the mug. The corners of his mouth turned up so subtly that at first she wasn't sure she'd seen that ghost of a smile. Oh, yeah, she and Adam had some serious talking to do before she steered the Escalade up I-5 and back to Canada.

"If I might interrupt?"

Well, so much for being subtle. Of course, both of them should have known better. Martin was more skilled than she could ever hope to be. Sure, she could see the aura of death wrapped around him like a cloak, but that wasn't all that amazing. Any number of people with a little guidance and practice could possess enough power to see that. Except Adam. In his case, it was more because his strengths were elsewhere and he never had to put any effort into trying. Martin, on the other hand, could almost read thoughts. Sometimes it scared the crap out of her. Then again, there'd been more than once during the past five years when his ability to hone in on her had saved her butt. She hoped he had more than six months because to say she'd miss him was a giant understatement. Besides, who was going to cover her ass when she managed to get herself cornered?

"Good." He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. His intelligent gaze swept over both of them. "If we're done with the poor old Martin bit and the little dance you two seem to be doing, perhaps we should get down to the reason we're all here. Catherine," he focused on her, his eyes dark and serious. "Adam told me about the episode last night. Why don't you walk me through it?"

Talk, hell, she could do way better than that. "Hold my hands," Cat reached toward him. His hands felt thin and cool as if they were nothing more than parchment stretched over bones. "Let's see if you can pick up the images from me."

Settling back against the chair, their hands together, Cat started once more to relay last night's vision. She closed her eyes as she began and this time the images came free of the shadows. Crystal clear, complete with sounds and smells that filled her nose with the stench of death. It was like watching a brand new DVD. Her words narrated the images that flowed from her mind to his in the movie-like procession. He stepped inside her mind, reliving her nightmare and sharing it all.

To have another inside their head freaked some people out. Not Cat. In fact, it was just the opposite; she welcomed him there. Since childhood, she could be minding her own

business and then bam, she'd be hit with the vision of a horrible murder. A young woman had been brutalized to the point of death and she would see it all in good old Technicolor. Why on earth would she want to keep *that* to herself? She'd never be able to sleep if she kept those images bottled up inside her own little pea brain. Come to think of it, before Martin, she did go a little crazy every time something like that happened to her. There hadn't been a soul she could share it with, not even her best friend.

When she'd finished the narrative and the images faded away, Martin let go of her hands at the same time he pushed back in his chair. His eyes were narrowed and unfocused, a sign that he was trying to digest both what she'd told him and what she'd shown him.

"What do you think?" She asked after letting a few moments of silence slide by.

Adam was back leaning against the counter, watching them both. This wasn't his area of expertise. She suspected they'd be calling on him to put his specialty into action before it was all said and done, and she didn't mean either his law degree or that pee-h-dee he was so proud of. He put a good spin on the term *well educated*, but it was the wolf in him that Cat was certain they'd need to summon.

Martin's eyes cleared and he furrowed his brow at the same time he steepled his fingers under his chin.

"I agree with your assessment," he said. "The coffin is the key to who or what we're dealing with, and we're going to have to find out who the host was. The case that brought me into the Order was a dybbuk, and this has the same feel to it. I don't know the level of danger we're dealing with, but that room left an ugly taste in my mouth."

That wasn't a figure of speech either. Both last night and this morning, the telltale metallic taste of blood lingered in her mouth. That transferred to Martin the second she touched him. It was as if both of them had partaken in the savagery that had been visited upon that young woman. What was scary about that was it made her think whatever they were dealing with was very powerful. Sights and sounds were normal with her gift, taste was not.

Then there was the coffin. It wasn't new, far from it judging by the style and workmanship. Someone had put a great deal of effort into both making and hiding it, which led her to believe whoever had made that coffin home, had been very rich, very powerful, and very foul. And if she was right, then whomever the host turned out to be had to have started with a black heart in order to deliver that kind of malevolence back into the physical world. If they didn't find it, and soon, there was no telling how much destruction would be let loose. Judging by the savagery visited upon the body of the young girl in her vision, they didn't have a moment to spare.

Another thought struck her as she mulled it all over. She looked back up at Martin. "What's a dybbuk?"

He smiled as if he'd been waiting for that precise question. "The dybbuk is found most often in Jewish folklore. The down and dirty description is that it's a possessive spirit or a

transmigrated soul who's wandering because they were not given a proper burial at death. The defining issue for a dybbuk is that in life they were an evil person. If the soul doesn't wish to wander after the improper burial, it must find a host. The host must be an evil living person for the dybbuk to possess them."

"A living sinner," Cat added.

Martin nodded. "Absolutely, and it's unfortunate that this world has no shortage of potential hosts."

"So if this person who came upon the coffin has been possessed by the dybbuk inside, does that person cease to exist?"

Adam sat down next to Cat and joined in. "Yes and no. From what we have gathered through the years, the knowledge of the host remains, though the dybbuk gains power over both the body and the knowledge. They also bring with them everything from their past lives and that's just one of the things that makes them so dangerous."

"Ugh." She wrinkled her nose at the thought. "Bottom line is that we can have a centuries-old demon inside the body of the twenty-first-century creep, and the demon has the benefit of all his past knowledge, along with everything current inside the head of the host?"

"You get an A," Adam told her. "That's about the size of it."

"Well, that sucks."

Martin laughed and shook his head. "Just one of the things I love about you, Catherine. That succinct way you have of describing things."

"That's what a good education can buy you, eh?"

She clinked her coffee mug against his. "So assuming this thing is the dybbuk you guys describe, how in the world do we fight it?"

"First things first," Adam interrupted. "We have to find out where it is and then we have to find out who it is."

"And then?"

"And then we figure out how to kill it."

Cat got up from the table and headed to the coffee machine where she topped off her mug with Adam's put-some-hair-on-your-chest coffee. When he'd called it strong and black, he hadn't been kidding. She turned back to face the two men. "Let's get to work."

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth stretched and yawned. God, she felt good. Part of it was that the sun was shining through the window, casting a butter-bright glow into the dull room and warming her skin. It wasn't the splendor her palace bedroom had possessed with its large, carved bed

and hand-woven carpets. Then again, it was much better than the black emptiness of the limbo she'd been in for the last five decades. It was this way each time she reentered.

After the deprivation of the coffin, fresh air and sunshine gave her a rush of sensation. Last night's encounter helped as well. She could already feel the flesh of her body firming and becoming younger. The magic worked, and it didn't matter the century.

Swinging her legs from the bed, Elizabeth wandered into the small bathroom just off the bedroom. The place might be tiny and, for lack of a better description, shabby, but the luxury of warm water eased some of the discomfort of the poverty.

Until she was able to find something better, this cramped space that was hers and hers alone would suffice. It gave her privacy and a small level of comfort. That was all she needed for the moment.

Leaning her hands on the edge of the porcelain sink she gazed at her reflection in the mirror. The glow that warmed her face pleased her. Good hard sex had a way of making her feel as though she could take on the world, but it was more than that. Her face glowed while any trace of the hateful lines formed during Amanda's imprisonment was gone as in *poof*, gone!

Elizabeth stepped back so that she had a better view of her body in the mirror. Grabbing the hem of her nightshirt, she pulled it up and over her head. Slow and methodical, she ran her hand from the side of her face, down her neck, across her breast and down her flat stomach. Amanda had kept this body in good shape, a vanity that transcended both prison and a watchful probation. Still, this was more than attention to the maintenance of her aging body. This was the magic. Her skin was pinker, her breasts firmer and her stomach tighter than at this time yesterday. Turning around, she admired the beauty of her body.

The blood had done its magic, as she'd known it would. It had yet to fail her.

Yes indeed, things came together with a splendor and grace that spoke to her of karma. All was right with her world today. She would utilize her finely honed skill of patience by staying here as Amanda until she had a chance to leave this place and make a new life for herself somewhere else. Timing was of critical importance and so for the time being, she would wait and take full advantage of the potential that had been laid at her feet.

Elizabeth smiled, thinking how ironic it was in a way. She had loved Bram Stoker, the eccentric Irishman who had been such a delightful though somewhat repressed companion. She had been enthralled by his imaginative creation of Dracula and fascinated by the immortal creature that in so many ways mirrored her own existence. Even the real Dracula, the Wallachian prince with a taste for blood and violence, held an intrigue that made her wish he could share her fate. He would have been a perfect immortal cohort.

Sitting on the edge of the filling tub and pouring lavender-scented bath crystals under the running water, Elizabeth decided that she liked Vlad the Impaler better than Stoker's fictional Count Dracula. Vlad had taken what he had wanted without excuses or apologies.

Many died at his hands, yet he went down in any number of history books as a hero of the people. He drank the blood of his enemies and protected the people of his country at the same time. In her mind, it made perfect sense. Good and evil were relatives. One couldn't exist without the other.

Like that which Vlad the Impaler had accomplished for himself and his country, what she'd accomplished last night was far more good than evil. There was purpose in the death of that girl. It was not a simple random act of violence even if it appeared that way. Far from it. That young streetwalker had gone to a better place than the awful corner Elizabeth had pulled her from. At the same time her unknowing gift poured life and beauty back into Elizabeth. If that wasn't a higher purpose, then what was?

Turning the water off, Elizabeth tested the temperature and was pleased by the warmth that flowed through her fingers. She stepped into the tub letting the heated water swirl around her body reminding her of the warm blood that had flowed down her throat a few hours before.

## Chapter Nine

*Her hair was magnificent, the way it flowed down across her shoulders and glimmered in the light of the candles as it fell down her back. Her long black velvet dress, widow's black, was cut so low that her supple white breasts all but fell free of the supple fabric. Leaning over him she smiled, her teeth white and straight in her unlined porcelain face. She was so beautiful he wished he could reach up and touch her cheek. He longed to feel the softness of her inviting breasts against the tips of his fingers. He ached to lay his head against her bosom and inhale the soothing scent of lavender that rose from her throat letting it wash over and around him. Such beauty he had never been witness to before.*

*As if reading his mind, she moved close to him, the full breasts pressing against his arm, her head tipping towards his. The tip of her tongue ran slow and tempting across a rosy lower lip. He could almost taste the sweetness of her mouth.*

*"You won't stop me," she whispered against his ear, her breath warm and inviting. "They couldn't before. You couldn't in London, and you won't in this strange place either. I'm here to stay."*

*The longing of a moment earlier faded as fear wrapped icy fingers around his throat. Despite the gentle calm of her words, he was afraid.*

*"Who are you?" he asked when an ugly memory flashed through his mind.*

*Her laughter floated through the room where shadows danced on black walls and what moments before had felt soothing and sensual now crept alive with the throb of terror. Evil was here, alive and waiting.*

*"Your nightmare."*

*"Who are you?"*

*"Your lover."*

*"Damn it, who are you?"*

*She leaned over him again his nostrils filling with the scent of fresh lavender. Pressing her ruby lips against his in a hard kiss, she spoke without breaking the contact. "You remember, lover. That dark night, rain on our bare bodies."*

*A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. "WHO ARE YOU?"*

*"You may call me Countess." She ran her hot tongue over his lips.*

*Before he could move, her hand came from behind the rich black skirt, and in one swift, sure movement she slit his throat.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Martin sat up stock straight in the bed, gasping for breath, his hands clutching at his throat. "Good God, man," he muttered to the empty room. Then looking down at his hands, white and clean, he shook his head. "It was a bloody dream."

What had started out as a ten-minute nap had turned into an endless nightmare that now had him drenched in sticky sweat. He hated dreams and always had. Might be different if he had ever experienced one of those funny and encouraging dreams that his friends had related to him in childhood. That had not been the case for him. God always seemed to be playing cruel jokes on him. First there were the visions during the daylight hours and if that weren't enough, there were the dreams that invaded his nights as well. His world, waking and not, had been filled for some eighty-plus years with violence, fear, and destruction.

His mother had loved to say there was no rest for the wicked. In her way, she'd been joking. Martin wasn't. He was beginning to think the only true rest he'd ever get was the day the cancer finally drew the curtain shut. That might not be such a bad thing. At least it would mean the end of the crazy dreams.

He sat on the edge of the bed wanting to believe this dream was no different than any of the thousand other dreams he'd had. It wasn't working. He had one of those gut feelings that seemed to be screaming that it was much more. He'd been in this business long enough to know better than to ignore what to others would be nothing more than a nightmare. It was the one thing he shared with Catherine, and one of the reasons why he felt such an affinity with her.

There was any number of gifted people in the Order who went about their business with the discretion that the Order demanded. They used their gifts to keep an unsuspecting world safe and expected nothing in return. But in all the years and through all the people he'd known only one had a power with strength equal to or possibly even greater than his own. That was Catherine Lohr. The dynamics of the Order changed the day she was initiated. Sometimes he felt they were blessed and others, like right now, he knew better. They were cursed.

Sweat dripped down his forehead and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. He didn't need to get up and look in the mirror to know his face would be as white as a newly



bleached bedsheet. Not that he looked that great as a general rule these days. He was old and his body was now riddled with cancer, two conditions not known for promoting a healthy and vigorous appearance. Still, there was some life left in this old body, and if he was correct, the woman in his dreams was a nemesis as old as his career. She wasn't going to slip through his hands again.

Enough had already suffered at her hands; it was time to stop her reign of terror on the world once and for all. He hoped he had enough time to do the job right. Failing in this quest again would not be the legacy he would choose to leave for Adam and Catherine or the Anima Mundi.

He could see the future of the Order far better than anyone else could. He wasn't being self-righteous or pompous either. It was unembellished fact. As complicated as the world was for the hunters, once in a while something came to him crystal clear and without the need for analysis. Just as Obert Antwerp had known that Martin would succeed him, Martin understood that it was going to be a joint effort for this watch. This was a new millennium that called for a new style of leadership. Together Adam and Catherine were the most powerful hunters he had ever seen. It took only one hunt together and their fate had been sealed in Martin's mind. The two of them would usher the Order into the changing world.

He pushed himself up from the bed, making his way to the bathroom. Running cool water in the sink, he splashed his face, hoping to chase away both the nightmare and the fatigue that seemed to be his constant companion these days. He didn't look much better when he got out but at least he felt better.

"Well old man," he said to the reflection in the mirror. "If Churchill could do it, so can you. The Empire needs you."

The doorbell rang as Martin hit the last step on the staircase. Adam came striding out of the office to open the door and their morning went to hell in a handbasket.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been months and though the physical changes were not dramatic there was something in his face that nagged at her unconscious. The spider web of death clouded around him and that hit far too close to home for comfort. Pissed her off really. It was bad enough cancer had taken Mom, but now Martin, too. Damn it anyway. Here was a man who had the truest heart of anyone she'd ever met, bar none. He was incorruptible, honest, and true. Death had no place here.

Watching him come down the stairs, if pressed she'd say that Martin looked fresh and alert, even if she hesitated to say he looked good. He'd gone upstairs an hour or so ago to take a nap, although he couldn't have slept very long because she heard water going after what seemed like minutes. Cat and Adam both had their noses buried in computers using the Order's massive resource library to try and track who or what might have been cached in Spokane so she wasn't sure how long he'd been gone.

Just as the Order had spent a couple thousand years tracking and stopping evil, so too had those committed to the black side of this universe spent an equal amount of time preserving and perpetrating the essence of wickedness. What hadn't been destroyed mind, body, and soul had been preserved. It was hidden, moved, and protected, waiting for the day when it could be set free in the world again. The Order had been there all along and kept fabulous records with whatever knowledge the hunters were able to glean. As time passed, patterns began to emerge and from these patterns hunters like Cat and Adam could make educated guesses.

Spokane, a sprawling metropolitan area made of up of bedroom communities that rolled together to create a greater city of about four hundred thousand, wasn't what Cat would have classified as prime breeding ground for necuratul. It was a western city where Indians once camped on the banks of a river that ran through the middle of downtown and beaver hunters followed on the heels of the Indians. The splendor of the falls, the centerpiece of the city, still ran crystal clear and clean. Conservative and low key, it just didn't have the feel of a logical hiding place.

Then again she recalled that one of the most notorious serial rapists made Spokane his home some years back. Fred Coe terrorized Spokane in the 1970s, spreading hate and terror throughout the lilac city. Then there was serial killer Robert Yates who for over a decade left the bodies of prostitutes spread from one end of the city to the other. That sicko even went so far as to bury the body of one victim in the flowerbed at his own home. Creepy as that sounded it was even worse because he had a family complete with wife and children.

Spokane had learned the hard way that looks could be deceiving. Coe was the handsome son of a prominent family, and Yates was the all-American family man. Bottom line, things weren't always what they seemed. On the outside, Spokane had the beauty and grace of a magnificent western city, but behind the veil of respectability and prosperity there was a crack that opened itself up wide enough to make a home for the devil. It happened with Coe and Yates; it was happening again with an as yet unknown face and name. Maybe it was a perfect hiding place.

From her chair in the office Cat could see a man standing on Adam's front porch. He was as tall as Adam though not as well built. His face was drawn and serious, his hands shoved into his pockets as he spoke in a voice low enough that his words were indistinguishable. Not that they needed to hear them. Cat got up and walked over to where Martin stood at the foot of the stairs. They looked at each other and nodded in unison.

The battered corpse of the girl she'd seen in her vision had been found.

Adam urged the man on his porch into the house and shut the door behind him. "Cat, Martin," he said. "This is Sandy Roberts, SAC for the Spokane Division. They've found her."

"I'll get my jacket. Martin, can I grab a coat for you?"

"On the chair in my room."

She raced up the stairs and grabbed the hooded sweatshirt that she lived in and looked it too, and then she darted into Martin's room. On the chair where he said it would be was a tan jacket with the unmistakable smell of cigar clinging to it. Her first thought was to reprimand him yet again about smoking, particularly those rank cigars he was so fond of, and then took a second to think it through. He was dying. Not that they weren't all dying every day of their lives. It was different for Martin. Death was in his direct line of sight, which meant that if he wanted to go out smoking one of the hideous stogies, who was she to try and persuade him any differently? She reached over and picked up the jacket deciding to keep her big mouth shut.

Cat turned to head downstairs when the cell phone buzzed in her pocket. She grabbed it and flipped it open.

"This is Cat."

"Catherine," came the smooth and recognizable voice that sent the hair standing up on the back of her neck. "Doctor Craig."

Not good.

"What can I do for you, doctor?"

"Let me get straight to the point."

Wasn't like she was waiting for small talk. "Please."

"Your mammogram indicates a small abnormality in your right breast. I need you back in here as soon as possible."

*Fucking A!* This could not be happening. Not now. Not after Mom. Not after Michael. She took a deep breath and tried to think.

"I'm in the United States."

"Where?"

"Spokane, Washington."

"Good. I have a friend at Sacred Heart Hospital. I'll call him and let you know when to go to his office."

"Can't this wait until I come home?"

"No."

"But ..."

"I'll call you with time and location."

The phone went dead before she could say another word. Cat stared at the small flip phone for a long moment before folding it closed and putting it back in her pocket.

By the time she made it back downstairs she had her face schooled into what she hoped was control. Cat couldn't afford to dwell on that phone call for a whole lot of reasons. Instead she handed Martin's jacket to him and headed towards the front door. Movement was important in more ways than one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth wrapped the towel around her warm, glowing body and padded into the bedroom. What to wear? She stared into the closet, unhappy with her choices. Something would have to be done about the state of Amanda's wardrobe and soon. Turning away, she walked towards the chest of drawers. Perhaps something there would spark her interest.

It struck her as she walked across the room that the bedroom window just happened to be adjacent to the Reverend's office, where odds were he'd be sitting at this time of the morning. He was a man of habit who spent several hours each morning at his desk going through bills and correspondence. His desk faced the oversized window across from hers.

She walked to her window and peered out. A smile lit her face. Without being overly obvious, Elizabeth drew the curtains aside enough that her room would be in full view. She then stepped back and let the towel drop.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a quiet trip, it seemed that each of them was wrapped up in thoughts they weren't ready to share. Cat concentrated on where they were going and the task that lay ahead. It worked to keep her focused rather than dwelling on that call.

The late model Suburban piloted by the somber Sandy Roberts gave her a great view from the passenger's side window. The city flashed by, old brick buildings mixed together with new structures that while trying to blend with the old couldn't hide their recent birth. Fall was easing in and leaves whirled and tumbled to the ground in a kaleidoscope of red, gold, green, and brown.

The air altered in a swoosh that she heard inside her head. It was here where the streets were narrow and steep and in desperate need of some serious TLC that evil's breath whispered in her ear. Showing through the battered asphalt were the deep red bricks that made up the original roadway, the thump, thump, thump of the fat tires on the uneven surface vibrating throughout the Suburban. Her body buzzed from more than the rough surface of the road beneath them.

Her eyes narrowed as she surveyed the passing landscape. On either side of the street box-like buildings that were old and sagging stood weary guard. The buildings passed into a shadow in the rearview mirror as the neighborhood gave way to a sloping hill dotted with scrubby pines and crumbling rock that once upon a time must have been support barriers. At the bottom of the hill were several marked cruisers, another black SUV, and a dozen or so people standing around watching and straining to see beyond the yellow tape. They were the ones too curious to wander away even when it was clear they would be able to see nothing.

Cat scanned the crowd while Sandy maneuvered around people and cars until he found a space large enough to park in. All around them was a mixture of people stretching for

whatever bit of excitement they could glean. There were young college students who lived in the cheap apartments alongside poverty-entrenched mothers who were either too discouraged or disinterested to move beyond the mice-infested apartments where they were raising another generation of lost souls. There were the young men with the deep set eyes and pale faces that spoke of demons that haunted their minds and raced through their veins. They had all made their way down the cracked sidewalks to see someone whose luck had been worse than their own.

She'd seen plenty of similar areas in cities throughout the world. Spokane was no different than Toronto, New York, Paris, or London. In every one lived a class of people relegated to the dingy and drooping corners of the city where misery fed off their misfortune and evil pretended friendship. When a person was beaten down day after day, year after year, it became fertile ground for the forces that sought to destroy. Evil knocked on a thousand doors, only to find nine hundred and ninety-nine closed. The thing was, there was always one door that opened, even if it was only a crack, and that's what the necuratul waited for. It needed a mere sliver of space, a spark of despair or a flicker of defeat, and it could make its move. The opportune home for vice lived around every corner and more often than not in the sad and dreary corners of the cities.

Just like this one.

Sandy stopped and Cat closed her eyes letting her mind wander out into the sun-spattered brush. The pain came in a tumultuous wave, roaring through her arms, legs, and stomach. Even as strong as it was, the feelings were not the sharp stabbing sensations that had assailed her last night. It seemed to Cat that what she was experiencing now was not the presence of a new and dangerous evil but the lingering emotions of the crowd, many of whom had experienced pain and abuse at the hands of loved ones and strangers. This was not what she was searching for. Opening her eyes, she looked at Sandy.

"Where is she, Mr. Roberts?"

"Sandy," he corrected her with no hesitation.

Sandy Roberts had a good face that was now creased with curious intensity. She'd seen that look before. It happened each time she met someone new and in particular from those who worked for the Division. They knew what Cat could do before they met her and were fascinated and skeptical all at the same time when they were face to face with her.

"Sandy," she repeated.

He studied her for a long minute, his hands still gripping the steering wheel of the motionless vehicle. His hands loosened and the crease in his forehead disappeared; whatever he'd seen in her face seeming to satisfy him. Waving a hand at her to follow, he jumped out and headed towards the small crowd of uniformed officers on the outside of the marked off area. Cat, along with Adam and Martin, followed close on his heels.

Sandy picked up the police tape and held it for Cat while she ducked underneath. Once on the other side, he led them back through untrimmed hedges and overgrown bushes that

poked and scratched as they pushed their way through. Thank goodness for the sweatshirt she'd put on or her arms would be in shreds.

The clutter of bushes, grass, and trees gave way about fifty yards from the parking area. In the clearing Cat stopped as her breath caught in her chest. Golden sunlight streamed through the trees in ribbons of light that fell across the naked skin and matted hair of a young woman. Her back was up against a large mottled pine tree with her head down at an angle that made her chin touch her chest. She sat with her hands folded in her lap as though it was natural to be sitting bloody and naked in a bramble patch.

Even though she'd seen more than her fair share of the dead, both innocent and not, it was something that made Cat's stomach drop every time. She'd killed enough in the last five years to understand death, and yet something like this made her so goddamned angry. That had to be a good thing, though. It was what kept the fire going and without the fire chances were she'd have been dead herself inside of a week.

Evil was a tricky thing, not to mention manipulative and sneaky. There were no rules and nothing was sacred. And she did mean nothing. Not time, age, innocence, or vocation. It took the good, the bad, and as the movie title suggested, the ugly. An equal opportunity employer, so to speak.

All she could say was thank the good Lord for the Division. Since the feds got wise and started working with the Anima Mundi instead of in spite of them, the fight had become at least a little easier. That was not to say that the hunts became easy. It just meant that by working together it became less complicated. Like right now.

Once the victim had been located, both the Spokane Police Department, or the SPD as they were lovingly referred to, and the Division, responded. The officer who was the first one on the scene took one look and called the Division. He'd decided at the get-go that the body had all the markings of an unusual murder and hadn't been anxious to get involved.

The tip-offs weren't difficult to notice either. The woman's skin was an unnatural crystal white. In the broad daylight it was almost translucent. Even a rookie would have been able to figure out in a heartbeat that she'd been bled out. The fact that she sat in a spot where nary a drop of blood was on the ground was yet another brilliant tip. Didn't take a master detective to get the clues on this one.

The surreal scene made her skin crawl, and it was more than the brutalized body sitting before her. This was a new monster to Cat, and in her cockiness, she'd thought she'd seen them all in the last five years. Baby, had she been wrong. Maybe this was old hat to Adam and Martin, and no doubt Martin in his many years had seen much worse, but to her, this was ghastly.

She wanted to scream because they weren't able to stop the monster before it had made such an outrageous kill. She alone had seen it and then been powerless to stop it. More to the point was the boiling anger that came with her special brand of knowledge. If only she had a

clue where to start. The same dark resignation that settled in her heart was reflected on the faces of the others around her.

Even if this race was at the starting point, between the three of them, or four if she counted Sandy, they didn't have even one solid clue. Her gift of sight had shown them the room where the poor girl had taken her last breath but little good that did them in a city where the population hovered around half a million and spread out over miles and miles like a rippling pond. The reality was that the room could be anywhere from the top of Sunset Hill to the old homesteads that sat on the border between Washington and Idaho. The logistics of narrowing down one room in that geographic nightmare gave her a headache.

It was also possible that the victim's body had been transported far from the actual murder site just to throw law enforcement off. Her gut feeling told her that wasn't the case here. It was true she wasn't picking up the vibes of the killer. That didn't mean they were miles away from him either, just that the killer wasn't here at this given moment. She had the distinct impression that there was a method to the killer's madness. Once Cat figured out what it was, she'd beat the monster to the finish line.

Standing around pissed her off more than anything because they were day late and a dollar short. That lit a fire under Cat so that standing here meant they weren't accomplishing squat. They needed to get moving. The guys seemed to read her thoughts, and movement began. Sandy stayed in the background while Cat, Adam, and Martin walked the area around the body, looking and feeling for any residue the killer might have left behind. It wasn't much, but it was all they had.

"Martin?" she asked five minutes later.

He shook his head.

"Adam?"

"Nothing. Not a trace of scent or residue of a print."

"Shit."

They all looked at her and she shrugged. "We Canadians call it like we see it and this I don't like. It stinks to high heaven. This is the girl I saw without question yet how can the killer leave her here without a trace? It doesn't make sense."

"Perhaps it does," Martin said.

He had everyone's attention.

Cat was the one to push when the silence stretched on too long for her. "You want to explain?"

He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked out over the river. "So far both of you have hunted those who are young, relatively speaking."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he stopped her. He hadn't even turned his gaze away from the river and still he sensed her words before they came out of her mouth.

“No, hear me out, Catherine. What you two have hunted down and destroyed thus far were two, three hundred years old or less. In the grand scheme of the universe, young necuratul. There is malevolence in this world, older than time that passes from soul to soul, resting and then renewing itself in the body of a willing and able host. With each passage back into the world it becomes stronger and more powerful. Through the ages we’ve done our best to stop them. We track them and attempt to destroy them, and yet time and time again they slip through our fingers.”

Sighing, Martin took a breath and leaned his shoulder against a towering pine tree, his eyes turning away from the river and towards the dead girl.

“In the big picture the West is new. That’s the reason why it’s not often that we see the old rise in the American West. It’s too new. At the same time, it makes sense in a strange sort of way. After all, if the body of one of the old ones is to be kept until the right host comes along, what better place to move them to? I mean, who would think of looking for a four- or five-hundred-year-old corpse in a city that has been settled for only a couple hundred years, give or take? It’s a perfect place, and it makes perfect sense in a warped way.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re saying that we are hunting a monster that is, like, half a millennium old?” Cat figured she had to be hearing him wrong. A five-hundred-year-old monster? It was inconceivable.

“That’s what I’m thinking, yes.”

“That’s going to make this hunt very difficult.” Adam was as unruffled as ever by a concept that was astonishing to Cat.

“And dangerous.” Martin added.

“That’s why I can’t feel its presence?”

If what Martin said was true, then by all rights she should be able to sense this monster. Cat was strong with her skills at full power, and to think there was something out there that could shield from her was not something that was going to sit well. She didn’t need to be any more pissed off than she already was.

Martin nodded. “I’ve run into this kind only twice before and both times it slipped through my fingers like running water. That kind of evil is the stuff that makes my nightmares unbearable but that also keeps me alive. I wasn’t able to stop it before, but with both of you at my side, this time I will crush it.”

The tone in Martin’s voice shook Cat out of her narcissistic indignation. There was anger and an iron resolution that left no doubt that he would do as he said. There was something else there that she couldn’t quite define. It made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. It also put a ton more resolve into her own backbone not that she needed much encouragement. All anyone with a conscience had to do was take a look at that poor girl’s ravaged body left like a discarded toy in the dirt. Once they did, they would feel the same kind of fire towards grabbing justice with both hands.



The difference for Cat and her allies was that at least they were armed with weapons that most people could never possess. They had the traditional mortal weapons of guns, knives, and explosives she was itching to use right now. They were also armed with the unexplainable gifts that gave them the ability to see through the layers of the world and into the shadowy realm that the vast majority of people didn't even know existed. It was often ugly and violent in that dark place, though in an odd twist, it was what gave their lives value and purpose. And besides, she'd use whatever she had to get her hands on the bastard who'd drained the life from that poor girl. If that meant taking a walk on the dark side, then so be it.

Cat looked at Martin. "Should we give it a shot?"

## Chapter Ten

It didn't always work, though sometimes images remained long enough to allow them to pick up important details. Not even a spark of life was left in the broken girl. The pale, battered body propped against the tree was the physical vessel that once housed a soul. That was all. It wasn't hopeless even if it looked that way. There was still a chance that the body could tell them something. It was much like the vase that held the tulips of early spring. Even after the tulips had dropped their petals and the water had drained away, tiny remnants clung inside the vase long enough to let them know that the flowers once existed. There was always that slim chance the essence of life would cling to her ravaged remains.

Cat was good on her own and that wasn't conceit. She was both clairvoyant and cognitive while Martin was primarily a retrocognitive. Cat could often see it all before, during, and after. Martin was brilliant with the after. The combination of the two of them was the real power, and she was grateful he was here.

Now they squatted on either side of the body. Cat positioned herself on the left side and placed her hands on the dead girl's head so that her fingers touched crusty hair. Martin, on the right side, took both lifeless hands from her lap and held them in his own. Cat couldn't help but notice that there was little difference in the flesh tone between Martin and the dead girl.

Pushing away the disturbing images of the clasped hands, Cat focused her attention on the girl. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly and evenly. The pictures that often played in her mind like a running movie didn't come. Instead, a filmy blackness that moved about in a swirl filled her mind leaving her filled with the sensation of cold and isolation. Through it all flowed a deep sadness that brought tears welling in her eyes.

She waited for the darkness to clear. It didn't. It got deeper and deeper, her fingers turning to ice despite the warmth of the bright sunshine. When her fingers began to tingle,

she pulled her hands away and rocked back on her heels. Despite Cat's best efforts tears trickled down her cheeks. She hated crying; it made her feel too girlie. Or maybe it just made her human. And it wasn't just sadness for the lost life. She was pissed off that someone or something had stolen the life and the soul from this girl leaving nothing, not even a single trace that might allow them to track him or her. Cat didn't care if the girl had been a prostitute, a druggie, or even the girl-next-door; wherever she'd come from she'd deserved more than this.

Yeah, it pissed her off in a big way.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day had rolled by in a haze of forced smiles and nauseating small talk. Now she was hungry. And not in a way that could be satiated by meat or cheese; Elizabeth was hungry for the magic.

In the corner, the ancient stones and the exquisitely crafted coffin gave her a rush of adrenaline that was so close to the flash she felt when having sex that she almost believed she could give up sex. Of course that was absurd to even consider and last night's encounter made that crystal clear.

She'd been able to restock the room during her day trips down during the day, moving in and out of the old section of the church without anyone giving her a second glance. Not all that difficult this time of the week. The typical day found only her, Reverend John and Mary, the church secretary, working in and around the church and parish houses. Funny thing, today Mary seemed to be coming around less and less. Elizabeth had a sneaking hunch that Mary was uncomfortable around the Reverend's pet rehabilitation project and found excuses not to be at the church. Suited Elizabeth fine, the woman was a toad.

The more Elizabeth learned of the wayward Amanda, the more she liked her.

The devil of Amanda lived on even if the body belonged to another. The minute Elizabeth realized that her presence made Mary uncomfortable she'd focused in on the dumpy woman and gone out of her way to find reasons to be in the same room. Cheap entertainment, she admitted, but entertainment, nonetheless. At least until Mary made herself scarce. All good things must come to an end or so she'd heard somewhere along the line.

With Mary absent, avoiding the Reverend became less of a challenge. Making an effort to appear interested now and again helped to pacify him, and it amused her. Not quite as much fun as terrorizing Mary. Fun was fun, though, and she had a special spot for men of the cloth. They were easy to corrupt, or at least that had been her experience. It remained to be seen if the men of faith from this century were any different. She suspected not, considering how many of the good old boys she'd bedded in her day. If she'd learned anything along the way, it was that men were men regardless of the clothes they happened to be wearing.

By the time night rolled in, Reverend John was off to dinner at the home of one of the most important parish members, or so he'd explained as though she gave a damn. His perceived importance at the invitation had brought a blush to his otherwise pasty face. She didn't think she was ever going to get him out of the place he was so busy crowing.

At last she was alone. In the sanctuary Elizabeth sat a row back from the front, her feet propped up on the back of the pew in the first row. In a style reminiscent of an age long gone and even outdated, a huge wooden cross with a likeness of Jesus impaled upon it took front and center stage. Ah, the beliefs of the innocents. They felt so secure in their knowledge that heaven was waiting for them. Their little black book promised them a better life. One beyond the pain and misery of this one would greet them if they played by all the rules. That was good because she fully intended to send as many of them as she could to heaven or hell or wherever death might take them. She had rules of her own, and they weren't in that little black book.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Cat's cell rang as she stepped across the threshold and into the house, she took one look at the number and hightailed it right back outside. Ignoring Adam's quizzical and questioning expression, she kept her back to him. She recognized the number that had popped up on her display.

"Hello, doc."

"Here's the info, Catherine."

"Can't this wait?" she tried again. She didn't want to deal with this right now; there was plenty on her plate as it were. There wasn't room for anything more.

"Day after tomorrow, nine a.m. at Empire Imaging on the lower South Hill. They will do more extensive x-rays and an ultrasound. Doctor Benjamin will review the results, and we'll go from there. It will take no more than an hour."

"But ..."

"Catherine," he said in a voice that made the hair stand up on her arms. "This is not a game and time *is* an issue. I shouldn't have to remind you that it's a little early for you to be joining your mother."

Crap, crap, and double crap. Here was one of the problems with having a doctor who just happened to also be a friend of the family. Doc might have practiced a little bedside manner for other patients but the fact that he knew her well meant that he didn't pull punches or waste words. Jackson Craig M.D. had been blunt and to the point from the moment she'd become his patient. He hadn't been able to save Cat's mother, but he could save her. Perhaps it would behoove her if she let him.

"Yeah," she breathed into the phone, her hand still gripping the small instrument tight enough that her fingers were turning white.

“Yeah what?”

“Yes, doctor. I will be at Empire Imaging bright and early day after tomorrow.”

“Good. Look, Catherine, I know I’m coming down hard, and I know you understand why, but I also want you to keep in mind that this could turn out to be nothing.”

“And it could turn out to be cancer.”

The pause said more than words, though he gave a valiant effort towards alleviating her fears. “True enough. There is an upside though if it is cancer.”

“There is an upside to breast cancer? That’s a new one on me, doc.”

He’d have to do some fancy footwork to get her onboard for that one. She’d watched her mother die, for heaven’s sake. She had stood by helpless and heartsick while watching a beautiful, robust woman fade until she was little more than skin and bones. And he had an upside to that? Ah ha.

“Early detection means pretty good odds at survival.”

Good comeback that still fell a bit short in her book. It wasn’t like she came at this particular issue uneducated. Her education had carried a damned high price, too.

“At what cost?”

She remembered it like it was yesterday. All the drugs, the chemo, and the radiation, along with the ugly little side effects to cancer’s cures that nobody wanted to talk about out loud. From that viewpoint there was a lot to be said about quality of life. What good was life if you couldn’t even find enough strength to lift your head from the pillow? What good was life if you prayed for death?

“Let’s just take it one step at a time, eh?”

His soft words cut through her defenses. Not to mention that doc was right. Cat was jumping ahead of herself. This was all very preliminary and preventative. The big “C” had not been formally introduced.

“Deal, and doc?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks.”

“Day after tomorrow, Catherine. Don’t forget.”

“I’ll be there.”

She folded the small phone shut and stood still as stone on the porch. Her eyes were focused somewhere far beyond the green grass of the front yard although she wasn’t seeing a thing. That was what overload did to a person, and she welcomed the numbness. It was better than feeling.

“You all right?”

Cat jumped, surprised by the sound of his quiet voice. She hadn't heard Adam come out the door let alone move to stand right next to her. His hands were in his pockets and his eyes followed the line of her gaze.

"Yeah."

"I don't believe you. I am an all-wise and all-knowing Indian, you realize."

Cat touched his arm and smiled. Leave it to Adam to figure out the right thing to say. "Thank you, brave Indian chief."

"What's up, Cat? You're almost as white as our victim."

"I'll settle for almost being a compliment."

"And ..."

She stared harder for a few seconds, deciding how much to share. In the old days Michael would have been there for her or at the very least on the phone having sensed her distress. She missed that camaraderie and the closeness that could never be again. Here Adam was, extending the olive branch and making more of an effort than she. It wasn't that she didn't want to accept the gesture, at least deep down. On the surface, it was too soon and the fear too new. She wasn't ready to let go.

"Let it suffice to say that blood is thicker than water, and right now I'd give my left arm for water."

"Ah a cryptic sage." He threw an arm around her shoulder and hugged her close to his body.

She liked the way he smelled, appreciated the gentle kindness in both his words and actions. "That's me," she said. "A sage."

"Seriously, Cat, can I help?"

She leaned into him and for the briefest second gave consideration to letting it all out. Maybe if she shared the pain would ease. Maybe not.

"At the moment, no, but I'll keep you posted."

\* \* \* \* \*

The bar was hopping with activity by the time Elizabeth floated through the front door. A band was playing excellent jazz while couples swayed on the dance floor. Instead of the haze of cigarette smoke that would have permeated the room in years past, the smoke-free legislation passed a couple years earlier had the room wafting with perfumes, aftershaves, and pheromones. Much better in her opinion; nothing dampened an erotic encounter quicker than the stench of stale cigarettes.

Elizabeth let her gaze slide through the room, appraising the cattle and assessing her strategy. It was a most wonderful place to graze with plenty of sustenance for the hungry. She slid into an empty booth at the back of the room, far enough away from the main action

to be out of notice and yet an unobstructed view let her scan the bar's patrons. It was a perfect spot, as though it had been reserved with her name on it. It was the little pleasures that let her know things were moving in a way that was creating a perfect world for her. It seemed as though the planets had lined up to send her world into a precise orbit. An infinite number of possibilities opened before her and all of them were wonderful.

It didn't take long to spot her, maybe five feet tall, with tiny hips and large breasts. Her short red hair was spiky and sexy. She wore a short black skirt topped by a tight gold shirt with no stockings and tall black heels. She'd come ready for action and in the hour or so Elizabeth had been watching her, she'd had plenty of women to dance with though no real takers. In a place where the men kissed the men and the women kissed the women, picking up the perky little redhead was easy.

Elizabeth smoothed her leather skirt when she stood and sidled up behind the redhead as the band started to play a slow, smoky song. She ran her hand down the woman's arm from shoulder to wrist and felt the quiver that followed her touch.

"Dance with me," Elizabeth purred into her ear.

The woman turned, her green eyes alive and full of fire. She ran her tongue over her lower lip leaving it wet and inviting.

"Oh, yeah." She smiled.

Elizabeth moved her body with the easy glide of a pampered cat. She moved close and pulled the woman next to her hot body. Together they swayed and pulsed to the life of the music, their voices low and close on the crowded dance floor.

By the next song Kim was hers. Elizabeth smiled. This was going to be easier than she had hoped. Then again she'd always been good at this. Women liked her, even trusted her, at least until it was too late and by then, they were hers completely.

After a few drinks, it wasn't difficult to convince Kim to leave the loud music and crowded bar. Once back at the church Elizabeth lit the candles while Kim looked around the crypt, her hands on her hips, her feet slightly apart.

"This is a fucking tomb," Kim declared, her words slurred at the edges. "Fucking wild."

Elizabeth smiled while her eyes scanned the ripe, inviting curves. "Yes, I suppose you could call it a tomb. I like to think of it as my secret garden."

"Oh, Lizzie baby," Kim said as she circled, her fingers trailing across Elizabeth's cheeks as she moved. "You are one freaky bitch. What's in here?"

Kim had moved away from Elizabeth and was leaning over the casket that sat with the top still open.

"Nothing important."

Kim laughed, her booze-induced good humor not losing any of its power. "Like I said, you are one freaky bitch."

“But ...” Elizabeth purred as moved to stand behind Kim, her arms circled around her hot body.

Kim turned away from the coffin and into Elizabeth’s embrace. Her smile was full and eager. “But I fucking like it.”



## Chapter Eleven

The night fell black outside the window as the silence in the office grew deeper. The three of them had buried themselves in research, breaking long enough to grab dinner and then get right back at it. Cat sat hunched over a keyboard with her fingers flying as she scrolled through records. Each new bit of information had her refining her search criteria as she went. Something was bound to come up, wasn't it? With the three of them working, the odds were in their favor and ultimately it had to bear fruit.

The last thing Cat wanted to do at the moment was try to sleep. If she didn't dream about the dead girl, she'd sure as hell dream about her own impending death from breast cancer. Yup, two really good things to fall asleep on. She would rather sit here all night with her mind buzzing and her back hurting like hell from her less-than-perfect desk posture than close her eyes and let her thoughts dwell. It worked too until she realized that her eyes were no longer focused on the computer screen and were staring at the black edge of the monitor.

"Ah, shit." She pushed back, tilting her head against the chair. Closing her eyes, she tried to prepare for what she felt coming. Her body stiffened as a vision began to stream through her mind.

At the sound of her voice Adam had shot up from his chair and crossed the room in a single bound. He took her face between his hands and smoothed his thumbs across her cheeks. He didn't bother asking what was happening.

"What are you seeing?"

His voice seemed to come from someplace far away even though she knew that he was pressing against her.

"Darkness."

Moving shapes and shadows of the night, black yet shifting like a cut of ebony satin blowing in a strong wind rolled behind her closed lids. She could hear the sound of water

caressing her ears while the smell of fresh clean air filled her nose. She was there mind, body, and soul.

“Tired, very tired,” she murmured.

Adam’s gentle strokes continued on her cheeks while the vision became clearer and her inner eyes adjusted to the darkness inside her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Hands gripped her around the middle as she was lowered from what must have been a shoulder. A tree, its bark thick and brittle, bit into her back, making her shoulders flinch at the new onslaught of pain. Her eyes wouldn’t open, and her lips felt as heavy as iron. The sound of rushing water was near enough that its movement came gentle as a caress.*

*In contrast to the soothing sounds, rocks dug into the back of her thighs and she realized with a start that she was naked. She wanted to raise her hands and cover her nakedness, but there was no strength in her arms. There was no strength anywhere in her body.*

*She wanted to live yet as her chin sank to her chest she understood her time was short.*

*A single tear slipped from beneath her lowered eyelids, leaving a trail down her crimson stained cheek. She had seemed so nice and yet now as wave after wave of pain washed over her, she knew she had made a fatal misjudgment. What she had taken for exciting and exotic had really been a mask covering evil. Pure, dangerous evil.*

*She would die in this cold and lonely place. The night birds rustled in the trees above her, a cool wind making the flesh rise on her bare arms and legs. She could do nothing except wait for the final breath to push from her chest.*

*In the distance her footsteps were fading as she walked away. Her laughter was soft but audible on the night breeze.*

*As the sounds died away, a heavy silence filled the night. Even if she had the strength to cry out, no one would hear. Her final thought was that she hoped someone nice would give her cat Lacy a home.*

*With one last shuddering breath she let go.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat’s eyes snapped open and the first thing she saw was Adam’s strong face.

“She’s dead.”

Martin had moved from his chair and was standing behind Adam watching Cat. “It reached out to you this time.”

“No,” she shook her head. “It was the victim I was inside not the creature.”

Her body was still buzzing with the sensations that were as close to real as possible. She could feel the bites to her skin, the searing pain that ripped along her neck and shoulders. It wasn't just the pain either; it was a bone-numbing cold that reminded her of the inside of a sub-zero freezer.

Cat looked up at the men and tried to explain. "I felt her pain and despair. The woman understood that her life had been stolen, and she was waiting to die."

Adam asked, "Could you tell where?"

Cat shook her head again. "No, she's been dumped, but I couldn't get a feel for where it is. Another tree by water, that's all I could tell. She was too weak to open her eyes though she was reaching out with her mind as if she understood somebody would hear her. This woman was special, and we can't waste what she tried to do."

Cat stopped and took a deep breath the lingering pain and despair washing over and through her. Right behind it was the fury that pushed everything else aside.

"Goddamn it, another one, and we couldn't stop her."

Both Adam and Martin looked at her sharply and she didn't care. *Get used to it boys.* She might have been raised a proper little rich girl but when she got riled, she could keep up with the best of the truckers. She had words she hadn't even used yet.

"What?" she wondered why they were giving her the odd man out look. At least until Adam spoke.

"Her?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The gods either hated him or loved him, and he wasn't quite sure which one was better. Martin had been harboring a sneaking suspicion since the word go what they were up against here, and now he was pretty damn sure.

He'd been marked since birth to accomplish one goal. He'd failed once already and had a very small window of opportunity to make it happen now. The real question was how? Last time he'd been blindsided one hundred and fifty percent. This time around he was much older, wiser and smarter. The problem, the very large problem, was that she was much older, wiser and, he suspected, smarter. She'd had a hell of a lot more time to get good at this. He'd had one lifetime and she'd had a dozen. The odds were most definitely in her favor.

What was on his side were the numbers. He had the power of the entire Anima Mundi and in this room with him today, two of its most powerful. With his own considerable skill, they formed a solid triad that would have the best chance for defeating her. If it was her. On the off chance he was wrong then they could very well be, as Catherine would put it, screwed.

He had lost track of her in London all those years ago and despite his best efforts, had been unable to track her. Perhaps now, working off the assumption that it was her, he might

be able to backtrack her movements. Rather than working forward as he'd been doing for years, he could reverse the search and see what he came up with. It might just prove to be the key they needed to get to her.

Time was another complication. If it was her, she'd work fast to get her physical body back into full power. She would have taken a healthy and willing donor, but there wasn't a body on this earthly planet that was comparable to the unearthly magnificence that she commanded through the blood. She'd discovered one of the secrets to immortality and used it with delighted abandon. Only one life mattered, and it was hers. All others were tools to euphoria.

She would kill quickly and in numbers. Broken and bloodless bodies would be littered across the city in a matter of days if she weren't stopped. This was less a case of history repeating itself than living history. Or rather living in her case, dying history for everyone in her path.

With the exception of Martin, and that was going to be her downfall.

## Chapter Twelve

“Martin?” Cat asked, “What are you thinking?”

He had moved away from both her and Adam and was leaning against the doorway his eyes dark and focused far away. A heavy silence that made Cat twitch fell over the room. She could toss in her own ideas and decided against it. Martin had his own way, and it didn't include the musings of an underling. He'd let them know what was on his mind in his own sweet time. Just as her fingers started tapping against her legs, Martin looked up his eyes now focused on her.

“I don't know. I have an idea but I need to get into some of the old files to see if what I'm thinking is even possible.”

She could push and it wouldn't do any good. She'd learned that the hard way a couple years back. With Martin there wasn't a soul who would get anything out of him until he was good and ready. And she did mean good and ready. He was a thorough thinker who would look at all the angles and possibilities before he'd go forward. It wasn't just at a mental level either. He wouldn't make a physical move without plotting the path first. Sometimes the frustration of it made her want to scream. She had a tendency to blast forward first and think later. She was a good student though and was learning patience. Wasn't her easiest subject by far.

Her thoughts turned back to her vision. The woman she'd seen was clearly beyond their ability to save. No one could live through the damage her body had sustained. She was as dead as Cat was alive. The best they could do for her was to continue to move forward and find the woman who took her life. They had to stop the bitch from killing again.

Sitting around wasn't accomplishing anything. Cat was as twitchy as if she'd fallen in a patch of poison ivy. While she was willing to let Martin take his time processing whatever it was he was processing, she wanted to move. Inactivity was driving her nuts.

“I can’t sit here any longer.”

It was well after midnight and sleep hadn’t been in abundance but after what she’d witnessed in her mind it was better than a good bet that sleep wouldn’t come her way anytime soon. She now had two dead girls to haunt her dreams and the threat of the big C tossed in just to keep things interesting.

“Can you and I drive around a bit, see if we can feel anything?” she asked Adam.

His nod surprised her given how late it was and how exhausted all three of them should be. Adam looked as jumpy as she did. Martin was another story. He was as pale as the thin white clouds that float through an otherwise sunny day. He looked about as substantial as one of those clouds. Maybe she should stay here with him instead.

He seemed to read her mind. Shaking his head and waving his hand in the air, he told her, “You go on. I have some more work to do here.”

“We can stay.”

Cat looked over at Adam who gave her a slight nod. There was a worry in his dark eyes that mirrored her own. All was not right with Martin.

“No,” he said to both of them. “Go.”

There was a tone to his voice that brooked no argument. Given that, she didn’t waste any time heading out the door and towards the car. They were moving before she had her seatbelt buckled.

The first place they stopped was down near the river in an old section of town called Peaceful Valley. It was an area going through a strong renewal effort. It was full of urban professionals updating the ancient and small homes that once housed the poor, the artists, and the forgotten. Adam stopped the car next to a sidewalk that could have gone through a minor bombing it was so broken and raised. She stepped over the uneven surface with care and made it to the rough but level grass on the other side. A few streetlights gave them a bit of spotty light.

As they walked along the grass behind the asbestos insulation factory that was now the ghost of a shell abandoned and reviled, she could hear the sound of the river as it flowed by clean and steady. The sound stopped her and she paused to close her eyes. The sound rolled through her body, rippling with a familiar rhythm. Her heart revved up a notch as the significance of the river hit her.

“That’s the sound I heard.”

Adam took her hand and pulled her close to his side. “I figured as much only it doesn’t help us.”

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, her brow wrinkled. She didn’t appreciate his pessimism.

“How can it not help?”

He walked with her towards the river's edge and stopped pointing both right and left at the water that flowed as far as she could see either direction. She didn't understand what he was trying to get across. There was nothing of distinction that stood out beyond the sound that she had heard clear as a bell during her vision. It was this river; she just knew it.

"What?"

"There are miles and miles of river," Adam said with a quiet patience. "She could have been dumped anywhere from the Idaho border to Tum Tum some thirty miles north of here. That's a hell of a lot of ground to cover."

He had a point, and in her excitement the elementary logic had gotten buried in emotion. She frowned, sighed and turned her back on the water. She wasn't as disappointed as saddened. Her hope was that they could find this poor woman before anyone else. The unfortunate person who stumbled on her body would be forever scarred. What Cat had seen in her vision was something that would sicken even the hardest. She didn't wish that on anyone, and if she could save someone from that, she would.

"Let's drive the streets."

Good intentions aside, they were not going to find her tonight. Hell, for that matter, they might not even find her tomorrow depending upon how well she'd been hidden by the killer. It could be days before some hiker stumbled across her cold, naked, and ravaged body. A quicker alternative might be to see if Cat could sense the room where the woman had been killed. Even though she hadn't seen it in the vision, she was pretty sure she had been killed in the same place as the other young girl.

She tried it out on Adam and for the second time tonight was surprised by how agreeable he was though he could be simply humoring her. They left the riverbank and headed back to his car. He held tighter to her hand as he helped her across the uneven ground and broken sidewalks. She didn't want to let go of him. There was something unnerving about what she'd witnessed inside her head, combined with the dark night, sounds of rushing water and rustling underbrush. Tough demon hunter that she was, it was the unknown that could scare her. She liked to know what she was fighting.

If she focused on the bitch, she could chase away the fear with anger. She liked anger a whole lot better than fear. This woman, whoever she was or had been, was killing attractive young women in a degrading and inhumane way. It made Cat's stomach turn to consider how brutalized the women had been. Judging from the pain she'd felt when she had been the mind of the second victim, there was little doubt that they'd discover the same kind of violence as with the first girl. It was not a good sign, and evil of that magnitude had to be stopped.

The anger began once again to bubble inside her chest and Cat settled into the feeling. Anger was good.

Traffic was light at this time of night, and Adam drove the quiet older streets of the city in a slow, methodical style. He cruised by the oldest buildings, regardless of their

location or condition. The place they were seeking could as easily be located in what appeared to be abandoned buildings as in one of the newly renovated buildings being brought back to a new and useful life.

The night was quiet as if the two of them were the sole two people awake. Around them the buildings and the spirits were at rest and not open to the probing of her mind. To say it was frustrating was an understatement. She wanted to find her and wanted to find her now. Under duress Cat would exercise patience but it wasn't her strong point. More like bullheaded and determined.

By two-thirty Adam yawned and looked over at her with a shrug. "I don't think we're going to find her tonight and this dog is tired."

"Shit."

"Tsk, tsk," he admonished. "Such language for a lady."

"And who told you I was a lady?"

"You have a point."

She smacked him in the arm.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Wake up, Martin. Wake up and see me."*

*His eyes opened and once again she stood before him in the luscious black velvet. Her skin was as smooth and beautiful as fine porcelain and just beyond the reach of his outstretched hand. Her eyes glittered full of mischief and life.*

*"Wake up, my little muse. Come out and play with me."*

*"What do you want?" he whispered as cold, black dread began rolling up his back and tightening across his chest in a band of pain. He struggled to breathe.*

*Her laughter, so full of mirth, was real and deep, "Oh, you foolish man," she told him as she leaned forward, her breasts straining against the velvet bodice. "I want your soul, what else is there?"*

*The pain was pouring through him like molten lava pushing towards the sea, searing hot and unstoppable. He pushed away from pain and focused on the woman.*

*"NO."*

*Her laughter consumed the air around him making him want to scream, if only he could, but the air seemed to have been sucked out of his chest. Instead she touched his face, her fingertips sending shards of pain deep into his skull.*

*"You don't have a choice, my love. You don't have a choice and never did. I will come for you. I will drink your blood, and I will take your soul."*

*"NO."*



*“Oh, yes.” She leaned over, her breath warm against his ear. “Oh, yes. You and your kind, you think you can stop me but just as you failed before you will once more. I am here again, old man, and I am young, beautiful, and strong. And unlike you, I am here to stay.”*

*His breath was ragged. He had to stop her. He had to but he didn't know how.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of a door closing jolted Martin awake. Bloody hell, it was more difficult to hold on as the days marched by. The dreams were becoming more vivid and realistic, which did not leave him with that cozy feeling.

He had to find her, and now.

Martin had suspected even before Catherine's last vision that it was Bathory. It might have been fifty years since they'd stood face to face, but that didn't fog his memory one bit. He'd know her in a second. She was as familiar to him as his own face. She was the most dangerous and destructive woman he'd encountered.

He'd come up against her one other time and she'd almost killed him. He didn't have any illusions that he'd make it through this time. He was old and he was sick, not a great combination for a powerful hunter. As long as she went down with him, nothing else mattered.

His one saving grace was the youngsters, even though they would balk at being described as youngsters. They were in fact middle-aged adults who had seen much in their years. To him they were youngsters who still had decades left to live and to hunt. It was a calling that didn't provide either retirement or a retirement plan. He should know that better than anyone as he held the record for being the oldest hunter in the long history of the Order. It was a dangerous profession that took too many before their time. What they saw and what they had to do left an indelible impression that didn't make for long and happy lives. That's not to say he was unhappy. On the contrary, he felt that he would be leaving the world a better place for having been in it.

If there was such a place as heaven, he was relatively certain he'd earned the right to enter. If heaven was only an invention of man and the afterlife was nothing more than the peace and quiet of not being unwell, that was fine, too. His entire adult life had brimmed with constant turmoil so to simply sleep the good sleep was not troubling to his mind. It was more relief than troubling.

Then again there was always the possibility that death was a move into another dimension. Hadn't his friend, the quantum physics professor, maintained that the world was a maze of dimensions that souls moved through from life to life? If Earl was right, then Martin hoped his next dimension would turn out to be one filled with sunlight, flowers, and a good woman. Yes, a good woman would be nice. No monsters or evil beings, just one good

woman to walk with and talk to. To live beside and grow old with. It wasn't an unreasonable request.

"One woman," Martin murmured into the darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was deserted this time of night, the shifting water below the bridge swooshing by in a never-ending sweep towards the mighty Columbia River. The air was electric, full of scents and sounds that made her tingle from head to foot. Stars littered the sky above her in a canopy of twinkling lights.

The night was glorious, reminding her of the rich fall days of her homeland. Someday she would make the journey back to trace the passage of her lands and title. She'd gotten close some fifty odd years ago until *he* had stopped her. It had infuriated her to be taken down and at the same time had enthralled her. He had been a worthy adversary.

Martin Ludlum had been gorgeous in those days. Tall and dark haired, his British accent had been music to her ears. His aristocratic upbringing had been in concert with her own and under the right circumstances he could have been a valuable ally. That silly little woman he'd been in love with had bored Elizabeth to tears. He should have thanked her for what she'd done instead of embracing fury.

Ah, but then so many times throughout the uncountable years her actions had been misunderstood. There had been purpose in everything she had accomplished. A higher meaning that the lower classes were incapable of understanding. She'd believed Ludlum would, and she'd been wrong. Though he'd come from better stock and breed, his mind had not been ready for the truth. He'd not only despised her for setting him free, he'd destroyed the human form she'd occupied, sending her soul back into the waiting limbo.

Now it was her turn. He'd exacted his revenge on her and she'd afford him the same courtesy. She'd have a little fun along the way, after all what good was living life again and again if one didn't throw in a little adventure to give it all some spice?

She'd reached out and touched him while he slept, filling his mind with her beauty and her spirit. It was ridiculous how easy it was. Sometimes she forgot that he was a man and they all fell to her feet in worship. Ludlum would be no different and when he fell, she would take him, swift and bloody, just as he had done to her on that dark, rainy London night.

"Goodnight, sweet prince." Her whispered words wafted down towards the ever-moving water. "We shall meet again soon."

Tossing a kiss to the stars, Elizabeth turned and walked towards the shore. Her shoes made a tiny click against the metal of the footbridge that sounded like the tapping of a woodpecker against one of the tall trees. It was a glorious night.

## Chapter Thirteen

Back at Adam's house they sat once more in his big office absorbed in their individual thoughts. Cat thought about how they might all be searching for a common goal but they worked it in slightly different ways in order to reach the same conclusion. The hunters were scattered throughout the world because darkness waited in every country and in every corner of the earth. They lived and worked wherever they were needed, coming together when necessary.

Under normal circumstances, and she used that term loosely, a couple of hunters could track down evil and destroy it with few problems but today she wasn't so sure. Cat had yet to encounter an evil strong enough to erase all traces of itself like this one was doing. It had her adopting a healthy dose of wariness instead of her normal bull-in-a-china-shop technique. Would she be strong enough or would the three of them together be strong enough to face it down? Whoever this bitch turned out to be, she had to be an old and powerful demon to pull this off. The whole thing left Cat more than a little uneasy.

After about half an hour of dead silence Adam pushed his chair back and looked over at Cat, his eyes smoky and troubled. There were dark circles under his eyes that made him look older than he was.

"I don't know." The note of frustration in his voice echoed what she was feeling. "And we can't sit here all night."

If he was expecting an argument from her, he wasn't going to get one. It was hard enough traipsing around the world slaying dragons and demons when she had an idea what she was up against. The unknown that was happening here was frightening. Even more so when she knew deep down that others were going to die if they didn't find her soon. She didn't want to be the one to make the mistakes that would lead to more people dying. She should be able to make this stop.

“Come on,” Adam told her as he walked towards the door. “You and I both need a little shut-eye. I hate to be the one to break the news, but you don’t look so hot.”

“Hey,” she protested. “I resent that, I think.”

“Don’t, because I don’t mean it in a bad way. It’s just that you have circles under your eyes and your skin is so pale I have the urge to go get a sun lamp and bake you under it for a few hours.”

Adam paused in the doorway, leaning a shoulder against the frame, his arms folded across his chest. He focused his gaze on her, searching her face with those dark unnerving eyes.

“So what’s up, Cat? What’s really up?”

She knew where he was going with this and she was too tired to give it a run. “Nothing,” she lied.

“Liar.”

Well, so much for that tactic, like she’d held any hope that it would work with him. There would be no getting around this wolf-boy who could smell a rat a mile away. It was more than that though, it was as if he could see inside her, even hear her thoughts. She’d believed the first time she had been around him that he could read minds. He’d since reassured her, several times, that he couldn’t actually read minds. He’d tried to explain to Cat that it was more a sense of what people were thinking and feeling. Whatever it was, he was damned good at it.

“Okay, okay.” She shrugged, figuring a little honesty wouldn’t hurt. “It’s a couple of things.”

“Like ...”

“Like this hunt. Adam, this woman’s dangerous; I can feel it in every fiber of my body. She’s like the daughter of Hitler or maybe Ivan the Terrible, and I don’t know if I can stop her. I’m afraid more are going to die before I can find her.”

“You’re not alone in this, you know.”

She waved her hand over her head. Of course she knew what he meant and yet the feeling in her heart grabbed on like the fight was all hers.

“I know, Adam, it’s just that it feels personal.”

He nodded without saying a word. His eyes still held hers and the silence hung between them. Damn him, but he had a way of setting her on edge. His gaze lingered on her face, the dark eyes bottomless and full of secrets that she couldn’t even begin to make out. It made her feel exposed and that was one weird feeling. He’d made her feel like this the very first time they’d met and it wasn’t any better now, even considering they’d shared the most intimate thing a man and a woman could. She wondered what it would be like to have a normal relationship with a regular guy. Oh, wait a minute, she’d tried that once and got a big fat F for her trouble.

“All right,” she muttered. “You are a problem for me! There, are you happy?”

“Me? What?”

“Oh, you can be such an ass,” she whispered.

“Heard that once or twice before.”

She snorted in a most unladylike manner and then took a deep breath. “You set me on edge. I don’t know if I should kiss you or kick you.”

“Kind of extreme emotions, don’t you think?”

“Damned right, Dr. Freud, but that’s it, plain and simple. I had a relatively uncomplicated life seeing visions and fighting demons before you pranced in and messed things up.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever pranced.”

“Ha ha, you know what I mean.”

“You think you haven’t messed with my life?” he growled, the change in tone making her head snap up.

Fair enough question even if it did blindside her. As selfish as it sounded she hadn’t given much thought to how she might be affecting Adam. She guessed she’d taken for granted he was a stereotypical man who bedded a woman, had a good time and went on his merry way. She wouldn’t admit that to him, whatever else he might think of her, confirming that she was self-centered and closed-minded wasn’t the thing that was going to win him as a friend or keep him as a lover.

“I suppose it’s a possibility.”

Her admission seemed to be what he was searching for. In an instant his eyes filled with mischief and despite everything that was happening around them, Cat had the impression he was enjoying the hot seat he had her on. Adam had enough layers that it was hard to pin him down, and yet rather than putting her off it intrigued her even more.

In a perfect world scenario Cat envisioned living an uncomplicated life or as uncomplicated as it could be given her profession. Personal entanglements hadn’t been on her radar screen. Now Adam was in her world and uncomplicated was about the last thing it was. Still, she had the strangest desire to work her way through each and every layer of the complex man just to find out what made him tick. She wanted to see the beauty of the beast. He was like no other man she’d ever met, and that fascinated her. Then again, she hadn’t met any shape shifters before, so it wasn’t like she had much to compare against. That aside, he wasn’t going out of his way to make it easy -- not, she suspected, that he wanted to. Nobody had to tell her he enjoyed the way he shook her up. Must be the alpha power thing.

“Ah ha,” he responded, obviously putting all his education to use with such a concise reply.

“Oh, please,” she moaned. “I surrender. I’m sorry I took off on you before. I’m sorry I haven’t talked to you but you have to understand, Adam, you scare the bejesus out of me.

I've never felt this way before and I've been avoiding you. Avoiding whatever it is between us that makes me feel so ..."

"So what?"

She knew what he wanted; it was in his eyes and in the way he'd treated her since walking through the door. She stood up and walked over to him, standing very close, her hands on the front of his shirt. His arms fell from his chest to rest on her hips. He was hot underneath the cotton shirt, the heat sending waves of electricity up her arms.

"So lost when you're not around, so happy when I see your face, so excited when I touch you that all I want to do is throw you on the floor and ..."

His lips cut off the flow of words, his kiss deep and thrilling. Yes, this was it, the abandon that swept her away on a tide of sensation that she'd only experienced one other time. She invited his kiss, opened her lips and welcomed the intimacy of his tongue touching hers.

*Soul mate.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth strolled down the deserted street inhaling the clean fresh scent of night and reveling in the solitude. Streetlights dotted the sidewalk with evenly spaced pools of gold and above her a full moon tried to compete. She swung her arms and smiled.

The cruiser pulled to a stop ten yards or so ahead of her and the tall uniformed officer who stepped out made her brows raise. Not bad for a boy in blue.

"Officer," she said in a polite and calm voice.

"May I see some identification?"

"Unfortunately I left my purse back at the church."

"The church?"

She smiled at him, knowing full well that it made her even more attractive than usual. She could feel the flush of the kill flowing through her body, giving her not just beauty but strength.

"Yes sir," she told him with as contrite a tone as she could manage. "I am staying at St. Peter's, just around the corner."

"Your name?"

"Amanda McAnulty." Confident as she was, Elizabeth didn't like having to give out Amanda's name, considering that she was a convicted felon and that could cause problems with this do-gooder policeman. She couldn't tell him her true name because if he checked with Reverend John, he'd have no idea who Elizabeth Bathory might be and would wonder why Amanda was using an assumed name. No matter which way she viewed it, giving a name at all was bound to be a problem.

“Amanda, what are you doing out at three in the morning?”

She shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep and thought that perhaps a walk around the block would help.”

“Not a good idea these days, especially this time of night.”

“Officer, it’s been quiet and I haven’t seen a soul. Not a dangerous person anywhere.”

“Nonetheless --” He opened the rear door to his cruiser. “-- I’ll drop you at the church.”

She was not excited about this little twist. “I’m only around the corner.”

“I insist,” he said, his eyes narrowing.

To argue any further would be ill advised. He was looking at her with eyes that said he’d believe her as long as she didn’t push one step further. It went against her grain to submit, but there were moments when it served her purpose.

“Well, then I accept your gracious offer.”

He waited in the driveway until Elizabeth had unlocked the parish house door and closed it behind her. From the darkened window she watched in the shadows as he remained a few minutes longer than necessary before pulling out and driving off into the night.

She’d have to be more careful.

## Chapter Fourteen

Cat moaned and Adam deepened the kiss, the burning hunger racing through his body and coiling around her. Adam held her tight against his chest and the beat of his heart was so strong against his ribs she could feel it vibrating against her own. His hands on her hips pulled her tighter and his need for her was clear. In that moment her own desire rose with such strength that she moaned again, as much for the depth of her need as the rock hard feel of him against her hips. She wanted nothing more than to stay here and make love to him, to pretend nothing else existed except the two of them.

Safe from the world. Safe from the unseen. Safe from her own crippling doubts.

“Come,” he said, breathing hard against her lips. He didn’t wait for her answer, instead caught her hands and led her towards the stairs.

The call for words was long gone if it ever even existed. Inside the door to his bedroom he caught her hand again and pulled her to his body once more. He captured her mouth with his, the kiss hotter and deeper, filled with an urgency that he’d earlier hidden with calm words and gentle teasing. All that was gone, now replaced by a roaring fire that threatened to consume them both.

With his foot Adam shoved the door closed, the latch making what sounded like a thunderous click. Then darkness whispered over them like Dracula’s cape. In the darkness he caught the edge of her shirt and pulled it over her head in a fluid motion that had cool air winging across her skin. She gasped as his hand slid under her light bra as much from shock as from the feel of his hot fingertips against her breast. It wasn’t enough and she wanted much more.

Cat’s hands pulled at the buttons of his shirt, the need to touch him overpowering everything else. Impatient with her fumbling hands Adam leaned away and stripped his shirt



off, tossing it away. Together they moved towards the bed, hands and lips touching and tasting as the remainder of their clothing fell away.

Naked, with the back of her legs against the bed, Adam growled low in his chest, the sound part man, part animal, all of it making her gasp. One hand found the small of her back as his head dipped and he took a nipple in his mouth. The sensation was a bolt of lightning that made her clutch at his shoulders pulling his head even closer. How she had missed the fire that roared whenever they touched.

The need for him was intense, like nothing she'd ever felt before. Even in Romania she had held back but now she wanted nothing less than total release. She longed to know what it was like to give everything, absolute submission to the hunger for this man who had crept silently inside her mind and her soul.

Adam lifted his head and looked at her. Even in the darkness she could see the light that gleamed in his black eyes, a mirror of her own intense feelings. The animal reared in him, the raw sexual need didn't define him, yet enveloped him, all at the same time, flaming the already fueled fire.

What he'd told her earlier was right on; she wasn't in this alone.

Cat slid her hands from the back of his head, moving them slowly down his shoulders and his arms, finally tumbling backwards with him onto the bed. Her hands continued to move on him from his chest to his flat stomach where the dark hairs curled around her fingers and then lower. Adam sucked in a swift breath as she caught and held him in the warmth of her hand.

"Sweet Jesus," he groaned, his head thrown back.

The heat roared through her and holding back wasn't an option. His hands urged her close and she slipped a leg over to straddle him, her body suspended just enough that they weren't quite touching. She stayed there suspended like a drop of rain that had yet to fall and wondered for a tiny moment if she was getting in too deep. He'd told her they were mates and so be it. She wasn't about to fight the inevitable. At least not right now.

"Touch me," Adam whispered, his hips arching into her hand. "Feel what you do to me and how you set me on fire. Let me feel you. Please."

That last plea, full of honesty and throaty passion surprised her. That sense of surprise shifted in an instant into a feeling of power and Cat closed her eyes savoring the moment. So this was abandon. She had the alpha in the palm of her hand in more ways than one and it felt good. A smile turned up the corners of her mouth.

Dropping her body with agonizing slowness she drew him inside of her, the sensation sending her pulse racing. His hands gripped her bottom as she moved up and down with a slow and easy rhythm that contrasted with the crashing tides that roared through her body. Soon he was matching her stroke for stroke and the fire grew from a smolder to a conflagration. She didn't know when it flipped but it did. She may have started it but Adam

took charge, the alpha re-emerging and ending it with a deep thrust and a guttural moan that sounded more like the beast than the man.

She collapsed on top of him. *I ran from this?*

Her head against the damp hair of his chest, Cat could hear the rapid beat of his heart. The quickness of the beats matched what she felt in her own chest. She inhaled the heady scent of him, wanting to hold him like this forever, the darkness and the silence a blanket of comfort that had been missing in her life. She felt safe, and maybe even more important, she felt loved both physically and emotionally. That was a new one to her and not unpleasant, even if it was a little frightening.

As her heart slowed, she shifted to lie beside him with her head on his arm.

“Wow,” she murmured.

“Wow indeed.” He moved to kiss the top of her head.

“I um ...” She began stroking his stomach with a feather soft touch.

He grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. “Don’t,” he warned and she knew he wasn’t referring to gentle strokes of her fingertips.

“But, Adam ...”

He rolled on his side and propped his head on one hand, his eyes staring down at her. “I’m not going to let you make any more excuses or talk yourself out of what we have.”

“Which is?” she challenged.

“What it is.”

“Well that nails it right down.”

He gave her a wry smile. “You get too caught up in absolutes, Catherine. Sometimes you just have to accept that things are, for no other reason than that.”

“They just are?”

“They just are.”

“That doesn’t make sense to me, Adam. I know in your world it does. You’re so very sure of yourself and of us, but I’m not.”

“You think I’m so sure of myself?”

“Yes. You know what to do, how to do it, and you’re never wrong.”

He laughed and dropped back to the pillow his eyes on the ceiling. “That’s rich. Me? The guy who married a lesbian? Never wrong? I don’t think so.”

“So what about that?” She snuggled closer to keep the warmth. She had to admit the story intrigued her. She couldn’t imagine him with another woman, let alone not recognizing when a woman’s real attraction was directed at a different sex. Not only was it intriguing, it somehow made him more human. More like her.

His voice was soft in the darkness, almost hesitant as if the memory was painful. “College romance, a beautiful six-foot-tall Blackfoot from Montana. She was a stunner and

more fun than a guy could hope for. Of course in those days I was all for a good time. Long story short, we got married right after graduation and I thought, no, I knew, that I knew everything. Even our families approved of the marriage, cementing my already cocky opinion of myself. Sure I was a Spokane and she was a Blackfoot, but it worked and everyone was happy. Except, I came to find out, Terra. Six months into the marriage, she bailed. Or I should say, Terra and her girlfriend bailed, leaving me to lick my tail, and I do mean that literally.”

“I’m sorry.” Her hand rested on his still hot chest.

He rolled back over to face her, their noses almost touching. “Don’t be. Oh, yeah, I was embarrassed for quite a while. I spent every spare minute back in school. I worked during the day and sat in classrooms at night just to keep myself too busy to think about it. Everyone thought I was driven. You know, the guy who could never get enough knowledge. Nothing that noble, it was good old-fashioned cowardice, which is how I ended up with a wall full of degrees.”

“Here I thought you were another Einstein.”

“Not even close. It was my way of hiding, and it worked until I figured out that what had happened was nobody’s fault. Terra couldn’t help what she was any more than I could change what I was. Think about it, Cat; being a shape shifter isn’t exactly the kind of thing that enhances your resumé, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I suppose not,” Cat told him with a quiet laugh. “Especially if your potential employer is a cat person.”

“No shit,” he said with an uncharacteristic curse.

She touched his face with her fingertips. “You come across as so certain all the time while I’m floundering around wondering what the hell I’m doing and if I’m going to get somebody hurt.”

“You have more courage than you give yourself credit for and you’ve saved a lot of people heartache and injury. With me it’s more belief than conviction. I have to believe what I’m doing is right or one of these days I’ll make a fatal mistake and someone will die who shouldn’t. I’ve learned some hard lessons along the way that have pretty much trashed my post-college arrogance. I think I know what I’m doing most of the time these days, but I believe I’m right and that’s what you see as confidence. You believe in your heart --” He touched a finger to her chest. “-- that what you’re doing is right, too. The only difference between us is that you keep it close.”

“And with us?”

“Since the day I laid eyes on you I’ve felt it in my soul. The brutal truth is that Terra was beautiful, fun, a diversion and a huge mistake. You are beautiful, intelligent, sexy as hell, and forever. This isn’t something I think, Cat; this I know.”

She envied his sense of conviction and the way he seemed to understand at an instinctive level. Things had changed so much for her during the last five years, and it was difficult to just let go and believe like Adam had found a way to do. The very foundations of her beliefs, her sense of trust, had been all but shattered, and now he asked to her to let go and just accept. She felt it in her heart just as he did, but her mind didn't want to let go of the defenses that so far had kept her from being hurt again.

"How can you be so sure?"

He tipped her lips up to meet his. "I just am, and it's not the cocky boy who stepped out of the University of Washington with his first diploma thinking he was master of the universe who is declaring his undying love. This a man who has loved and lost, who has seen things no one should ever have to but who knows what is real and what is not."

"But you were wrong about Terra." That might be cruel but she had to know the difference; it was important.

He leaned his face into her and she could feel his smile against her cheek. "I was young and full of enough hormones for three guys. I'm not like that anymore. I'm not young. I'm not foolish, and I have definitely learned the difference between love and lust. I also know when the two merge for something far greater than either one alone."

"And we have that."

"Oh, yeah." He pulled her to him. "No doubt about it."

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Adam and Catherine came into the office at a little after five, Martin had banished the despair of the dream, relegating it to a place in his mind that he would come back to later so that he could review, analyze, and try to make sense of it. All he was dead certain of at the moment was that the dream was not the random firing of his brain during sleep despite what many of the new researchers were claiming. That theory might prove true for other people but not for him. Bathory was communicating she was aware he was searching for her. That absolute certainty brought stakes up a notch or two.

Catherine came through the door first looking exhausted. The dark black circles under her eyes aged her beyond her thirty-five years and Adam, who followed close on her heels, wasn't quite up for *GQ* either. The most troubling part was that they hadn't made any ground and both of his hunters looked as though they had been through a week-long losing battle.

"Go back upstairs and get some sleep," he told them. He would feel better if they were rested and alert. In other words he wanted them at one hundred percent and not the sixty or so he was seeing now.

"Sure," Catherine told him with a smile that erased a little of the fatigue from her face. "You first."

“Ah, but that’s where I have you, young one. I’ve been sleeping right here in this comfortable chair.”

Cat snorted and shook her head. “Oh, yes, I can see how comfortable that chair is. Right up there with a bed of nails. Seriously, Martin, you look about ready to tip over from exhaustion.”

“Well I admit this is taking a toll on me. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“None of us are,” Cat said. “Speaking for myself, I was able to grab at least a couple hours of shut-eye so I’m rearing to go.”

Her face was set in a mask of determination he’d seen before. Martin guessed the chances of getting her to even try to sleep a bit longer were slim to none. Adam’s face mirrored her weariness, broken only by a gleam in his eyes. With sudden insight Martin’s eyes narrowed and he wondered about that claim of two hours of sleep. How much was sleep and how much was ...

Adam had stopped in the doorway a spot Martin was beginning to view as Adam’s favorite resting place. His voice banished any more talk of sleep.

“Might as well admit that none of us are going to sleep well until we end this thing.”

Once again Adam had a point. Sleep sounded like a good solution and it would help them think, as long as they were actually sleeping and not what he suspected they’d been doing. The real question was whether any of them would be able to close their eyes and drift away. He doubted it. They were of one troubled mind, and they might as well take Adam’s lead.

Martin nodded and Adam went on. “So let’s finish it.”

## Chapter Fifteen

It was amazing what sex could do for a person. Even given the turmoil from the day before and the whopping two hours of sleep that she and Adam were able to grab, the rumble with wolfman had her blood rushing. Martin might think she'd looked like death warmed over, but she didn't feel that way. Right now she felt charged and brimming with determination. She wanted to find the bitch and find her today. There would be plenty of time for sleep later.

Another woman had been killed and that knowledge pushed her to make up the ground they'd failed to achieve over the last thirty-six hours. It was going to happen soon. The little pieces of information they'd been pulling from the files and history books were going to gel; they just had to. The fact they now knew it was a woman was a bonus strike. That narrowed it down by half, and she'd take any advantage she could.

Adam was alone in the office when she came back in with a cup of the coffee. Martin must have decided to take a break after all. She walked around behind Adam and put a hand on his shoulder. His muscles were tense beneath her hand, and it made her lean over so she could take a good look at his face. Beneath the perpetual tan that gave him that fit look in any season, she could see the strain that darkened his already dark eyes.

"Adam." She squeezed his shoulder before pulling up a chair next to the desk where he was peering at the computer screen.

"Don't even say it, Cat."

"What was I going to say?"

His fingers stopped moving on the keys as he pushed back a little in his chair. Raising his hands to his head, he ran his fingers through the long dark hair he hadn't bothered to braid since their earlier tumble. "That I need to talk about this."

"So you can read my mind?"

He closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, before opening them and looking deep into her eyes. "Yeah, I guess I can."

Now coming from anybody else that comment might have come off as a joke but from Adam, not hardly.

"Damn," she muttered. "I suspected all along you could, but I was hoping."

That made him smile a little, chasing away some of the fatigue from his face. "Not to worry, it doesn't work quite that way. I can't *read* your mind per se, I just have a sense of what's going on inside that pretty little skull of yours."

"Ha, ha, flattery is going to get you nowhere."

"Who needs flattery?"

She shook her head. "Lack of sleep and an overabundance of the nasty doesn't seem to have dulled your wit any."

"No." His eyes narrowed and a tiny smile made him look more like a predator than a man.

He was still looking at her in a way that made her want to jump right smack in the middle of his lap. The man had the strangest effect on her and she was beginning to think she could get used to it. It would be a better idea right now to keep her mind on the present and not on the possible.

"Quit trying to change the subject. Talk to me. Tell me what you've found. I'm not going away so you might as well give it up Rover."

He turned his electric gaze away from her and back to the computer screen. He was all business. "I've got several potential sites that I have a strong feeling will yield our hidden room. From there we can backtrack to our killer."

"That's great."

If Adam could get them into the general vicinity, she had no doubt she'd be able to lead the way to the room. From there they should be able to take the hunt to conclusion. She knew today was going to be different.

The air in the room changed and her body went on alert. Each time they got to the core of the hunt, the physical tracking that is, her blood raced and her body buzzed. Maybe it was because she understood what evil unchecked could do that made her a predator in her own right. When the opportunity presented itself to take it down, she would with no hesitation and no second thought. Those were two things that could make a girl dead in a hurry.

So much lived in the world unseen and unclean, yet people went about their daily lives unaware. It was more than being unaware. From personal experience she'd found that people didn't want to know. In fact, the death of that young woman the other night had barely made the news, and why? Because she had been at the bottom of society, a girl who had sold her body to survive. Not worth much by the standards of the proper society.

That pissed Cat off.

That victim had been a woman who regardless of the station life had handed to her, had been young, with an entire lifetime ahead of her. It didn't matter a tinker's damn to Cat if she'd spent that life at the top or the bottom of the social ladder. That wasn't the point. The point was that the murdered girl had been entitled to a life, good, bad, or otherwise, and the fact that it had been stripped from her was something that demanded justice. Cat's kind of justice.

The beauty of the Order was its nonjudgmental nature. At least as far as the victims went. They did indeed pass judgment on the wicked, functioning outside of the recognized laws as judge, jury, and executioner. Never would she have guessed in a million years that she'd consider herself an executioner, but she'd be damned if that's not what she was. What they all were. And who would know it to look at them?

She glanced over at Adam again and considered how unlikely looking a crew of executioners they presented. First there was Martin, over eighty and still six feet tall with a stock of paper-white hair, green eyes, and the pale skin of one accustomed to cloudy climates. Reed-thin with long fingers, he looked more like a concert pianist than death coming armed with a rapier. And then there was Adam, enough taller than Cat that at times she had the urge to jump on a chair just to be able to look straight into his eyes. She guessed of the three of them, he probably came across as the most dangerous between his height, his obvious strength, and a heritage that he wore with the pride it deserved. Adam could command a room by doing nothing more than walking into it. Still she didn't think most people had even a tiny clue how dangerous he was and what he was capable of when the situation called for it.

Then there was Cat, all five-foot-five, one hundred and ten pounds of her. A skinny, medium height, middle-aged woman with a fondness for blue jeans and sweatshirts didn't scare most people. Sure, she would have loved to be six feet tall with a sculpted body and long, shiny hair, just the sort of supermodel bionic woman look that inspired confidence. But nature hadn't shared her vision. There were advantages, however, in being endowed with run-of-the-mill looks; she could blend in with ease and that had played to her advantage more than once.

Evil knew the Anima Mundi. It expected and watched for it. It saw it as special so when an ordinary person like Cat came looking, who would pay attention? She might be skinny and regular looking but looks could be deceptive. She was gifted, strong, and motivated. Necuratul had killed the one person closest to her in the entire world, and as long as there was a single breath in her body, she would fight and destroy as many of them as she could. This skinny old broad was far more powerful and deadly than she looked, just like Martin, Adam, and the rest of the Order. To underestimate any of one of them was to risk signing a death warrant.



Right now she needed to get a new warrant signed and ready to go; all that was missing was a name and a location. Adam seemed confident they'd have the location before sunset and if she knew Martin like she thought she did, he'd have a name for them as well. He was like a bulldog with a bone when it came to identifying the enemy. By the time she and Adam returned today, he'd know whom they were chasing.

Thinking about Martin made her frown. If she were to say Martin had looked like hell when they had come downstairs a few minutes ago, she'd be saying it in kindness only. Truth of the matter was he was scaring her. The skin on his face had become so white it was almost transparent. She had looked over at Adam to see the same concern echoed on his face. Martin was not well, and she didn't care what he said about his condition. The cancer had to be further along than he was letting on.

Adam got up from the computer and grabbed a sheet of paper from the printer. Putting the folded paper into his pocket, he snagged his jacket off the back of the chair and motioned for her to follow. The hunt was about to begin anew.

She glanced up at the stairs before following Adam out the front door. Something tugged at her heart and it was all she could do to drag herself out the door and away from Martin. It was as if she were leaving her father because Martin had been that to her. She'd never been that close to her own and then he'd died before she'd finished grade school. The conflict pulled her in two different directions. The hunt drew at her mind and a premonition dragged at her heart. She needed to follow Adam and at the same time wanted to stay right here with Martin to make it better; to make him better. No matter what she wanted to do, the truth was that she couldn't. Not Cat or anybody else would be able to make Martin better. She turned away from the empty stairs and followed Adam out the front door

She would do the only thing she could. She would hunt.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Amanda?"

His voice was soft, hopeful and it made her smile. *Soon*, she thought, *we shall see what's behind that collar.*

She turned from where she stood looking out the back door of the church. "Reverend."

His smile was sly, the kind that made the women of his parish feel safe and cared for and made women like her want to use him. In her former life she'd had her servants, who dutifully found her prey and then disposed of them once her work was done. With each successive return, she was required to rebuild her staff of loyalists. It was a tedious process that was necessary just the same. Looking at the mousy man across from her, it occurred to Elizabeth that with the right motivation, John might hold potential. It was possible that he might be useful to her and if not, well who would miss one aging minister of a church long past its prime?

“I have to leave for a conference in Seattle this afternoon,” he told her.

“Have a pleasant trip.”

“I’ll be back in the morning if you should need anything, I’ve left my cellular number on the desk in my office. Please feel free to call me.”

She didn’t miss the emphasis. She never did.

“Of course, Reverend.”

He started to leave then paused. “I know I probably don’t need to remind you but I feel it’s my duty to do so. You are under my supervision and I need you to stay on the premises during my absence.”

“You have my word.” Elizabeth used her index finger to cross her heart.

His smile became brighter and he turned to leave. “Until tomorrow then.”

“Until then.”

A few minutes later the sound of his car long distant, Elizabeth went back to her room, where she put on pearls and the ruby ring she had loved for centuries. The feel of them against her skin was electric. The pearls seemed to glow the minute they touched the bare skin of her neck, and she rubbed her hands over them, relishing the power.

She slipped out of the parish house, careful to look around as she made her way to the church. Once in the hideaway her eyes lingered on the casket that glowed in candlelight. She walked over to it, stopping to caress the sides with the palms of her hands. As before it was empty save for the fine dust that covered the bottom. Her eyes on the dust, she remembered the night all those years ago when another woman gave her the kiss of life. She, like Amanda, had been beautiful on the outside and wicked on the inside, a perfect host and a delightful partner.

Taking her hands away from the coffin, they went to the buttons of her shirt. She slipped out of her clothes, standing naked in the dusk of the room except for the jewelry. Hoisting herself up, she brought her legs up and over the side of the casket, lying down atop the dusty remains. The dust against the skin of her back, legs, and buttocks was warm and tingling. With her head on the ancient pillow of shattered satin, Elizabeth closed her eyes. At first her hands toyed with the pearls, slipping them through and around her fingers. Then as she lay in the coffin with her eyes closed, images rolled through her mind, visions of past lives and future promises.

\* \* \* \* \*

“There are three places I think we should start with,” Adam told Cat after a few minutes of driving that seemed to her to be aimless. There was, however, a method to his madness, or so he made it sound.

Adam maneuvered the big SUV around curving streets lined with old trees tall and broad enough to block out chunks of daylight. He guided it down one narrow street that

traversed a rather steep hill, and it amazed her that there was enough room for the big rig to even use the ancient street. If there had been cars parked on both sides, there wouldn't have been. At the bottom stood a brick building that one quick glance told her had once upon a time been a school. The trees broke there and bathed in clear warm sunlight she could envision children racing across the generous grasses that spread out like a blanket from all sides of the building. The green grass of the play yard was long gone and was now a tangle of yellowing weeds that hadn't seen a lawnmower in a decade or more. Still, it wasn't quite abandoned either. Signs of life were obvious in the windows as well as the trashcans at the side doors and the fresh marks of vehicle tires that creased the yellowed yard.

Adam stopped the car and they both got out. He walked around the school in one direction while she walked the other. The pulse of lives that once came here to grow and learn flowed in, around, and through her. There were wisps of laughter and concentration. There were streaks of pain and sorrow as well. She tilted her head and absorbed the energy before walking across the yard to stand next to the brick. With a deep breath Cat centered then put her hands on the wall that was warm from the morning sun. Anticipating a possible jolt she was surprised at the low voltage visions that fluttered across her field of vision. Nothing more than the ghosts of the past were held in the heart of the bricks. Whatever had occurred here was a distant memory. It seemed obvious that someone inhabited the building now but his or her presence was innocuous. She wasn't here.

Stepping back, Cat eyed the building, understanding why Adam had tagged it during his research as a real possibility. It was old and sturdy, a receptacle for the past, the present, and the future. It held all the requisite elements of the room she'd seen in her visions. It wasn't what they were looking for, though it was far from finished. Life was waiting ahead for the structure that wasn't scarred with blood and violence.

She went back to the car as Adam came around from the far side of the school.

"Nothing," she told him. "You?"

"Not a thing. I didn't really think this was the place but it fit the age of what I believe we're looking for. The other two are more likely candidates."

"Shall we?"

"Let's hit it; we're burning daylight."

"Well said, counselor."

It was the second building Adam pulled in front of that grabbed her attention. The church sat proudly in the middle of a long city block that long ago must have been part of the city's center. The city had through the years shifted west and now the church was part of an area that sported cracked and weedy sidewalks, houses with crumbling brick and fences that leaned more than they stood. The church grounds, unlike the yards in many of the surrounding lots, were not neglected and at the back edge sat two parish houses, one small and one mid-sized. The church was old enough to be part of the original city, perhaps even making it through the fire that had destroyed much of the early Spokane. The two separate

parish houses looked as though they had been built some years later and they needed a bit of TLC, as did the church itself. Still there was life in the place and work was being done to bring it back to its glory. Someone had been trimming the shrubbery and scaffolding was up along the north side of the church where new siding was being installed. Even if a little worn around the edges, this was a place where human hands were still at God's work.

When her feet hit the pavement the wave hit. Wave wasn't right; it was more like a tsunami. She stumbled on her feet and when she gained her footing again looked over at Adam. He had the same look on his face, as if he sensed a presence or in his case, maybe even smelled it. He was so caught up in his own world of sensation he hadn't noticed when it hit her.

Leaving Adam on the sidewalk, Cat walked up the front steps of the church and put her hands on the double doors that lead into the entry of the chapel itself. Coldness and warmth transferred from the ancient wood into her body and she stiffened, her neck stretched and her back arched. Through the roar she could hear the joyful voices of the choir, the hope from a thousand wedding vows and the tears from a thousand funerals. Pictures flashed before her eyes, a hundred years of life and death. Behind it all like a continuously running soundtrack were the screams and the overpowering scent of lavender.

In a flash, lightning struck her palms, and she screamed as she snatched her hands away. She glanced at Adam who was watching from the bottom of the sagging steps. She was a little surprised that he hadn't jumped up the stairs when she'd screamed except that he still seemed lost in whatever it was he was picking up on.

Cat stared back down at her tingling hands. "Okay, there's something very freaky going on here."

Adam's face cleared at last and he focused his gaze on her face. "I'm picking up a faint scent of blood. It's faint though like it's far away."

Cat knew what he meant. She'd been able to see so much of what had gone on in the church both good and bad. Violence had not been in the forefront. Neither had it been absent either. It was that background thing, the sound of screams that was like a thin veil behind everything else. It was very odd and very disturbing.

"I don't know, Adam, I just don't know. I can't say it isn't here and I'm not getting a clear picture that it is either. I do know something odd has happened here and not that long ago."

Shaking her hands out Cat gave them a few seconds to stop tingling before she grabbed the handles and tried the doors. Not surprisingly, they were locked. Back down on the sidewalk with Adam, she stared a moment longer at the door before turning away. Together they circled the grounds, trying their luck with the back of the church and then the parish houses. No one appeared to be around.

If she could just get inside, she might be able to get a clearer picture. Where the hell was everybody?

She looked at Adam and shrugged. "Shall we try the other place and then come back by?"

"Guess we'll have to."

Neither one of them wanted to leave. Then again they weren't the breaking and entering type either so unless they were prepared to break into a church, they'd have to give it up until later. She stared at the church through the side window as Adam drove away, a nagging little voice whispering in her ear.

The third building was a vivid contrast to the first two. It was also a church but time had done nothing but enhance its beauty. Well cared for with tended grounds and gorgeous shrubs, it rose tall and regal with stunning stained glass windows and a beautiful gray stone exterior. The stones intrigued her particularly since in her visions she'd seen stones in the walls. It could be a match. Cat jumped out before Adam had taken the key out of the ignition, jogging towards the massive front doors. The stone steps up to the door were carved stone, as wide as a semi without so much as a single chip. Serious time and money had been spent on this baby meaning it had to have one hell of a congregation not just now but throughout its history.

The doors were gorgeous, carved with scenes from the Bible. They were as stunning as Rodin's *Gates of Hell*. That might be a slight exaggeration but not too far off either. No doubt about it, lots of green had been spent on this one.

With a deep breath, she placed her hands on the doors and closed her eyes. Like before she could hear voices, prayers, tears and whispers of hope. What she didn't sense was evil. Nor were there any screams or unusual scents lingering in the air. Compared to the last church, this was plain vanilla.

If she was here, she had the power to camouflage like nothing Cat had ever encountered before. She took several steps back from the doors and considered before turning away. She touched the door again and shook her head. It didn't feel right. Returning to sidewalk below she looked at Adam and wrinkled her brow.

"I don't think so," she said at last.

"There's something here," he countered, his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared.

She didn't agree. It felt clean, in fact when she thought about it, almost sterile. Her gut told her it was innocent, a church that played its part and nothing more. Whatever he smelled in the light breeze wasn't coming to her in any way, shape, or form.

"I don't feel it, Adam, and I didn't see it."

His face cleared when he took her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "I don't know, Cat, there's something here, even if I can't put my finger on it."

She wanted to be on the same page and couldn't get there. She closed her eyes and concentrated, waiting for something, anything, to give weight to his feeling. Opening her eyes again a few seconds later, she shook her head. He was wrong.

Before she could argue with him he turned and jogged around the building amazing her with how light he was on his feet for a man as big as he was. It was the wolf in him, she knew, but it still took her breath away to watch him move like that. A few minutes later, he came back shaking his head, the long braids swinging back and forth.

“Maybe it’s not her but it’s something.” His eyes were narrowed in thought, his nostrils still flaring.

“She’s not here,” Cat insisted.

Silence stretched between them and then at last he shrugged. “You’re sure?”

She was and told him so.

“All right, then. Any suggestions?”

“Let’s go back to the other church see if we can get inside. That place has an undercurrent that makes the hair stand up on my arms.”

“That’s more than we’ve gotten anywhere else.”

“Yeah.”

Adam hesitated and then turned towards the street. “Let’s go.”

It took a few minutes to drive back to the first church. She was hoping someone would be there when they returned, and her hopes were dashed in a hurry. It was still as quiet and empty as when they were there earlier.

Once more she stood on the front steps and placed her hands on the doors. She was thinking “what the hell” might as well give it one more try. Again the jolt screamed through the wood and down her arms. No pictures flicked through her head, only the strike of pain that rolled from her hands up through her arms and into her shoulders. A razorblade of fire that cut to her soul. This was not normal.

Oh, yeah, something was here.

## Chapter Sixteen

Elizabeth had watched out the window hidden from view until the two left. The man had been interesting-looking, tall and handsome with thick black braids that fell down the back of his long-sleeved jersey shirt tucked into form-fitting blue jeans. The black leather boots with the silver tips were a nice touch. In fact, she had liked the whole package. Wouldn't mind a whirl with that boy, she thought as she watched him prowl. Not her taste as a general rule, however, that didn't mean that she couldn't dally once in a while with a worthy man. The one who had come around the side of the church studying everything with the eyes of a predator made her blood rush a little faster.

The woman had been a different story altogether. She had been nothing special except that like the man, her eyes had searched everywhere as she walked and there had been something of a light around her, for lack of a better description. It wasn't that Elizabeth had seen a glow wrapping around the woman; it had come more as a feeling or an instinct. Like the braided man, she had been an attractive little package that Elizabeth wouldn't mind unwrapping if she had the time. Not as pretty as Elizabeth preferred, but she liked the way the woman had moved with a grace that was beautiful to watch.

Despite the physical attraction to both of the nosy strangers, she hadn't wanted to talk to either one of them. It was as if they had carried signs of trouble attached to their backs. She waited in silence until she saw them pull away, the tall man driving. Oh, yes, very interesting indeed. Might have to keep her eyes out for that one, trouble or not, she had no doubt he could provide quite a bit of entertainment for a night or two.

Once they were gone Elizabeth left her corner in the old church and went out the back door towards her house. With Reverend John in Seattle and Mary taking the day off, she was reveling in blessed solitude. After her visit below, her skin was glowing like it never had in Amanda's lifetime, her hair turning a darker but far more beautiful shade with each passing day. With everyone gone from the church, she had all day to ready herself for the night. She

rolled over in her mind where she needed to go from here. Her strength and beauty were returning and it was time to plan for the future. She was rested, somewhat sated, and now had time to look ahead.

What she didn't need were distractions like the two who had circled the church and parish houses looking for someone to let them in. Well it wasn't going to be her, she had other, far more important things to do than to answer silly questions or give a guided tour of the historic church. She suspected those two had more on their minds than a guided tour though she didn't dwell on it. Bottom line was that regardless of what they wanted, Elizabeth wasn't inclined to be bothered and she wasn't about to share her fabulous secret with anyone except the chosen ones like Susan and Kim. Tonight perhaps another special one would have the honor of sharing her secrets and to give up her treasures in the candlelight and passion.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was like someone hit him in the head with a very large rock or a nice old wooden baseball bat. Even if no one had physically assaulted him, the spiritual attack was as bad and hurt as much or maybe more. They were losing ground in a hurry, not that they'd had much to begin with. Everything was happening in staccato bursts that were too quick and what was it the Americans were so fond of saying? They hadn't even gotten to first base yet. That was about to change.

Elizabeth Bathory was the most evil woman he'd come across in all his years with the Anima Mundi. She had killed hundreds, most young and beautiful peasant women and girls, only to drink and bathe in their blood. That would have been bad enough if she had stopped there except she hadn't. Her madness had no limits and eating the flesh of her victims was the ultimate proof of her deal with the devil. She had believed to her soul in the old adage -- "you are what you eat." She abused, sexually and physically, she tortured and maimed, all in the name of her own beauty and immortality.

It had gone on for years because she was royalty, a protected class in old Europe. It took years and hundreds of senseless deaths before anyone garnered the strength to stop her madness. Though she died walled into a single room in her own castle, what he knew and few others did was that Elizabeth Bathory hadn't been destroyed. Her physical body had ceased to exist that long ago day in a cold and filthy castle room but the essence of her soul had never been destroyed. Since that hour, Elizabeth Bathory had existed in a dimension that defied time and space.

The leather bound books which traced her movements had been in Martin's possession since the day his father died. The Bloody Countess had become a part of his daily life just as she had been for every generation of males in his family since her original reign of terror. Martin's solitary and silent mission had always been to find the remains of her body, in order to capture and destroy her soul.



The game of cat and mouse was as complicated as it was enduring. For Martin, she had killed the woman he'd loved just to spite him. She had laughed in his face as he'd sobbed over the lifeless body of his love. He had destroyed her physical incarnation that terrible night, and yet when he'd followed that body to the resting place given her in that lifetime, her grave had been empty. He had been unable to trace her movements from that point on, and he'd spent the last fifty years looking for her.

The fact that her grave had been empty hadn't come as a particular surprise. Evil protected evil, that was the one thing he'd learned from both his father and during his years with the Anima Mundi. She had been moved to protect her by those who realized that when the moment was right, she would return. It was as if she had vanished in the wind.

Until now. It seemed that wind had blown to a far away land and a quiet little city. Poetic justice, he thought, as he leaned back in the chair with his eyes closed. She had been protected here and yet the odds were not in her favor. They had chosen a city where a powerful Anima Mundi hunter lived. Karma at play, Martin thought.

The end was here, that much was certain. The end for Elizabeth Bathory and for him. His last hunt would be for the one he'd been searching for all these years, and it was no coincidence that his sleep was filled with dreams, pain, and the brutality of her brand of death. She was here and wasting no time regaining her beauty and power. He didn't have time to waste either.

How she came to be in this city was a mystery he would not have the time to solve and in all truthfulness didn't care if he did. For all practical purposes it didn't matter who had moved her here, when or why. What did matter was stopping her and destroying her once and for all before anyone else could be killed.

All he could hope for was that the three of them were strong enough to stop her. If Adam and Catherine were successful in finding her hiding place, that would give them an advantage. What face she would be using was going to prove more difficult. Not insurmountable just a complicating factor. He had seen her eyes and those he'd never forget. Regardless of the face she was wearing today, he'd recognize those eyes.

Martin got up and walked outside, standing on the porch of the old home that was as alive now as it had been in its heyday. The neighborhood was a beehive of activity. A mailman pushed his three-wheeled cart along the sidewalk, while two young women jogged side-by-side down the street. A skinny man with curly brown hair and powerful long legs pedaled past on a green mountain bike. Tranquil, peaceful and oblivious to the powers that swirled around them, each of them went about their daily activities.

Longing ached in his chest for the simpler days when he could go about his day as these people did now. He had a vague memory of how it was to live day to day without looking into each and every face that he passed searching for the seeds of evil that waited for just the right moment and just the right person to pass the dark gift on to. He recalled the scent of his mother's prized roses and the gardens that wrapped around their home in a

mantle of color. For Martin it had been the time in his life that had been simple and happy. Days when he could have jogged with a light heart or ridden his bicycle on a sun-filled morning without care.

Now he was an old man riddled with ill health and a heavy heart. The candle flame was growing dim and along with it came a host of feelings he'd buried for many years. His iron will and strong control was growing weaker. He told himself to shake it off and get on with the business at hand, which was far easier said than done when what he wanted to do was to sit down and close his eyes. His bones ached and his muscles screamed. He would give his kingdom for cup of tea and a moment's peace.

He was just about to turn and go back into the house when a rough green jeep pulled up and parked at the curb. He recognized both the driver and the tall man who got out and tapped his silver tipped cane on the asphalt even though he'd never met either one of them.

He was just heading down the steps to meet his guests when the ringing telephone made him spin and head back into the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Martin's call diverted them from their path back to Adam's house and once again towards the wooded riverbanks. Sandy had called the house with the news that they'd found victim number two. Now the four of them stood in a semicircle around the dead girl, silence hanging like dirty laundry between them.

It was as Cat had seen last night. The tree, the river, and the ground littered with a thick layer of fallen pine needles. She had been brought here, draped across the woman's strong shoulders, only to be propped up against the tree like a discarded bicycle. The place was beautiful in the sunlight, the water as clear and clean as in her native Canada. Maybe that was it. This place made her feel at home with its hills, trees and the beautiful clear water of the wide river. They were far from the ocean but there was much to be said for the powerful Spokane River. The waters ran strong, clear and powerful.

The real question was why did she dump the girl here? What was she trying to tell them? It wasn't random bloodlust that stole lives. No, Cat sensed it was more blood rite than lust and each and every move was calculated to achieve a specific goal. But what was it?

Once again the sight of the ravaged body had tears brimming in Cat's eyes. Violence was hard to take, even for those accustomed to it. Like most of the Anima Mundi in many ways she had become hardened to violence the majority of the time. The only problem was the unintended desensitization wasn't foolproof. There were times, like now, when it got through the hardened exterior. This poor girl had been tortured, although a closer look told her there was more to it than simple torture, if there even was such a thing as simple torture. What struck Cat was that there was a method to the madness going on here. Unless she was really wrong and she didn't think she was, there was some reason for the torture beyond the simple infliction of pain.

“Adam,” Cat said in a near whisper. “What do you think?”

He kneeled as close as he could without touching her, the pine needles crunching under the weight of his body while the air seemed to stop moving, his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. It was a very weird sensation being next to him as he worked a scene. Unlike Cat and Martin, who touched to sense, Adam gathered information from the air, the ground, and the trees. He worked in a way that was a complete and total mystery to her and amazing all at the same time. It felt as though everything stood still long enough for Adam to read the environment and when he was done, the world went back to its invisible movement. Like she said, very weird.

“There’s a process going on here,” he said in a hushed voice, more like he was talking to himself than to her. “Each victim is serving a purpose, a higher purpose, if you will. It’s not just about sex and violence, although I sense a very sexual aura around each of these young women.”

“Bingo! I got that too. It’s like she’s big time into fun and games except there’s something else. I sensed the same thing, especially last night.”

His eyes were dark and sad as he straightened. “We can’t allow her to continue.”

“No,” she agreed with him. “We can’t. Problem is, she’s not going to stop unless we stop her.”

Cat nodded to Martin, who’d been standing behind them watching. “Shall we see what’s left?”

His focus on the girl had been direct and intense. “Yes.”

She put her hands on the dead girl’s head while Martin took her cold white hands. Closing her eyes, Cat pushed everything else from her conscious mind, focusing on the woman beneath her hands. *Talk to me*, she coaxed silently. *Talk to me*.

At first nothing came and then a wave of sensation started at her fingertips, flowing up her arms and into her shoulders. It was a tiny flicker at first, gaining downhill momentum while sending a mixture of excitement and raw need flowing through her. Pictures, like something from a shadowbox, filled her mind with enough substance for Cat to sense what the dead girl been feeling and experiencing.

She had been looking for a little fun, a bit of release from a world that didn’t understand her but she was forced to function in. As the sensations came to Cat, they began slow and gained speed, turning from excitement to apprehension to fear. She could feel the other woman and the thrill of the physical abandon that had been the lure. Her senses had been dulled by alcohol, taking the woman’s subtle aggression as nothing more than liking things a little rough. The hook had been set deep before she’d realized the threat.

Then she’d begun to understand that her life was in danger but by then it was too late. The alcohol had played its fatal hand. The assailant’s roughness bruised her skin, but it was the blow to her head that dropped her into unconsciousness. Despite being overpowered, her

spirit had been strong; she hadn't given up even when the end came. Her life had been stripped away from her, peeled layer by layer like the tender skin of an onion. Even so, she had refused to allow death to take away her life essence. She had held on to the tiniest thread of her soul, at least enough to get through to Cat.

Cat stood up and opened her eyes, leaving one hand on the woman's head. "Thank you," she told her, even though she knew the woman was long past hearing.

Martin opened his eyes, and she could see that he'd come away with the same. "It was her."

"Yes."

Martin knew more than he was saying; Cat could see it in his eyes. Somehow she had to get it out of him. She just wasn't sure how. He'd had far more time at this than either Adam or Cat and he was a stubborn old goat when he chose. She didn't like it either. It was like working with a blindfold on when the other guy was wearing x-ray glasses. He was going to have to fess up so that they were all on the same page of music and pretty damn fast. She didn't want to have to come to another riverbank or bramble patch to visit a third corpse. This had to stop.

She opened her mouth but before she could utter a single word, Martin rose from the ground and put a finger to my lips.

"Not now, little one, not now."

God, Cat hated when they did this to her. It was bad enough that Adam could read her mind, but now Martin, too. If they didn't quit messing with what little was left of her mind, she was going to get on her pony and trot straight back to Canada.

## Chapter Seventeen

Rising from his knees with pine needles poking into the palm of his hand as he pushed himself up, Martin said a silent prayer and then crossed himself. His legs felt wobbly as he stood and it took a moment to steady himself.

He gazed down a few moments longer seeing the whisper of her life trail around the still body. She must have been a pistol with her short bottle-red hair, lithe, trim body, and long manicured nails. Unlike the young lady from yesterday, her skin had the smooth, fresh look of a life far from the perils of the street. There wasn't the pain of living on the street that had wrapped the other woman like a second skin. Not that it made any difference, she was just as dead.

The Division, not to mention the Spokane Police Department, would be calling in their respective profilers, psychologists, and any other experts they had on the string to try and figure out what kind of destroyer they were looking for. A serial killer in one respect, although with only two bodies, not much of a serial killer. Yet. Still they were sure to come armed with their degrees, research, and experience. They would draw up a composite picture of a cruel and dangerous criminal monster with an imagined face and a black soul. The profile would be distributed throughout the rank and file so that each and every officer would be looking for the killer.

He alone had seen her face, a secret that he was hesitant to put into words. He trusted Adam and Catherine with his life, and he wasn't sure why he had difficulty sharing her identity. That wasn't exactly true. Part of his reluctance was the fear. At his age he should know better and take the end of his life with the dignity that most of his long-gone friends had possessed. As death grew ever closer, Martin wasn't taking the high road. Instead, he was tripping along on a road far lower and more dangerous.

Since he'd stepped off the plane, he'd been rolling it over in his mind until he thought he understood. It was the unfairness that ticked at the edges of his mind. Martin had witnessed evil return to the living world in an unending march towards the light, and he wanted that for himself. Why could the unclean ones, the undead, the evil, continue to walk the earth throughout the decades when his body must grow old and riddled with disease? Where was the justice in that?

Then again, maybe it was the cancer eating away the rationality of his mind? That had been the one thing that had served him so well since that fateful night half a century ago. If he hadn't run this course, if the Order hadn't changed his life, perhaps things would be different now. Perhaps he wouldn't be questioning the lot fate was handing him.

And if he were honest with himself, totally honest, he would have to admit that he was more frightened today than he'd ever been. He had put stakes through the hearts of vampires, burned witches while their screams pierced the air and he'd destroyed evil spirits thousands of years old. All that he hadn't experienced was the fear that rolled like thunder through him in this moment. He was afraid of dying and he was afraid of not dying. No matter which direction he came at it, he was seeing and feeling things that scared, as Catherine would put it, the shit out of him.

The why of it and probably the real reason he hadn't been able to confide in the two of them was that he was scared of the cancer taking his life away in a slow and painful progression. He was equally afraid that the fear was opening his mind and his soul to *her* and all she could offer him.

Perhaps the best thing he could do for both himself and the hunt would be to catch the next plane back to London. If he were far away from the temptations she offered then conceivably he could let go of this life and die in peace. It would be the right thing to do only he knew deep in his heart he couldn't. She was the one he'd been searching for since that long ago night in the dark alley near his small flat in London. He'd seen what no mind could imagine, and it had changed his world and his grasp of reality. He had stopped her that night and at the time thought he'd put an end to her then and there. The error of that assumption had been brought home soon enough and since that day, he'd never shaken the feeling that her spirit was still with him. There was nothing tangible only the odd sensation that he wasn't alone that lingered in his bones.

The moment Adam had called him; the old feelings had awakened with a new and stronger vengeance. Despite the immediate premonition that he would be hunting an old nemesis, he'd recognized that regardless of who or what they hunted, it would be his last.

While his mind boiled with turmoil, Catherine had been watching him with an odd expression on her face, not that he blamed her. The mirror didn't lie these days, and he looked like a sick old man. Even his shoulders stooped, taking away a few inches of height and decades of age. Most of the time he didn't look quite as bad as he felt though that was only his opinion. The look on her face said he did in fact look as bad as he was feeling.

“Martin, are you all right?” asked Catherine.

He turned his back on the young dead girl and took Catherine’s cool hand in his, tucking it tight against his side and pulling her along with him as he put space between them and the body.

“I am fine, young one, just unsettled by the terrible loss here. She is destroying them, not just taking their lives and that troubles me.”

“Us as well,” Adam said from behind them. “There’s a stink to this that reeks unlike anything I’ve come up against before. I can smell the blood, the fear, and something else that I’m having difficulty identifying.”

The ground near the dumpsite had been soft and damp under their feet. At the parking area, the gravel once again put them on firm ground. Martin followed Adam and Catherine, leaving Sandy standing with three or four others back down towards the body watching as the evidence techs began their long and arduous tasks.

With his seatbelt snug against his body, Martin leaned his head back against the seat, thinking about dreams and dead women.

Breaking the silence that had accompanied them since pulling away from the park, Martin said. “She’s playing with us. It’s a game to her.”

Catherine turned in her seat until she was looking at him. “What kind of game?”

“She knows we’re hunting her then?” Adam added without turning around, his eyes on the road.

“Yes.”

And that was that. The dreams made sense, in fact it all made a strange kind of sense. She was toying with them, making the game much more interesting. The bar had just been raised and cancer or not, he was ready and willing to play.

\* \* \* \* \*

Silence was the name of the game all the way back to Adam’s house. At least until they pulled into the narrow driveway, which was blocked by an ancient jeep that might once upon a time have been green. Adam hit the brakes so hard Cat lurched forward in her seat, halted only by the click of the seatbelt as it locked into place at the sharp stop.

“Damn it,” muttered Adam while both Cat and Martin stared at him.

“And the problem is?” asked Cat.

“Just wait here.” Adam jumped out of the driver’s side door and started jogging towards the house.

“Not bloody likely,” Martin unbuckled his seatbelt.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Cat muttered and joined Martin in making a quick exit. It wasn’t often that anyone got to see Adam flustered, and she wasn’t about to miss out on whatever it

was that had him going. The sight of the rust bucket Jeep in his driveway had him as jumpy as the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof, a pretty good feat considering the man was a wolf.

They went in the back door, making sure that it clicked shut as quietly as possible. Didn't want to disturb the action. Looking at each other, they moved quietly towards the front room. Cat thought they looked like a couple of guilty burglars.

She stopped dead in the doorway and stared at the trio. What a sight to behold. It might be more polite to stay in the kitchen but curiosity got this cat.

The oldest man stared at Cat as she stepped into the room. His eyes narrowed and a frown turned his mouth down moving the wrinkles of his weathered face into a tanned mask of displeasure. Old was an understatement. The man was ancient yet still retained a powerful, proud carriage that had him nearly as tall as Adam who sat beside him on the sofa, his hand on the old man's arm. His braids were as long as Adam's though rather than the deep black of the younger man, his were rich silver. It was their faces that amazed her the most. Except for the differences in ages, they were identical.

Adam turned to look at her, his eyes wary and his lips pressed into a tight line. He shook his head and she ignored him, stepping further into the room.

Another man, younger but not young, sat in one of the overstuffed chairs with his hands folded in his lap. A rather amused, if not constrained, expression was on his face. A face that, like the other two, was unmistakable.

She turned her attention back to the elder man and Adam. Both were still looking at her almost expectantly, and she'd give a buck or two to know why. Now that she'd barged in uninvited, the silence was starting to get on her nerves.

"Hello." She just wanted to break what to her was an uncomfortable silence.

Adam took a deep breath and relaxed his face though it seemed to cost him. "Cat, Martin, I'd like to introduce my great-grandfather, John Bell, and my grandfather, Robert Bell. Catherine Lohr." He pointed to Cat. "And Martin Ludlum."

Cat was rooted to the spot, her normal glibness sinking to the pit of her stomach. There was something about the way John Bell was looking at her that made her feel like she'd been caught with Adam in the backseat doing the two-step. Martin didn't share her reluctance and moved forward to shake hands with both men.

"A pleasure." He took the seat opposite Robert Bell.

"It cannot be," John Bell announced in a voice that was strong and vibrant for man who had to have seen his first century or pretty damn close anyway.

"Grandfather," Adam began.

"No," John Bell stopped him. "I have spoken."

Adam's face started to color, a pretty good trick for a guy with skin the color of his, and his lips did that tightening thing again. "It's not that simple," he said between the compressed lips.



“It is,” countered John.

Adam looked over at his grandfather. “Can you help me here?”

Robert Bell still had a glint of amusement in his eyes, though he shook his head. “It is his right as our elder.”

Cat was looking from one to the other trying to pick up the thread. “His right for what?”

“Ah, let me,” Martin interrupted. “I believe, if I’m following, that Adam’s great-grandfather has a problem with the relationship between you and Adam.”

“What! Adam? What did you tell them?”

Talk about feeling like a boob. She didn’t have much family left, but even if she did, she wouldn’t have told them the details of what was going on with her and Adam. It was as embarrassing as if she were standing in her underwear in front of a room full of strangers.

Adam sighed and rubbed his eyes with one hand. “Perceptive fellow, Martin.”

“Adam,” she demanded. “What exactly does that mean?”

“You are not,” John Bell said, “one of us and thus it cannot be.”

Now her feeling of exposure shifted to outrage. Was he saying what she thought he was?

“One of you? As in a person, as in human being?”

“No,” John Bell said sitting up taller yet. “A child of the sun.”

“A child of the sun?” repeated Cat.

Adam tried to explain seeming to sense her rising irritation. “Roughly translated, Spokane means children of the sun and thus the tribal peoples are children of the sun.”

“All righty then,” she muttered and then looked at Adam, taking in his great-grandfather at the same time. “And that’s a problem why?”

“Adam must not marry outside of the sun,” John Bell declared.

She turned her gaze on the silver-haired centurion. “Let me get this straight. It’s not a child of the sun thing that has your braids in a twist. It’s that you don’t want him hooked up with a white girl.”

John Bell nodded.

Cat’s blood boiled. “Yeah, and marrying another Native American worked so well for him last time.”

Adam gave her a look that had her clamping her lips shut. She shrugged as if to say sorry, but in all reality she wasn’t much sorry for that crack. After all, gramps here was for all intents and purposes saying that she wasn’t good enough for Adam. Okay, fine, yes, she ran away from him like a scared little schoolgirl, but that was her choice. She sure as hell didn’t appreciate being blackballed because she wasn’t ethnic enough. Talk about reverse discrimination, eh.

“Grandfather.” Adam turned back towards the old man. “We will talk about this another time. Right now we have work to do.”

“Now is a good time. This must be stopped before it goes too far. I have seen it in a vision.”

“Now wait a minute,” Cat started but stopped when Adam held up a hand in her direction.

“Grandfather, I understand and appreciate your position. I respect you as my elder.”

“But,” the old man said.

“But this relationship isn’t as simple as an Indian and a Caucasian. This is something far more important.”

“I had a vision,” John insisted.

“So have I,” Adam declared and turned to stare directly into her eyes. “So have I.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Martin had to face the truth whether he wanted to or not. It was past time to come clean with his comrades in arms. If nothing else the visit from Adam's great-grandfather and grandfather had shamed him into action. John Bell had come to his great-grandson with the best of intentions, acting on his senses and his knowledge while Martin was keeping everything close to the vest. It wasn't right, and he knew it. He also knew that he couldn't let Adam and Catherine go into battle half armed, and by his silence, that's what he was doing to them. He'd suspected though he'd tried not to believe what his mind was telling him in no uncertain terms. He couldn't hide any longer, and he couldn't keep his colleagues in the dark. It wasn't fair to them or to the world, for that matter.

He sat in the overstuffed chair that faced the front windows and twisted his hands. Adam stood somewhat stiffly in his familiar spot, leaning on the doorframe with his arms folded against his chest. He'd been standing there silent and brooding since seeing his grandfathers drive away in the ancient Jeep. Catherine had dropped to the edge of the sofa, a feral cat ready to pounce at a moment's notice.

How many times had Martin heard the saying that the tension was so thick it could be cut with a knife? Well, this was the first time he'd believed it was possible, and it was his job to clear it.

"I must tell you a story," Martin broke the uneasy silence. Both heads turned his way.

"Please," said Adam.

Catherine just stared at him.

He sat up a little straighter and started in a slow, careful voice. "I was twenty years old, at university, and living in a small flat in London. I was trying to live a normal life just as my mates did, but I knew I was different. I'd been aware since childhood that I possessed a special gift just as my father had and his father before him. My father, in addition to his work

as a barrister, had another task assigned to him. One he did not speak of until my initiation came.”

“Anima Mundi?” Catherine asked.

“Yes. I did not know at the time what it was. I was to find out later after an up close and personal encounter with Countess Elizabeth Bathory.”

“The Blood Countess?” asked Adam. “I’ve read of her.”

“One and the same. It was recorded that she died in 1613 walled up in her castle after she’d been found guilty of murdering hundreds of young women. She drank their blood, bathed in it, and even consumed their flesh, all to make herself beautiful and young. She was a sadist who was rich and untouchable, or at least she thought she was. Even so, it took years before they stopped her vicious madness.”

“But they didn’t stop her insanity, did they, Martin?” Catherine asked in a quiet voice.

“No, my dear, they didn’t. Her body ceased to function that day in 1613, but her soul did not die. Nor did her thoughts or the knowledge she’d gained after years of experimentation and torture.”

Unfolding his arms and pulling away from the doorframe, Adam walked over and sat next to Catherine, putting a hand on her arm. “She’s the dybbuk you talked about.”

“Yes, Adam. I stopped Elizabeth Bathory in the middle of ravaging a young student one night in England well on fifty years ago, but what I didn’t know until it was too late is that I hadn’t destroyed her. By the time I realized my error, her body was gone. I’ve spent the rest of my life looking for this woman, this creature.”

“And you think she’s here?” Adam still held Catherine’s arm as if he was protecting her from the threat of this woman killer.

“I don’t think, Adam, I know. I can feel her. She came very close to killing me that night.” He touched his chest where the cloth of his shirt hid the scar her knife had made as he’d tried to protect his love. “Her blood mingled with mine and ever since I’ve felt her presence in the world even if she hadn’t yet risen. I have lived since then to destroy her and so far I have failed.”

Catherine leaned into Adam, her eyes still on Martin’s face. “She’s the reason you’re Anima Mundi.”

“Without question although it’s even more complicated than that. My family has been hunting hers since the beginning. You see, my dear, my family immigrated to Great Britain after two daughters were slaughtered at the hands of Countess Bathory. They were common people and Bathory was royalty and so the deaths of those two pretty young girls were ignored until Bathory’s atrocities touched the royal class. Only then was she stopped. My family was brought into the Order subsequent to Bathory being walled into her castle prison. We were there when she died and have been tracking her every single year since. Each generation has taken the pledge by fire.”

“But you have no children,” Catherine said.

“Ah, the bane of my existence. I am the last of the line, and she still roams the universe. It’s left to me to stop her. I must stop her, and I don’t know if I can.”

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time the sun began to dip behind the mountains to the west, the sky was brilliant in shades of azure and crimson. Elizabeth’s bags were filled with fine clothes, expensive shoes, and fabulous perfumes. Not only was she able to cash the checks without even a hint of a problem, the little-used credit card had come in handy as well. All in all, the trip had been a stunning success. In fact better than she had hoped. She needed a little to get her established and then she’d be in position to query the accounts that she had set up with each succeeding return.

Elizabeth dressed with care in the black silk dress with a neckline cut low enough that the fabric caressed her breasts in a seductive yet tasteful way. It was as if the dress had been handmade just for her -- the fit was so perfect and to think she’d found it hanging on a rack in a small store. Clothing had come a long way over the years. Running a brush through her hair, she turned full circle in front of the mirror. She was pleased with her reflection and the way her hair glowed and her skin was fresh and rosy.

She didn’t look behind as she stepped out of the house and into the waiting cab. The driver gave her a sideways glance that made her smile but she said nothing. She gave him the location and sat back for the short ride to the city’s center.

Located at the top of one of the finest hotels in the city the lounge was just beginning to fill for the night. Elizabeth felt the eyes on her as she wound her way through the exclusive bar and to an empty booth near the back. The windows that ringed both the lounge and the restaurant provided a stunning view of the city as the dark of night was sprinkled with the twinkling lights of the surrounding buildings and streetlights. The air was flowered with the scent of money, expensive colognes, and good brandy. This was the sort of place where someone with her breeding belonged. It was also the perfect place to find what she was looking for. The last several nights were fine for what she’d needed to get back into life. Now she needed something much more substantial.

It didn’t take long either not that she expected it to. If anyone understood the allure of sex, it was she. After all she’d been exploiting her appeal for longer than any of these people had even been on this earth. By now she had it down to a science and she could wield it with the skill of an expert swordsman. She’d been great in her first lifetime, she was unstoppable now.

The bonus was that he wasn’t bad-looking. The suit was custom made, not something he’d purchased from one of the many racks she herself had passed by earlier in the day. She knew quality when she saw it and this man was of quality and breeding, a combination that brought a buzz to her blood. Unlike Amanda her tastes were more varied. There was no

denying that she enjoyed the soft wetness of another woman, but she took equal delight in the hardness of a man. In her mind variety was so much more pleasurable than the same old thing all the time. Come to think of it, variety was exactly what she was looking for.

“Mind if I join you?”

Like her own, his eyes were china blue. His hair, with an expensive cut, was a pleasing shade of brown with just a hint of silver at the temples. She found the silver most appealing. Young was good and she had a distinct and long-standing taste for young men and women. There was, however, much to be said about a lover who'd had a few years to grow and improve. This man looked like he could have definite potential, not to mention he was a better than average bet to have the kind of money and assets she was in the market for. Young blood would be her goal another night.

“Please.” She waved her hand towards the empty seat across from her.

He laid a silver lighter on the table as he ignored the empty side of the table and slid in close beside her. “I don't recall seeing you here before.”

“I'm new to town.” She gave him a warm and inviting smile.

“Did you come here alone?” There was a tinge of surprise in his voice that she liked.

“Yes.” She frowned a little and looked at her glass as if she was troubled by the fact that she was by herself. “I came here to meet a friend, but it appears that he's stood me up. He should have been here half an hour ago.”

“Well,” he told her, a note of hope in his voice, “we can't have a beautiful woman like you all alone.”

“And what about your date?”

He laughed without any self-consciousness. “I'm afraid I'm as alone as they come. No wife, no girlfriend, not even a hopeful at this point. I stopped in with a couple of the men from my law firm for a drink and was heading out when I noticed you sitting here by your lonesome. I felt it my civic duty to make sure you were not abandoned.”

She looked up and gave him a shy smile. “So you're hitting on me?”

He pursed his lips for a moment and then smiled again showing a row of perfect, white teeth. “Yes I guess I am. Patrick, Patrick Robinson at your disposal.”

“Well, Patrick Robinson, I'm glad you stopped. My name is Elizabeth Bathory.”

“Interesting name. You're not from around here, are you?” He laughed self-consciously and continued. “That sounded stupid when you just told me you're new to town. What I meant was, you're not American, are you?”

“Perceptive, Mr. Robinson. Europe originally, although I've moved around quite a bit over the years. I've spent a good many years in the United States of late.” She didn't add that it was about fifty years to be precise.

“Patrick, please.” He squeezed her hand and smiled. “How interesting, you’ve got to tell me more. Do you have plans for this evening, or would you be kind enough to join me for dinner?”

“Dinner? How delightful of you, Mr. Robinson.”

“Again, it’s Patrick. Please call me Patrick.”

“Well, Patrick, I’d be delighted to join you for dinner. That’s the nicest invitation I’ve had all day.”

Her body was buzzing as they were seated at a table in the restaurant. By the time the waiter lit the candle in the middle of the table, Patrick Robinson was hers, hook, line, and sinker. Now all she had to do was find out the details. He came off as an excellent potential candidate but time would tell if he was going to provide her with what she needed and wanted. Experience had taught her that looks could be deceiving. There were a great many old money paupers running around the world, and she was not interested in a single one of them, regardless of how good-looking or talented in the bedroom. She wanted money and plenty of it.

Between the bottle of a lovely white wine he ordered for dinner and the two brandies they sipped with dessert she cemented her hold on him. He was smitten like a schoolboy with his first pretty teacher. His invitation to go back to his home was a given.

She smiled in the darkness of the late model Mercedes that smelled of new leather. When he pushed a button that opened one of the tall wrought iron gates on the paved drive that led to a large and stately old home on the street named High Drive, she was triumphant. Even in the darkness it would be impossible to miss the tended lawns and shrubs that screamed of a professional touch. The exterior was immaculate and the brick-paved driveway spotless.

She hadn’t lost her touch. Once again she’d picked the golden boy and payoff time was near.

The interior of the home was as elegant and tasteful as the exterior promised. Her eyes swept over the high ceilings and marble floors. As he took her small beaded handbag and the light shawl she’d draped around her shoulders and laid them on the antique bench at the entry door, she was calculating numbers in her head.

“The family home,” he explained as he led her towards a room off the main entry. “It’s been in my family for over a hundred years. Built by the Northwest legend Kirkland Cutter. Have you heard of him?”

“Beautiful,” she breathed and didn’t have to pretend. It was beautiful and reeked of old money. A great deal of old money. “Do you live here alone?”

“I do now. My parents have both passed away, and I’ve been divorced for a little over three years. No children and the bitch couldn’t get her hands on the place. Pre-nup, you know.”

His ire towards the former wife didn't faze her. In fact, if there had been a wife, Elizabeth would have dispatched her in good old-fashioned style. This was better than she'd hoped for and he was telling her what she wanted and needed to hear.

"Such a large house for one man."

He shrugged. "I know, but then again, I grew up in this house so I'm accustomed to it. Doesn't seem all that large to me. Besides, it impresses the ladies." His laugh had the edge of a man who was close to having one drink too many, which was what she had in mind.

"What do you think about one more drink?" She purred while running a fingertip across his cheek.

"Ah, a lady after my own heart. What's your pleasure?"

Her eyes narrowed and her smile was lethal. "Whatever you're having."

He bowed, rocky on his feet and walked into a room with two paneled doors off the right side of the entry. It turned out to be a study of sorts and she found him at a low-lighted bar in a corner of the room.

"Two fingers of twelve-year-old scotch?"

"Wonderful," she told him.

They sat side by side on the oxblood leather sofa with hips touching. Patrick draped an arm around her shoulders with his fingers touching the skin at the nape of her neck in a feather-light massage. She sipped the scotch that, as promised, was smooth and pleasing. It was a vast improvement over the cheap wine of the past two nights. She was beginning to feel like she was home again.

Patrick leaned into her neck and sniffed deep. "You are quite a lady, Elizabeth. Can't say I've met anyone quite like you before."

"No, I'm sure you haven't." She reached back with her hands and caressed his face, the stubble of beard rough against her fingertips.

"I like your confidence and the way you say things in such a straightforward manner. In my business it's all about spin and watching what you say and how you say it. You're a breath of fresh air, Lizzie."

"And I like you, Patrick. I like your looks, I like your scotch, and I like your home."

His fingers moved to her arm where he massaged the skin in a gesture that wasn't mere friendship. "Would you like to see more?"

He'd had enough to drink that she wasn't sure how much more he could show her though she was game. The luxury of her surroundings and the rich scotch had her blood rushing in a way that demanded release.

"Yes."

He took her glass and set it beside his on the end table. Getting up from the sofa he extended his hand. "Come, my lady, let me give you a little tour."



The staircase was impressive with its dark carved wood glowing and polished, reminding her of the home she'd been separated from centuries ago. The steps were padded with a fine oriental runner that went from the base of the staircase down the hallway as far as she could see. Very nice paintings, done by an artist she'd never heard of, covered the walls of the landing and the hallway to the doorway where Patrick stopped. Opening the door he motioned her in.

"The master suite, madam. What do you think?"

She thought it was delightful and more than she'd imagined. The room was at least two hundred feet square, with a huge fireplace flanked by a brocade sofa and matching chairs. The bed was a king-size four poster covered with a burgundy-embroidered spread that reminded her of the colors in her homeland. The woodwork, like that she'd seen on the main floor, was exquisite, old and quite well maintained. This room, like everything else in this home, was of the quality her royal heritage entitled her to. She felt herself relax in a way she hadn't in several lifetimes.

Elizabeth turned to Patrick and gave him her best come-hither smile. It worked like a charm. Loosening the tie at his throat, he crossed the room and took her in his arms. He smelled glorious, a cologne that filled her senses with heady delight.

"I don't know where you came from, Elizabeth Bathory, but I'm sure as hell glad that I stopped for a drink tonight. We were meant for each other."

Her lips against his she said, "Yes we were."

In a fluid motion, her dress fell away to reveal the smooth naked skin underneath the expensive silk. His eyes took on a shine as his mouth curved up in a smile. "My lucky night."

## Chapter Nineteen

Cat couldn't sleep. She was still worried about Martin; he had looked more sad and pale tonight than she'd ever seen him. There wasn't much Cat or anyone else for that matter could do for him though it still worried her. Adam, on the other hand, had been on the phone and the computer enough that they hadn't talked except for a few words. Neither she nor Martin had been able to pry a word out of him about the strange visit from his grandfathers. She'd watched Adam's fingers fly over the keyboard, his head bent low and his attention a million miles away before turning and heading upstairs. She went to her room alone.

Sleep wasn't going to come for Cat tonight. On top of everything else, she guessed she was worried about another woman losing her life to the madwoman and Cat not being able to do a damn thing to stop it. She was running face first into a brick wall, and she couldn't say she was overly fond of the sensation. Maybe it had just been luck in her earlier hunts. After all, some of the folks she'd worked with had told her horror stories of death and destruction before they were able to bring a hunt to its conclusion. She'd been luckier in minimizing the damage. She guessed now she was starting to feel her luck wane and that made the knot in her stomach tighten up something terrible.

She also didn't want to think about tomorrow morning. She hadn't told either Adam or Martin about her nine a.m. meeting, and she didn't want to. There was too much on the table at the moment without adding something else for them to worry about. This was her problem and she'd like to keep it that way. Actually she felt a little bit like an ostrich. If she kept her head in sand, it couldn't hurt her. Denial was a great weapon when used in difficult circumstances.

As quietly as she could, Cat made her way downstairs. No sense tossing and turning in the bed when she knew good and well she was not going to sleep. She found a bottle of water

in the fridge and took it outside to the back porch where Adam had some comfortable patio furniture. Maybe a little fresh air would soothe her racing mind and ease a bit of the fatigue.

“Jesus,” she swore under her breath five seconds later when the jump she’d just taken shaved a good five years off her not so young life.

“Sorry,” Adam said from where he sat swaying on the hanging loveseat almost invisible in the dark and starless night.

“You scared me half to death.”

“Like I said, sorry.” He patted the cushion next to him. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

“No.” She sat, feeling the heat of his body as she leaned against him. Despite everything, it felt good to lean on him.

Reaching out he took her shoulder and pulled her even closer, his arm draping around her in a natural embrace. “She troubles me.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” she snorted.

He gave her a squeeze and laughed a little. “Yes I am a regular Sherlock Holmes smarty-pants. Still, Martin is a legend and if she’s eluded him this long, well it concerns me. I hope between us we will be able to stop her.”

“Do you think so? I wish I could muster up a parcel full of confidence, but this is different and I’m worried.”

“I have to agree with you, hon. She’s a strange one, which makes me believe she’s also an old one. That’s what makes her incredibly dangerous.”

“I guess I’ve never come up against one of the old ones.”

“I have once and trust me, it wasn’t pretty.” His free hand touched at a scar on the side of his chin.

She’d wondered about that scar since the first day she’d met him. It made him look even more dangerous and sexy. “Tell me about it.”

She could feel the shake of his head. “Not now. Another time perhaps. Now I want to focus on Bathory and to do that I need a clear mind.”

His fingers stroked her shoulder and the heat throbbed from his touch racing through her body and reminding her of the hours in his arms. Clear head she reminded herself. Clear head. She started to sit back up but he held her tight against him.

“You can’t run from me, Cat.”

“I’m not running.”

Not really, she told herself. She figured she needed a little space to think without distraction and with their bodies pressed this close together, she couldn’t think at all let alone with a clear head.

His chuckle was low and quiet even in the silence of the porch. “Tell yourself whatever you like, Cat. Truth has a funny way of biting you in the ass when you least expect it.”

“Sometimes you can be so irritating.”

“So I’ve been told.”

She straightened up at last and then turned so she could see the outline of his strong face in the moonless night. “Adam, look ...”

Before she could say another word, he turned and took her face in his hands. “No,” was all he said before he kissed her. At first his lips were gentle and soothing but after a moment they became demanding, his tongue parting her lips to dart inside. The electricity that shot through her body defied anything she’d ever felt before. Traitor.

The sigh that escaped her wasn’t exasperation. She dropped the bottle of water and put her arms around his neck pulling him as close as she could. In the middle of the madness she wanted him and wanted him right now, right here neighbors be damned.

For a rational mind, it wasn’t the time or the place as if that really mattered at the moment. This had been building inside her since the moment they’d parted last. To say they were hot for each other was just about the biggest understatement this side of the Rocky Mountains. She was pretty sure her skin was hot enough to melt butter.

It struck Cat that there seemed to be a hum in the air, something like a lullaby. She smiled against his lips thinking that all things were in harmony at least for the moment. It kept her mind from wandering and pushed the pictures of blood and death far away. Wherever Bathory was tonight, she was sleeping and Cat’s mind and body responded not to the evil that waited somewhere beyond her vision but to the man whose hands slid under her shirt to caress the bare skin of her back.

Against her lips Adam whispered, “Come.”

Like she needed any encouragement there. “Anywhere.”

He took his hands from beneath her shirt to grasp hers. He stood pulling her up to lead her back into the house and up the stairs to his room. With a soft click he closed the door, plunging the room into a darkness broken only by a sliver of moonlight that came in through the big window to cut across the center of the room. Adam moved across the room in a silent glide that once again reminded her of the movements of a wolf. With matches he pulled from his pocket, he lit several candles that flickered and glowed in the dim room. Surreal was the thought that kept rolling through her mind as he came back towards her.

“Catherine.” His voice was low and husky, a growl that set her on fire.

The sound of her name rolling between his lips made her heart stop and then start up again, this time beating wildly. She managed to say, “Do you think we should do this?”

His smile was slow and sexy. “Not just yes, but hell yes.”

“Hell yes,” she murmured and moved to close the gap between them.

Standing face to face, Cat lifted her arms as Adam pulled the shirt up and over her head. Leaning close, he breathed in deeply at her neck, dropping his head until his tongue flicked over her nipple.

Cat gasped and pulled his head closer, her fingers entwined in the hair that he had freed from his usual braids. Thick black hair flowed between her fingers and across the bare skin of her breasts. His hands slipped to the waistband of the simple sport pants she wore, sliding his fingers inside and slowly pulling them down towards her hips. Cool air touched her skin that was on fire with the heat of his touch.

“Oh, my God,” she groaned as his head dipped lower, his tongue searing a path down her belly. She jumped as his tongue touched the heat between her legs.

She couldn't take this exquisite torture. “Adam,” she cried and he rose from his knees and pulled her to the bed. In a flash he skimmed out of his jeans and briefs, his shirt flying somewhere south of the bed. Joining her on the bed, he paused over the top of her, his own desire clear in the flicker of the candlelight.

Turnabout was fair play. She took his erection in her mouth, using her tongue to tease and caress. Adam made low and incoherent sounds as his hands played with her hair and his body tensed.

“Stop,” he croaked. “Stop, Catherine, I want to be inside you.”

Leaning back, she gazed into his smoldering black eyes and saw the truth. They were of one heart and needed to be one of body. She lay back against the pillows and welcomed him with her whole being: mind, soul, and body. He entered her, and she wasn't sure if she closed her eyes or they simply rolled back in her head. The feeling of him inside of her and filling her with such completeness all but stopped her heart.

She pushed her hips against his and he rewarded her by thrusting deep inside. The rhythm came naturally, a frenzy of pleasure and something far deeper that tied them together more than she could have believed possible. It was magic; it had to be.

“Look at me.” He paused, his hands on either side of her shoulders. “Look at me, Cat.”

She opened her eyes and stared up him. Raw and exposed, it was the most vulnerable she'd ever been. She should be scared and yet the growl that came low from his throat made her feel the exact opposite. There was something in that sound that touched her heart.

“You are so beautiful.”

Cat reached up and touched his face. “So are you.”

His hips started moving again, the heat bursting inside her like nothing she'd ever felt before and making her cry out. Adam anticipated and cut off her loud explosion by covering her mouth with his. At the same time she felt him go rigid with a final thrust.

Exhausted he fell beside her breathing deep and heavy. She didn't know what to say. A thousand conflicting thoughts were racing through her mind like what the hell had she been doing since she got here? They'd come to stop a killer and instead she kept jumping in bed with one of the hunters. Or maybe not instead of -- to be accurate, more like having sex during the lulls. She should be mortified at her lack of focus, except she wasn't. There was something odd going on between her and Adam that somehow felt right. Weird, but right.

“Penny for your thoughts.” Adam broke the comfortable silence.

She smiled in the darkness. “Not worth that much.”

His fingers pushed back the hair from her damp face. “Buyer beware?”

“Definitely.”

“Really, Catherine,” he pushed. “What are you thinking?”

“That we must be crazy. We’re in the middle of one the bloodiest fights I’ve been part of, and we can’t keep our hands off each other. If that’s not crazy, I don’t know what is.”

“Maybe not crazy.”

She leaned her head back against the pillow and looked up at the ceiling where the light of the candles flickered and danced. “You don’t think so?”

“No, I know it’s not craziness. For me it’s about the least crazy thing I’ve done in more years than I can count.”

Taking a deep breath, Cat turned her head so she could look at his face. Even in the darkness she could see the sincerity of his words mirrored on his face. “Why me, Adam?”

“Why not?”

She tapped him lightly on the arm. “Has anyone ever told you that at times your answering a question with a question is very annoying?”

“Maybe,” he purred. “Call it the fallout from a law school education.”

“Okay, mister lawyer, straight up answer. Why me?”

He reached over to pull her close. “I don’t know, Cat, it just is. I felt it the first moment I laid eyes on you and believe me I’m not a subscriber to the love-at-first-sight philosophy. Then we made love and it was a done deal as far as I was concerned. I’m a big boy and I know the difference between a quick lay and making love.”

“But aren’t you afraid of making another mistake? Didn’t you think it was forever when you got married the first time? And don’t forget your family sure has a problem with me.”

He tightened his grip on her and she could hear the beat of his heart where her ear lay against his chest. She inhaled the heady scent of his body and let it relax her.

“Yes I’m afraid,” he said with an honesty that surprised her. “Not of loving you but of losing you. It’s taken me years to find you; to find the one person I’m supposed to be with and it just so happens you’re another hunter. You are in danger any given day of the week and that’s what frightens me. I waited a long time to love someone again and I don’t want to lose you now. As for my family, they will come around.”

“It sounds so simple when you say it like that.”

“It is simple, Cat. Love just is. Things don’t always have to have a cut and dried explanation. You should know that better than most. Is what we do something you can

explain in black and white terms? Of course not and falling in love can defy rational explanation as well.”

If she could believe that, it would be simple. The reality for her was quite different. Love had never been that kind to her. She'd had distant and uninvolved parents and then there was Michael. Beautiful, brilliant Michael. Her heart still broke every time she thought about him. She didn't think she would ever get over losing him.

How could she describe her twin brother and all that he had meant to her? He had been her other half from the instant of her first memory. They had been crib mates, playmates and confidants. He had been there for her from her very first crush to the public crumbling of her engagement. Michael had been the one person she knew she could count on any time, any place, and she had believed in him until fate stepped in to turn her love and belief into ashes.

Michael had become the very thing she hunted.

Her brother had died in her arms as she had wept. Hiding behind the mask of beauty had been a demon and a killing machine. Too many had died at Michael's hands before anyone realized what he was and it was Cat who had ended his reign of terror.

A part of her died with Michael and she often wondered if it was the part of her that had able to love. She had loved her brother more than life itself and he had turned on her, almost taking her life. How could she not have known? They were twins, conceived and carried in one womb and yet she hadn't seen the evil that infected his soul and twisted his mind. Her visions had failed her and women had died because of it. If she had been that blind to her twin brother how could she ever love or trust another completely again?

“It wasn't your fault,” Adam broke into her turbulent thoughts. “Michael wasn't your fault.”

“Jesus, Adam,” Cat burrowed into his chest. “You have got stop that shit.”

“I'm not reading your mind, I can just tell where you're going. The wheels start spinning and I swear I can almost see them. Each time you think of you brother your eyes become the saddest I've ever seen.”

He pushed her away a little and took her face in his hands. “We are responsible for ourselves, Cat, that's it. You do the best you can and take life as it comes even if it's terrible like what happened with your brother.”

“That was more than terrible, Adam. I can't even begin to describe that horror.”

“I'll grant you that, but you can't stop living because your faith was shaken. People are, for the most part, good and kind. There is evil out there that would threaten all that is good, and it's up to you and me and all the Anima Mundi to do our best to stop it. At the same time we are entitled to some of the good things life offers like love.”

“You keep talking about love.”

“Because I love you and have from day one.”

“I don’t know ...”

“You do know.”

With a sigh she dropped once more to the pillow. “Yeah I do.”

“Accept it, Cat, and let it be what it is. It’s not going to be easy just because of who we are.”

“About that.” Cat rolled over and propped her head on a hand. “Let’s talk about this shape shifter thing.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Is it inherited or what? I mean, what if I ended up pregnant? We haven’t exactly been diligent here on birth control.”

“It’s not inherited, but it can be.”

“Well that’s pretty cut and dried. I’m feeling much better now.”

“Let me try to explain. It’s like your clairvoyance; it’s a gift. We don’t know the how and the whys. Some warriors are and some are not. When I was about fifteen, I made the first change after a sweat lodge session with my father and grandfathers. I was scared to death and they were proud. It is an important role in the tribe and the wolf is sacred. It took some time to be comfortable with it but I’ve come to accept what I am and what I need to do with my gift.”

“So if we have kids they’re not going to be little pups?”

He reached up and kissed her. “Not at first. It usually shows up in adolescence.”

“That’s got to be a hell of a sight. A teenage boy with loads of testosterone becoming a wolf. A mother’s dream.”

“We’ll cross that bridge if we get to it.”

“God, Adam,” she moaned again, overwhelmed by everything. “This *is* crazy.”

He kissed her deeply, his hands pulling her face to his. “No, Cat,” he said against her lips. “It’s love.”



## Chapter Twenty

Elizabeth was showered and dressed when Patrick rolled over and opened his eyes. “You don’t have to leave, do you?” He stretched like a lazy cat.

“Patrick, love ...” She leaned over him and ran her fingers through his hair. “... I have a few things to attend to.”

His smile was not what she’d call sweet, and that was more than fine with her. It had taken them all of about three minutes to discover their mutual tastes and after that the night had rolled on in a frenzy that had left him sleeping like the dead.

When she’d first noticed him last night she’d seen a means to an end, a quick end she added, that would help fill up her coffers and propel her on her way. But that changed minutes after they dropped into his deep comfortable bed, when the whips had come out and the restraints revealed. She’d thought him too drunk to be good for much pleasure, and she’d been wrong. This poor little rich boy was a wild one underneath the proper suit and tie, and an overabundance of alcohol hadn’t slowed him down at all.

She smiled as she thought of last night. It brought back many luxurious memories of a time when she could be held accountable by no one and took her pleasures at will. It appeared that to some extent, things had changed little; the rich still did what they pleased. And accepting as he was, Patrick had let her exercise her creative will and with it all desire to take his life fled.

Long ago she’d had a small circle of those loyal to her. They had helped her without question in the divine purpose that had kept her young and beautiful. Patrick gave her hope that she could fulfill her destiny in the here and now and at the same time not be alone. She hadn’t realized how isolated she’d been all these years and how she’d longed for that someone who could understand and appreciate her. Until Patrick. Beautiful, rich and willing Patrick. Had he been a lesser man she’d have taken his blood without a second thought,

leaving him drained and dead in the middle of the massive bed. The alternative was much more pleasing and far more satisfying. Elizabeth sat on the bed next to the reclining, naked man and made plans to return with her clothes later in the day.

All those years ago when she and her magnificent coffin been secreted into that crude room beneath the house of the Lord, she'd wondered at the wisdom of being closeted away in the middle of nowhere. She'd never heard of Spokane, and she hadn't been alone in her ignorance. It had been a frontier town full of cowboys, Indians, and hopeful merchants. Progress had been slow in coming to the city. Had she been able to voice her opinion, she'd have protested that putting her in the city was the decision of a madman except that locked away in the coffin she had been powerless to change a thing.

She'd waited in the darkness of that dungeon. Through the decades where in the world above the sun shone, the seasons changed and the city grew. Locked away in the ornate coffin in the crude stone-sided room, it was total solitude in dampness and blackout.

The day Amanda arrived, Elizabeth had felt the pull of the kindred spirit and excitement had begun to trickle through her immobilized arms and legs. She could feel the beautiful woman, full-bodied, full-blooded and with a mind perfect for the future that awaited Elizabeth. Her wait had not been long. Amanda had found her and they existed together now, part and parcel of each other, as it should be. Elizabeth was back and once again she'd found a faultless partner. The pieces of her new life were falling into place. She wondered if perhaps one day she would be able to recreate that small circle of loyalists who had stood by her even through the indignity of the trial that sealed her fate.

Without moving from the huge and rumpled bed, Patrick tossed her the keys to the Mercedes they'd ridden in from the restaurant last night. He declared his intention to take the day off just to rest up and suggested she use the car for her errands. She did love much of modern technology. That car made her fine carriages and magnificent horses seem crude in comparison.

His eyes were hooded and his smile narrow as he watched her move towards the door. He suggested they have a quiet dinner at home tonight. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip and winked. It was a wonderful idea, and she had a suggestion to make it ever sweeter. His smile grew as she told him her thoughts.

Others might find his immediate infatuation with her strange though she had difficulty understanding that. She was royalty, always had been and always would be. Her royal blood and her beauty had drawn people to her with a loyalty that bordered on obsession and she took it in stride. She couldn't change her birthright even if she wanted to. It was an entitlement she accepted without question.

Pausing at the mirror by the door, she smiled. The changes were coming with satisfactory speed. Her skin was a beautiful milky white without even the slightest hint of a wrinkle. Her eyes were the crystal blue that movie stars dreamed of possessing and did only with the help of creative lenses. Her hair was the halo of angels. Amanda still stared back at

her from the mirror although it wouldn't be long before she disappeared from view. Elizabeth was strong and her spirit was sure to consume even the slightest trace of Amanda. She blew a kiss to Patrick and left.

Elizabeth stopped at the curb half a block away from the church and searched the grounds before pulling into the driveway. At the house, she jumped out and pulled up the door to the single car garage. She needed to put the car inside so that no one would notice and question the Mercedes. Her work wouldn't take long and she wanted to be able to leave without notice when it was time. There were several things, or rather several donors, she had to deal with before making her final exit.

Mary was due in at about ten and even though Reverend John wasn't back until later, Mary would come in to get things ready for the weekend. Elizabeth had a little score to settle with Mary and this morning would do quite nicely. First things first though. She went to her room and looked around. Her purchases from yesterday were still in the bags. Just as well, made them easier to pick up and move. She did a quick inventory of the clothes and possessions that Amanda had brought to the boring room deciding that nothing suited her and could stay behind. All she needed were her jewels and her purchases from yesterday.

She slipped out of last night's expensive dress, folding it with care before putting it into one of the bags. Rummaging in the same bag, she found something more suitable for the day. She pulled on a long silk shirt with matching silk slacks that tied at the waist. She then put on a pair of black leather shoes that were soft enough to feel like slippers. Sitting on the straight-backed chair near the door, she ran a brush through her long hair as she waited. When she heard Mary's car pull up into the church parking lot, Elizabeth dropped the brush to the floor then stood up, smoothed the wrinkles from her slacks and headed towards the church.

With an unforced, bright smile on her face, she approached the hefty secretary who looked a little like a clown in her yellow flowered top. "Good morning, Mary."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat got up buzzing, and she did mean buzzing in a very literal sense. It had nothing to do with jumping Adam's bones either. The universe was shifting and change was in the air. If Adam and Martin didn't feel it too, she'd be surprised. It was going down today one way or the other.

She wasn't surprised, at least not with Adam. He came out of the shower prowling and on high alert. That wasn't an exaggeration either. He was prowling the house, his eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. She expected him to change at any second and start marking his territory. He was so charged she expected sparks when she touched his arm.

She stood at the counter and stared at the empty mugs Adam had set out for his houseguests. The superb aroma of coffee filled the kitchen and still she held the cup without pouring a drop. She was just too keyed up to add caffeine to the mix. Adam had made a pot of

his black brew, but he wasn't touching it either. He'd poured himself a mug after it finished dripping and then left it forgotten on the kitchen table when he went outside to pace the sidewalk in front of the house. She set the mug she'd been holding back on the counter and turned to the table. Sinking to a chair, she tapped her fingers and waited for Martin to make an appearance.

Her mind raced, turning over what little she knew. It made her wonder if maybe it would be wise to call in reinforcements. In the space of a couple of hours they could have two to three more hunters here. The power-in-numbers kind of approach.

The problem was she didn't know how much time they were going to have. It could be as much as a few days or as little as a few hours. The bitch was crazy; there was little doubt of that so unfortunately she was leaning towards the timeframe of a couple of hours. That wasn't enough time to bring in the specialized help that would be needed. Besides, the chance of the hunters being free enough from their own work to make it here at the drop of a dime did not present the kind of odds that gave her that warm and fuzzy feeling. Their jobs were of the twenty-four/seven variety and their territory the entire planet. That was a whole lot of ground to cover for a relatively small group of folks. What that meant in the real world was that the three of them were pretty much on their own with this one.

Crap, she muttered under her breath. They were it. One confused Canadian, one shape-shifting Spokane, and one dying Englishman. Fee fi fo fum!

\* \* \* \* \*

Mary backed up, stumbling as she tripped on her own feet. "I didn't hear you come in." A flush bloomed on her chubby round cheeks that only added to the clown-like appearance. "Is Reverend back yet?"

Elizabeth sauntered in and picked up a few papers off the edge of Mary's desk. She smiled at the other woman before sitting at the chair beside the desk. Brushing a hair away from her face, she reached over and touched Mary on the arm. Mary snatched her arm away and stepped to the far side of the desk, putting as much space as she could between them.

"No, I think he said he'd be back around ten. But I wanted to show you something I found in the basement when I was cleaning the other day."

"What?" Mary's eyes narrowed and the flush receded, leaving her face a pasty white highlighted even more by the bright green eye shadow.

"Oh, come," Elizabeth told her in a light, happy voice. "I'm not going to bite you. And besides, it's a little hard to explain. Actually --" She leaned towards Mary and spoke in a tone she hoped came across as conspiratorial. "-- I was hoping you could explain it to me since you're the resident historian."

Mary didn't look like she wanted to go anywhere with Elizabeth, let alone move outside the safety of her little office. Her mouth worked as if she was searching for a polite

refusal. Nothing made it past her lips, and Elizabeth smiled in triumph. She could smell the sweet scent of fear rolling off Mary's rotund body.

If Mary was anything, she was polite to a fault and Elizabeth had been counting on that. Mary was terrified of her or Amanda, as the case was, and wouldn't be willing to put herself in a dark scary room alone with a woman she perceived to be the devil. She was also too polite to snub the Reverend's personal redemption project and that was the card Elizabeth was playing this morning. Mary's good Christian nature wouldn't allow her to refuse. She could come, the lamb to the slaughter and not be any the wiser.

"Come on," Elizabeth urged, keeping the light and friendly tone to her voice. "You won't believe this."

"Why don't you just tell me what it is? I have a hunch I can explain whatever it is without having to go downstairs."

"I can't explain it; that's why I need you. Please."

Mary hesitated, biting her bottom lip and looking at Elizabeth with eyes that reminded her of a deer in headlights. Then her expression changed. Resolution along with a little curiosity pushed her towards Elizabeth and the door.

"All right, but I only have a few minutes."

"It won't take long," she promised.

And it didn't. True to her word, twenty minutes later Elizabeth retraced her steps along the dark hidden corridor emerging into the dim light of the basement alone. She turned, lowered the door and then slid the stack of boxes back to cover the metal ring. She straightened and smiled; looking around the room that gave no indication of the secrets it held just beyond the dusty wooden floor.

She was liking this time and place more and more with every passing minute. Everything was falling into proper alignment with a natural ease that pleased her. It reminded her of the karma that seemed to follow her through her journeys and adventures. With each successive return the time had been ripe for her and the wonders of each new world had filled Elizabeth with strength and new knowledge. She couldn't deny that she'd been stopped each time long before she'd been ready but that had been more of an inconvenience than a disaster. Knowledge was the true key and though they'd stopped her, they hadn't destroyed her. Just like they wouldn't obliterate her now, even if Amanda's body no longer held a breath and her heart no longer beat. It was the flesh that faded and that could be replaced.

The advantage to her long and fruitful journeys over the years had been the acquisition of knowledge. Each time she'd encountered a fatal flaw that had put her back in that beautiful box and each time she'd come back smarter and better prepared. She felt confident that at last she held the secret to her immortality in the palm of her hand and the best part was it was coming near.

She didn't have time to dwell on her victory; there was one last task to attend to at the church. As luck would have it, he was driving up just as she emerged into the daylight that streamed into the sanctuary, the jewel tones of the stained glass windows turning it brilliant shades of red, yellow, blue, and violet. For a church this wasn't a bad place. In a way it reminded her of home with the tall ceilings and the stained glass that gave the simple building a grand beauty. The oak of the pews was old and well cared for in a way that made the deep rich wood glow with purpose and life.

In her day the churches had also been old and tall with beautiful windows and warmth from the mighty congregations. She'd gone into those churches as a fine noble woman, putting in her appearances like the member of royalty that she was. It was expected from a woman of her noble birth.

Despite her veneer of propriety, those closest to her had known the truth of her beliefs and that had been fine with her. All the dogma spouted by the men of God in her day had done little to sway her personal beliefs. The proof had been there for her to see each time she saw herself reflected in a looking glass.

Today, well, they were still pounding out the same old rhetoric that from her perspective hadn't changed a whit in centuries. The only real difference she could discern was that here at least there was no state-sponsored religion, giving everyone a chance to embrace whatever spirit they wished to. She was even surprised to learn of the covens that worshiped as openly as any other recognized faith. Interesting, but not very compelling. If only the masses understood where the true power lay, they'd run from their churches in droves and worship the likes of her as the true gods and goddesses they were. Indeed, the power she held was far more tangible than the what-ifs preached by the likes of Reverend John.

Speaking of which, she had something she needed to settle with the pastor. A little for herself and a little for Amanda.

She heard the back door to the parish house open and close with a snap. Elizabeth stretched her arms over her head and smiled. She'd had just enough to time to race from the church to his office and prepare herself while he pulled his car into the detached garage. As his footsteps moved closer, she almost giggled. How she loved little surprises. Reaching the open doorway, Reverend John stopped in his tracks, a scarlet flush racing up his neck.

"Amanda," he stuttered.

"John," Amanda ran her tongue over her lower lip. "I've been waiting for you."

His gaze dropped to her naked breasts and stopped. "I, I, don't you think you should put something on?"

"Why? Isn't this what you've been dying to see for months? I thought a little welcome-home was in order after all the nice things you've done for me."

"I don't know what you mean." He sucked in his breath and brought his glowing gaze up from her breasts to her eyes.

She smiled with a sweetness that belied the intent beneath the mask, stretching her legs out with lazy indifference on the old-fashioned sofa that had been pushed against the far wall of his cluttered office. The sofa was meant to provide comfort to parishioners who needed the helpful words of their minister, not for the display of the beautiful, naked body of a temporary church boarder. Even so the effect was as powerful as she'd known it would be. He was no different than a hundred others she'd met along the way.

"Now don't be shy, John. You know exactly what I mean. I've seen the way you look at me, the way your eyes search my body when you don't think I'm looking. You've been dying to get your hands on me and your, well, you-know-what inside of me."

"Amanda, really, you shouldn't be talking like this, and you should put your clothes on. This just isn't proper."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk." She clicked her tongue. "John, this isn't supposed to be proper, and I'm going to talk however I like and besides," she took her index finger to her mouth, sliding it in slowly and just as slowly sliding it out. "You and I both know we're going to break a couple commandments today."

"Mary." The word came out in a strangled whisper.

Her eyes went to the crotch of his pants and an easy smile slid up her face. "She came in earlier but is tied up elsewhere for quite a while. It's just you and me."

Indecision flashed across his face, a violent struggle between what he knew was right and the lure of what he knew was wrong. Elizabeth smiled and waited.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Cat sat in the changing room of Empire Imaging tapping her foot, a pale blue and white gown covering her bare torso. The stupid ties that held the gown together from the side didn't want to close right and she fiddled with those trying to find way to make it comfortable. Nothing seemed to work very well and she gave up, holding it with her arms crossed over her chest.

It had been two hours since she'd left Adam and Martin staring after her with looks of stunned surprise. Martin more so than Adam. She guessed he felt he should have seen it and hadn't. Like he didn't have enough on his plate already. Worrying about her wasn't something he needed to do as well.

Adam hadn't said much. Instead those wolf eyes had narrowed in a way she was becoming familiar with. Patience was a virtue he held in spades though what that meant was he'd have plenty to say once they were alone. She could hardly wait.

Now she picked at the too-big cotton gown in the loveliest shades of white and baby blue. She still had on her jeans but was naked from the waist up, save for the gown and stuck in the tiny room to wait. What she wouldn't give for a big old sweatshirt.

The technician, Laura, was a delightful woman with a soft voice and easy way. She'd shown Cat the images Doc had sent down from home pointing out the area of his concern. Then she'd scrunched and pressed Cat's breast in the stand-up x-ray machine, taking slide after slide for what seemed like an hour but was probably more like ten minutes.

After that, Cat had been sent down the hallway to a dim room where she stretched out on a padded table while another technician ran the cool wand of an ultrasound machine over her bared breast. Images flowed across the computer screen in mellow oranges, sunflower yellows, and cool greens. Every so often the woman would stop the movement of the wand and push a button to capture an image. From her vantage point, Cat couldn't tell what it was



that made a particular blob stand out from another. After the first couple, she quit even trying to figure it out. Twenty minutes later, she was directed back to the three by three cubicle where her bra and shirt hung on the thin chrome hook.

She wasn't alone in the sterile room. The woman across the way reeked of cigarettes and her foot tapped like a drummer on speed as she waited for her own news. The cough that rattled from her thin chest left little doubt in Cat's mind what kind of news the woman would be hearing. Hearing that death rattle, she was more than a little glad she'd never acquired a taste for tobacco. She had enough problems without throwing something like that into the mix.

She was patting herself on the back for being a conscientious non-smoker when Laura came around the hallway corner with a manila envelope in her hand. She was brisk and all business.

"Catherine," she stopped outside the cubicle's curtained entrance. "I have your results."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a touch past eleven when Adam pulled up in front of the church for the second and he hoped, final time. In the bright sunshine it was a beautiful building that had weathered the years with dignity and grace. The second Martin stepped out of the car a shotgun blast of sensation assailed him. Shaking his head to clear it, he blinked and regrouped.

He walked up to the double doors of the church and turned the handles. Unlike yesterday when Catherine and Adam had encountered doors locked tight, the bolts had been drawn and the doors swung open with ease. Stepping inside he looked around. The vestibule was simple with a deep red carpet, several upholstered chairs and three narrow tables pushed up against the walls and covered with books, baskets, and programs. The air was thick with the scent of wood polish and sandalwood. Pretty standard fare for a church in just about any country.

Another set of doors led into the sanctuary and there were single doors on either side of the vestibule leading, he suspected, to dressing rooms, rest rooms and other church facilities. He took the double doors in front of him and stepped into the sanctuary.

Again the jolt jittered up his spine. She'd been here although he was certain she was gone now. It was no different than a hundred other churches he'd been in soothing and inspiring except in this case there was an aura of evil that floated through the room, a taint that held freshness to it. A thin veil of recent evil rather than time-imbedded malevolence. Although that wasn't necessarily correct either. In all probability Bathory had been hidden here for God knows how many years and had awakened within weeks or even days. The evil that defined Elizabeth Bathory had been sleeping or waiting for the next host body to set her free.

“Oh, baby,” Catherine muttered behind him. “I swear to God I can smell her.”

She stopped, put a hand to her mouth and muttered, “I guess it’s not too proper to swear on God’s name in his own house now is it?”

He couldn’t help the smile; Catherine just did that to him. Her nature was refreshing and frank in everything she did. Only one of the reasons he held her in such high esteem. He was a little surprised to find her standing right behind him. He hadn’t heard her car pull up. Then again he hadn’t been listening. His mind had been on the building.

“How are you?” he asked.

Her eyes clouded and then cleared with such speed that someone who didn’t know her as well might have missed the flash of emotion.

“Okay.”

“You’re certain?” He didn’t quite believe her.

She laid a hand on his arm. “Yes.”

He didn’t have the right to push. He hadn’t been forthcoming with his own battles so he had no right to push her on hers. Tit for tat as his mother had been fond of saying.

Martin let it go and switched gears. “What do you feel?”

Catherine took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “She’s here.”

He nodded and patted her hand. “I agree that she’s been here. She’s gone now.”

“Damn,” Cat muttered, opening her eyes and turning her gaze towards Adam, who had come in behind them as silent as the night.

“Let’s do a quick once-through,” Adam said as he was moving towards another door.

They did as he suggested, searching as much of the church as they could and finding nothing. Once they were done there, they walked the short distance to the smaller of the two parish houses. The doorbell went unanswered as they stood on the front porch and waited. Adam left Martin and Catherine standing on the porch of the first house while he walked to the second parish house. A few seconds later he came around the corner and motioned for Martin and Catherine to join him. He held his cell phone to his ear and his face was dark and serious.

Adam’s conversation was brief, and he had the phone back in his pocket by the time they reached him. The only word Martin had been able to make out was “blood.”

“Something’s very wrong here,” he told them as he led the way to the back steps of the second house. “Check that out.” He pointed to the kitchen through the clear Plexiglas of the storm door.

The bloody footsteps that led to the kitchen sink from the hallway were thick and dark against the pale flooring. Blood droplets looking like red rain had fallen in the otherwise sunny kitchen.

“Shit,” Catherine muttered and turned away.

Martin stared at the surreal scene and felt the fury build in him. It made him angry how she used and discarded human beings as though they were nothing more than rags. She drained their lifeblood and left the empty vessels behind, unneeded and unwanted. Worst of all, she did it again and again through unending lifetimes. It wasn't fair and it wasn't right.

Within moments sirens floated through the air, breaking up the late morning sunshine.

"Your buddy didn't waste any time," Catherine said to Adam as she turned away from the bloody scene and towards the direction of the high-pitched wail.

"He wants her stopped as badly as we do. Maybe not for the same reasons, but his are just as good anyway."

Adam had a point. Their world provided them with all sorts of reasons to stop this creature that couldn't rationally be explained to most, even those from the Division who were supposed to have better than average understanding of what the Anima Mundi was all about. Even with this supposed one-up on the regular law enforcement people, there were moments when what they were up against defied any type of explanation they could provide men like Sandy Roberts. He'd do his best to understand, but if a man were to dig down a layer or two, understanding was pretty much superficial. Until a person faced the kind of front lines that they battled on a routine basis, true understanding was impossible.

Sandy Roberts pulled up not more than three minutes later emerging from a dark car that was different from what he'd been driving so far. His face was grim, his mouth a set line in a face that was far more serious and haggard than the first time Martin had seen him. The youthful countenance had aged overnight.

Martin was anxious to get inside the house. After what he'd felt inside the chapel and now seen in the parish house kitchen, there was no time to waste. There was a rippling current in the air that set his nerves on edge. Not that he thought she would be inside. She was gone, which was not to say that she wouldn't be close by watching them as they surveyed her handiwork. She was proud of what she was accomplishing and like any of the modern-day serial killers would want to reap the greatest amount of satisfaction from each and every kill.

The Order was as old as time and so was the evil they hunted. The games over the years had changed in frequency, location, and damage but one thing hadn't altered, the dance between the hunter and the hunted. A serial killer was a serial killer and that didn't vary regardless of the century.

Catherine was as antsy as he was, her eyes squinting as she watched Sandy and his crew open the parish house door careful not to destroy any potential evidence. There was a controlled restraint in Catherine's body as she waited for her chance to step inside the house where the very recent kill awaited her special skills. It seemed to be taking every ounce of concentration she had not to push the police aside and run through the door.

He suspected she was more than anxious because this time she hadn't seen it coming and because she was having her own brush with mortality. It was one thing to fight an

external evil; it was another to fight your own body. She hadn't shared what was happening in her life and might not. Not that he needed to know the specifics. One look in her eyes told him as much as words ever could. He knew the look in her eye because he'd seen it staring back at him from his own mirror.

Putting a hand on her shoulder, he gave it a gentle squeeze. She looked up at him with a humorless smile. "Patience, little one."

She nodded, put a hand to her mouth and began chewing on a fingernail.

Adam stood tall and straight as he always did, watching each and every move that was being made around the parish house. His photographic memory was logging the actions with a preciseness that was frightening sometimes. It was also a tool that came in quite handy on more than one occasion. The details never passed Adam by even if it took a little bit of time to understand their significance. Little was lost on the powerful shape shifter.

They waited with patience that was hard found for about an hour as police techs and Division flunkies made their way in and out of the house with cameras, bags, and clipboards. Sandy had come out after the initial walkthrough to report that they'd found the minister nude and murdered on the sofa in his office. "Not pretty," was his official comment on the condition of the minister.

By the time Martin was convinced that Catherine had to have gnawed all ten fingernails to the quick, Sandy motioned them to come in. Not a minute too soon as he feared she was close to drawing blood.

As he walked up the back steps, Martin placed his hand on the rail and electricity shot up his arm. His hand flew off the rail, and he wasn't able to stifle the gasp. He'd felt the static jump in the air since they'd arrived. This was different and far more dangerous.

Catherine stopped mid step and turned around. "What is it, Martin?"

"I don't know," he lied and wouldn't be able to explain why if pushed. It wasn't like him to exclude Catherine or any of his hunters for that matter. It was just that this time things were different. He was different and he needed to sort it out before he could share much with his colleagues regardless of how much he trusted them, which he did.

Adam was bringing up the rear, his face puzzled by Martin's physical reaction. As usual he kept his comments to himself and waited for Martin to share whatever it was. There were moments when Adam's habitual silence was worse than a screamer. He appreciated the way Adam processed everything before he spoke. He was the rational mind in a sea of emotion, and that was one of the things that made him a natural leader.

Martin paused on the steps and put his hand back down on the rail, this time with a slow even movement. He tensed expecting another razor jolt. When nothing happened, he pulled his hand away and continued up the stairs to follow Catherine into the bright kitchen. They all watched their steps making certain not to step in any of the bloody marks.

Inside, he looked around. It was a good-sized room designed to be the heart of the house. A large oak table sat in one corner with six chairs, each with a dark green cushion tied to the dowels of the chair back, giving them a country-comfy look. The floor was linoleum made to look like a light-colored hardwood. Like the table with the cushioned chairs it gave the room a homey look. Welcoming was the word that kept coming to his mind. The walls were painted a pale but bright yellow that warmed the room and captured much of the natural light. If not for the crimson footprints and bloody raindrops it would be like something out a country home magazine.

But there were those footprints.

A woman's footprints.

Three separate doors led out of the kitchen, two on either end into hallways and one that opened up into a fairly good-sized room that was furnished with sofas, comfortable chairs and low tables. The original living room in the house though now it was more than likely used as a meeting place for various groups within the church. Without disturbing a thing in the kitchen, he followed Sandy and Catherine down the dim, narrow hallway that came off the kitchen to the right. Three doors opened off the hall and Sandy motioned for them to step into the one at the end.

The room was dim, the shades having been drawn and only a single lamp burned on the edge of the large desk cluttered with stacks of paper, magazines, and a computer. He lay sprawled on the sofa positioned against the far wall.

The room must have been the original master bedroom as it was large with a door that he suspected opened into a small bathroom. A sizeable window with the shades closed took up most of one wall with overflowing bookcases filling up the remaining walls. A sofa was pushed to within a few inches of one of the bookcase-lined walls. Blood splatters that looked like drops of crimson paint littered the spines of several shelves of books behind the sofa.

The man himself lay with his head tipped back against the arm of the sofa, his legs stretched out to the end of the cushions, his hands folded across his bloody abdomen. His eyes were open, his lips were parted. Posed, thought Martin as he gazed down at the lifeless man.

Unlike her other victims, he had been a clean kill. He had not been butchered or mutilated. There were, at least from this vantage point, only two visible entry wounds, one at his throat, a clean cut through the carotid artery and a second near his genitals. He didn't have to be a forensics specialist to figure out the neck wound was the fatal one. And he didn't have to be a psychologist to get the significance of the genital wound. She was sending a message, very clear and very loud.

Bugger was, he was certain the message was for him.

## Chapter Twenty-two

“Shit,” was all she could think of to say. With the kind of money she’d grown up with and the nice fancy education her parents had seen fit to equip her with, not to mention all the years of good breeding, a person would think she could come up with something a little more refined to express her emotions. Yeah, well, a person would think that all right but she recalled the Steinbeck story about best-laid plans that led her right back around to the ever useful, all-purpose, “Shit.”

Besides, even given the very large vocabulary her nifty education had provided her with, it seemed the absolute right thing to say. The whole situation was spiraling out of control at such a high rate of speed that if nothing else, it scared the shit out of her. What in the world were they dealing with anyway? It was a given that they weren’t dealing with anything from this world or this dimension anyway. The thing, this woman, this Blood Countess, belonged to another time and place, and it was up to them to put her down once and for all. She belonged in another dimension and had no place in Cat’s time or world.

Despite her frustration and Martin’s obvious distress there was one thing that she was convinced of right now, this very minute, and that was that she’d had it with this bitch. What she’d done to these poor women was hideous enough but this butchery made her stomach roll and damn it she had a pretty strong stomach. She hadn’t thrown up when the doctor had his somber chat with her, and she’d likewise managed to keep everything down when she walked in here.

She guessed the bottom line was, she was done screwing around. No more bodies, no more mutilations and damn it to hell, no more blood drinking. Enough was enough. Cat was going to find her and find her today if it killed her. In this job, that was not out of the realm of possibility.

She looked over at Adam and could see the same steely determination written all over his face. It made her feel good to realize that she and Adam had more in common than simple sex. It was as if they were on the same plane, and while for her that was a new experience, it wasn't all bad either. The fact that they were on the same astral plane about vicious murders in general, and in particular those committed by evil incarnate, vampires, ghouls, and any other less-than-human beings, was, for lack of a better description, cool. She was aware it was kind of weird, but hey, she figured she'd take what she could get, when she could get it. All things considered at the moment, that was enough.

So here she stood in the cluttered study, a room that under any other circumstances would be a place of confidence and welcome, staring at the bloody body of one of God's chosen ones who now appeared by default to be one of evil's chosen ones as well. He was bloody, beaten and, she suspected, violated. So much for a room of confidence and welcome. More like an Aileen Wuornos rerun, only with a lot more violence than the executed serial killer's standard MO.

Female serial killers got under Cat's skin in a big way. Didn't seem to matter if they were from this world or another, they were plain old violent. The man before her had been ravaged. Not just killed, but ravaged with an unrestrained violence that made her stomach roll. What the hell was that all about? Talk about overcompensation. Or was it penis envy? She had a tendency to get confused on her Freudian psychology. Didn't matter really, the end result was the same.

What she was seeing now, more than even sensing, which was her strong point, was that this demon was sending a message minus one important detail. Cat wasn't clear to whom the message was addressed. Her? Somehow she didn't think so. More like Martin. He'd said his family had been after Countess Bathory for hundreds of years, so it made more sense that she would toy with him. If she had to guess, she'd say messing with her and Adam was the icing on the cake.

And then there was the even stranger part. She hadn't been certain before but was now convinced that Bathory knew they were here and that they were searching for her. This was a first for Cat. She'd been on umpteen hunts but her prey in the past had seemed oblivious to her presence until it had been too late to escape the final justice. She didn't get that here. It was more like Bathory sent out feelers. Like the two visions Cat had experienced. It seemed as though once Bathory had confirmed that she was on Cat's radar screen the game had begun in earnest. That made her even more determined to get this bitch, and if there was one thing this Canadian could do, it was dig in her heels. She couldn't speak for English Martin or American Adam, but in the high country, tracking was a science and that was something that might pass by her prey. All the better for Cat.

"The splatters on the books," she said to no one in particular. "Judging by the splatter, I'd say little miss blood and gore is pissed."

“I’d say more of a serious case of fury.” Adam was scrutinizing the splatters and making notes in a small pad he’d pulled from his pocket.

“Shall we?” she asked Martin who had already moved close enough to take the hand of the dead man. Martin’s eyes were closed and his brow furrowed as if in pain.

She didn’t like the look on his face. Like the minister who was lying in his entire natural splendor for the world to see, his unseeing eyes gazing up at the ceiling, Martin’s face was as white as the skin of the dead man. It felt somehow wrong and she worried he was ready to collapse at any moment. What strength she’d seen in him on the first day was fading like the daylight.

He opened his eyes and they were clear. Fatigue seemed to fade from his face as he nodded and moved toward the body.

Martin said, “Come, Catherine.”

Putting her hands on the dead man’s head she tried not to wince as the ooze that matted the soft and fine hair together shifted between her fingers in a wet slide. She ignored the unpleasant sensation, not to mention the unease that rattled her to the bone, and like Martin, closed her eyes.

Her breath caught in her throat as images shutter-clicked through her mind. From the moment of her entry to the moment she drove in the fatal wound, Cat saw it all. Her throat raged as the cold steel of a wicked knife sliced across her own warm flesh. It was all she could do to catch her breath as she pulled her hands from his head and stumbled back, her knees buckling. Adam caught her before she fell to the carpet. His arms cradled her next to his chest and he hurried out to the yard where fresh air filled her lungs. Hugging her close, he gave her a moment to gather herself. She leaned her head into his chest and breathed in the now familiar scent of him. The vivid images faded in intensity and her breath evened out. Sensing the calm in her, Adam set her down with care, making sure her feet were solid on the wood of the back porch before he released her.

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” she muttered. “That sucked.”

“What did you see, Cat?”

She looked up at him, putting her hands on his chest because she needed the solid touch of his body. “I saw her, Adam. I saw *her*.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“*Martin.*”

*The luscious black velvet was gone. She stood in the dim room surrounded by books, her skin as smooth and beautiful as fine porcelain and covered with blood. Her full breasts with the rosy nipples were just beyond the reach of his outstretched hand. Her eyes glittered full of mischief and life.*

*“My handsome muse. Catch me if you can, old man.”*



*“How could you do this?” he whispered his breath warm in the room that had turned cold as ice.*

*Her laughter so full of mirth was real and deep, “Oh, you foolish man,” she told him as she leaned forward her breasts moving towards his lips. “It was as easy as killing a bug.” She snapped her fingers and laughed.*

*“What do you want?” he screamed at her. “What?”*

*Again her laughter filled the room and send chills down his spine. She turned her head to look him in the eye. “I still want your soul, what else is there?”*

*Pain began pouring up through his hands and into his shoulders. He wanted to back away from her, away from the pain and couldn't. Her naked body held his gaze.*

*“No!”*

*Her laughter consumed the air around him making him want to scream if only he could, but the air seemed to have been sucked out of his chest. Instead she touched his face, her damp fingertips sending shards of pain deep into his skull.*

*“You don't have a choice, my love. I told you before, you don't have a choice and never did. I will come for you. I will drink your blood and I will take your soul just as I've done to him.”*

*She backed away so that he could see the dying man, pale and bleeding out on the sofa. His eyes were open and staring.*

*“No!”*

*“Oh, yes.” She leaned over, her breath warm against his ear, her breasts pushing against his arm. “Oh, yes.”*

*His breath was ragged, pain making his body shake all over. He had to stop her. He had to but he didn't know how.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Martin pulled his hands away from the body and moved back. Adam had taken Cat out of the room a few minutes earlier, and he stood next to the man's lifeless vessel and stared. It was indeed lifeless, though it was far from empty. She had seen to that, knowing as she did that he would come behind her.

The men working in the room gave him a wide berth, tending to matters in other areas until they could approach the body. Martin was torn on what to do. He didn't know how to feel. Each time she reached out to him, invading his mind and body, he felt a little piece himself tear away. He hated her and wanted to destroy her.

He also wanted to know her secret.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam leaned over and kissed her on the top of the head. "Tell me."

"Man, oh, man," Cat ran her hands through her hair. Sweat had made it damp and it clung to her fingers. "She's playing with us. I sensed it before, but I know it for a fact now. She didn't block a damn thing this time; it was as clear as a brand new DVD. I saw her seduce the minister, take him, then kill him. The whole time she's looking him straight in the eyes as if she wanted to make sure she burned her image into his eternity. She didn't just kill the man, she destroyed him."

"Do you think you'll be able to recognize her?"

Would she ever. "Damn straight."

Cat doubted she'd be able to erase the image of that monster's face from her memory. She was beautiful, elegant, and filled with the kind of rage that fueled tornados. The mask of beauty hid something ugly that went beyond evil. She feared whatever it was, but feared even more the idea that they wouldn't be able to stop her.

"Good." Adam touched her face with his fingers, a gesture so reassuring that her body began to calm.

She looked around, realizing that Martin was still inside, and the thought chilled her to the bone. The same thought seemed to occur to Adam and they both hurried back into the house.

Martin was standing with his back against the study door, a towel in his hands as he wiped away the blood that had transferred from the reverend's body to Martin's palms. The red streaks sent a chill racing back up her spine, and she looked down quickly at her own hands. She was grateful that they were clean, all things considered. So much for the return of her bravado.

"Did you?" It was more a rhetorical question than anything. She knew he'd seen the same thing she had and that didn't make her feel any better.

"Yes, Catherine," he answered with his eyes still on his hands while he continued to wipe them over and over again as if he couldn't seem to get them clean.

"She's playing with us."

He stopped the wiping motions and looked up at her. His eyes were sad and the weariness seemed to have returned. "Yes, but it is more than a game of cat and mouse."

"What do you mean?" Stupid question. She knew what it meant and had seen it reflected in Bathory's eyes. The truth of the game had been there for her to see. She had meant for Cat to understand.

"She wants me."

"What?"

It was a chorus of voices that spit the question out. Cat had been silent because she knew the truth of his words. Adam and Sandy had chimed in together not having the benefit, if she could call it that, of the vision. They had no way of knowing what she did.

Puffing out his cheeks, Martin took a moment before answering. "I've been looking for her my entire career, and she's been looking for me."

"Outside, folks." Sandy surprised Cat with his abruptness. So far he'd been nothing if not the pillar of politeness. After a second it dawned on her that he wanted this conversation to remain confidential and out of the hearing of the half dozen or so officers and techs who were still roaming around double-checking. He wasn't trying to be rude. He was working on damage control.

Outside they walked around to the back of the church far enough away from the crowd to have some solitude. There was an uncomfortable silence as they looked from one to the other and waited for the explanation.

"Explain," Sandy directed when no one else volunteered. If Cat had to guess, she'd say that Sandy was in no mood for waiting games.

"Have you ever heard of the Blood Countess?" Martin asked Sandy.

When Sandy frowned and shook his head, Martin gave him the down and dirty version. It took less than three minutes.

"You're not going to tell us we're after a seventeenth-century countess, are you?" Sandy asked with surprise when Martin finished.

"Indeed I am, young man."

"Oh, come on," Sandy said looking at their faces one after another. "I know you guys do some kind of freaky stuff, but reincarnation of a couple-hundred-year-old psychopath? That's more than a little hard to swallow."

"More like a four-hundred-year-old psychopath, and I doubt the Reverend in there would disagree with the psychopath theory," Cat told him.

"That's precisely what I'm telling you all," Martin said. "It is Elizabeth Bathory in the flesh."

"How can that be?"

Sandy wasn't going to be swayed even though the three people standing in front of him were together on it. The one irrefutable thing she'd learned in the last five years was that evil was not completely destroyed no matter what was done. It was like an infection that antibiotics could control but couldn't quite destroy. Given the right set of circumstances, the infection would build until once again it rampaged and sickened. That was evil. It hid, it waited, and it built until its chance to live came again.

People thought Hitler or the others like him who throughout history killed and destroyed for the glory of destruction were gone. In reality it was a kind of good news/bad news situation. It was true that Hitler's body had been killed all those long years ago and that that was the good news. The bad news, well, she'd leave that to the imagination, but folks had better pay close attention to their world leaders. There was a reason why the phrase "history repeats itself" came into being, and it wasn't metaphorical.

“How it can be --” Martin turned to face Sandy. “-- is quite simple. She waited until the right person came along, and then she stepped into the waiting vessel.”

Holding up his hand, his eyes squinting, Sandy voiced his skepticism. “Once again, I’ll say that I’ve seen firsthand what you guys can do. I’ve seen you read a dead man’s mind. I’ve seen her describe visions that are so picture perfect that she might as well have been standing in the same room with the killers. But those folks who do the killing are not ghosts or spirits, they’re flesh and blood people of this time and this world. So you tell me how can this Countess Bathory just step into someone else’s body, and I’m taking from your explanation that that’s what you mean?”

“Correct, young man. She waited in a plane of existence that neither you nor I can understand and then she stepped into someone else’s waiting and willing body. She took them over mind, body, and spirit, complete with all the knowledge gained from multiple lifetimes.”

“All right, so let’s just say for the moment that I go along with this concept -- and I’m not saying that I do -- but for the sake of argument, say I do. What happens to the other person?”

“I suspect that we all think along the same lines in that regard and believe that it’s a bit of co-existence.”

“You mean like a multiple personality thing?”

“Yes, that would be a simple way to explain it. The evil one is the dominant personality but the original owner of the body still exists just buried far in the background. If they didn’t co-exist in a manner such as that, the old one would be completely lost in a new time full of wonders that weren’t even thought of at the time they were born.”

“True enough,” Sandy muttered but his face was still puzzled. “Weird as it all sounds.”

“I’d suggest,” Cat told Sandy, putting a hand on his arm, “that you just go along with it. Trust me, it’s easier than trying to make rational sense out of something that seems to defy all rational thought. What we do is almost magical and has no explanation that anyone has been able to come up with so far. And think about this,” she continued. “If what we can do defies explanation, and you’ve acknowledged that you know what we can do, then isn’t it also possible that someone born hundreds of years ago can come back?”

“It seems so incredibly far-fetched,” he hedged. “I just don’t know.”

“I think you do.”

Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his trousers, Sandy shrugged. “Fine, for the moment, let’s just say I’m going to keep a very open mind.”

“Excellent,” said Martin.

“What now?” asked Adam. “Do you have any idea where to find her?”

Martin didn’t answer right away. Finally he said, “We’re not done here yet.”

She opened her mouth to ask him what he meant, but before the words were even formed, a man, tall, thin, and pretty darned young, came around to where they were standing and motioned towards Sandy. Sandy met the man a few feet away, and they stood close together in deep conversation. The two were far enough away that the others couldn't hear what was being said, but couldn't miss the concern creasing Sandy's forehead. They finished their conversation and the younger man turned and retraced his steps, disappearing around the side of the church.

Sandy walked up to them and said, "We need to go into the church; they've found something very interesting."

## Chapter Twenty-three

He was not a bad-looking man for his age. Medium height with strong broad shoulders and a solid body, he stood military straight. He had not succumbed to the spine-bending effects of age. Unlike the rich brown of her memory, his hair was arctic white, thick and a little long. It still held an attractive curl that wrapped around the tip of his ears. She remembered the curl in his hair, finding it attractive in a time when men spent a great deal of time keeping their hair short and straight.

The pallor of his skin spoke to an illness of one sort or another that was raging with a silent fury through his body. He was still powerful, though the edge of disease had a clock ticking somewhere in the distance.

Martin Ludlum had changed much during the last five decades, but not enough that she wouldn't recognize him. And she knew that his memory, still sharp as ever, had a clear recollection of her. Her face could not be the same as that which he'd stared at that starry London night given that the body was different. It wouldn't matter though for they would know each other in a heartbeat. The face might change from life to life, the soul did not and it was her soul he'd see the minute he looked into her eyes.

What she noticed about him was that time had not diminished the power that radiated around him like a spotlight. She was pleased for it was that power that held the key to uninterrupted immortality. Whether he realized or not, it was there inside of him just waiting for her. She had searched a dozen lifetimes looking for him, and it had seemed to take forever before she found him. With a setback of a mere five decades, here they were again. The morning light had promised great things, and thus far it was living up to her expectations.

Elizabeth smoked a cigarette while perched on the rock that decorated the corner of the business building a block or so away from the church. The taste of the cigarette was mild

and somewhat uninteresting compared to the lovely European varieties, but it was a touch of oral gratification nonetheless. She was careful not to drop ashes on her clean silk slacks. She'd managed to keep even a drop of blood from spilling on the fine fabric; she wasn't about to spoil it with ash.

With the lilac bushes still full, she sat shielded by the deep purple blossoms. Their fragrance filled the air bringing a smile to her face. From her vantage point, she watched the procession of policemen and techs scurrying through and around the church and parish houses. It was a regular beehive of activity. Who would guess that one little woman could command that kind of attention?

It wouldn't be long before they wondered what happened to the boarder, the ex-con the church had been eager to take in, eager to convert to the life of God's servant. They might have already gone out in search of her. Not that it mattered much; her influence was complete enough that few, if anyone, would recognize Amanda in her. The woman still existed deep inside the body, but Elizabeth was the boss, the commander, the countess. Elizabeth Bathory was here and here to stay. There were, however, things about Amanda she liked including her taste for the sensual delights. It was so in keeping with her own refined tastes.

The young man who had scurried across the lawn with such a look of intense concentration on his face was of particular interest to Elizabeth because he had come rushing out of the back door of the church itself. Now given that she'd tried to be careful in hiding the door to the crypt, she had a hard time believing it had been discovered in such a short amount of time. Then again there was little inside the church itself to put such a look on a man who had chosen law enforcement as his career. She had to admit that it was probable one of the little worker bees had stumbled across her precious secret. Troublesome little drones that they were.

It was bound to happen sooner or later. She had just hoped it would happen later rather than sooner and after she'd had an opportunity to put the room to use a couple more times. Then again, she had that house at her disposal, Patrick being such an eager and willing cohort. He, of course, thought she was talking kinky fun and games. That was true to a certain extent. She didn't think he quite got the full picture yet.

Just as it had come to pass in each lifetime before, there were men and women more than willing to be her helpers. It was amazing what pleasures sex could buy. Men like Patrick were so easy it was almost sad, with little or no challenge. Still, without Patrick and the others like him who had come before, her fun and games would be hampered, and that was not something she liked or would tolerate. The flesh and blood of the young and beautiful thrilled her in a way that would not be curtailed.

The bastards had stopped her once in a cruel and thoughtless way. They had treated her as though she had been nothing more than a peasant. Now she had the chance to even one small score and the anticipation brought such a rush of pleasure, she felt wetness

between her legs. The thought made her push herself up from her viewing spot and sneak back around the corner. She stayed alert and aware making certain that no one in the focused group down the street had paid the least bit of attention to her. To anyone who looked, she was nothing more than a curious neighbor.

“Hey, lady, gotta dollar you could spare so I could get something to eat?”

She smelled the man before she heard his begging words. Dressed in a filthy green jacket, sagging jeans that once long ago may have been blue, and torn sneakers, his hair hung like a rag mop around his peaked face and was as dirty as the clothes that hung on his emaciated frame. There was a rock somewhere he'd crawled out from under, and if he intended to buy food with the money he begged for, then she was a queen. Just proved to Elizabeth yet again how little the world had changed beneath its cosmopolitan exterior. Beggars were beggars, and it didn't matter what century they came from.

Elizabeth pulled out the ten-dollar bill that she had slipped into her pocket earlier after rifling through Patrick's wallet and handed it to the ghost of a man. She made certain not to touch flesh to flesh, pulling her hand away the moment his finger grasped the bill.

His eyes filled with a light that did little to erase the pallor from his face. He gave her what she was certain he thought was a smile. It was little more than a stretch of thin bloodless lips across cracked and yellowed teeth. It lasted a mere second before his lips snapped shut and his body crumpled in on itself. Stuffing the wadded bill into his pocket, he started to scurry away.

He paused and turned back to Elizabeth. Straightening up as if he was summoning some bit of dignity from a place deep inside him, he croaked, “Thanks, lady.”

Dropping her cigarette, which had burned down to its stub of yellow filter, she crushed it with the toe of her shoe. Dismissing the raggedy man, Elizabeth climbed into Patrick's expensive black toy. She turning the key and it purred to life. She was humming as she guided the car to the house high on the city's snob-filled South Hill.

It was easy to find her way back to Patrick's house; she had memorized every detail of the road leading up to the fine mansion. With the touch of a button the massive wrought iron gates at the mouth of the driveway swung open for her. It was a shame that in the end she'd be forced to move on because this estate was perfect for her. Running into Patrick had been a stroke of good luck. Or was it, she wondered? Perhaps it was more fate than luck. She'd paid her dues in spades and her time was coming round again.

Carrying the bags she'd retrieved from the dreadful hovel Amanda had been forced to call home, Elizabeth climbed the massive staircase. Who would have guessed that such beauty lived in this city that from all appearances was nothing special. It had lovely mountains and lush pine trees but where was the culture? Where was the royalty? She longed for the opulence of her youth and for the servants who would never have dared to defy her. Her mouth watered for the rich foods cooked by the never-questioning domestic staff.



Dropping her bags on the bed, Elizabeth shed her clothes and walked into the large master bath. She sat on the edge of the massive tub and turned on the water. Pouring a liberal amount of lavender bath oil into the running water, she tested it with her fingertips to make sure it was the proper temperature.

If there was one thing she didn't care for in today's world, it was the lack of breeding and proper hierarchy. She should not be forced to draw her own bath as she did now or to fetch her own towels. The bath should by all rights be hot and waiting for her, the cloud-soft white towels held by a servant who waited for her mistress to step out of the lavender-scented bubbles.

Alas, those were things long past even if not forgotten. Slipping into the hot water, she laid her head back against the marble tub and closed her eyes pondering as she did the possibilities of what life held for her. Who was to say she couldn't find the pleasures of her youth once again? Patience was the key just as it had been all along. Nothing was impossible if she waited until the time was right.

Inhaling deeply and soaking up the relaxing warmth of the water, she could see the old man's face as he'd stood on the grass, his eyes scanning. He'd known she was nearby, and his eyes had searched for her. Soon they would meet in the flesh and though in another time she might be frightened of what he could do to her, she wasn't today. Their dance card was about to be filled one final time.

As she soaked she heard steps on the stairs. She didn't stir or open her eyes. When the footsteps halted at the open bathroom door, she smiled. "Hello."

When she looked up, Patrick was loosening his tie, leaning against the doorframe. His eyes were steady on her face, a wicked smile curving up the corners of his mouth. "I was hoping you'd have made it back."

"Lock, stock, and barrel." She raised a hand, running it slowly and easily across her breasts.

His eyes glittered while watching the movement of her fingers. "Perfect."

"I thought you were staying home today."

"Important client called. Took an hour to calm the crazy bastard and now here I am."

"The water is still hot," she told him.

He tossed the tie off to the side and unbuttoned his shirt. Pulling away from the doorway Patrick walked towards the tub that was plenty big enough for two.

\* \* \* \* \*

Congealing blood had a smell a person never forgot and it hit Cat right between the eyes. It wasn't just the smell either; it was the almost claustrophobic walk down the hallway that had been hidden underneath the chapel for how long was anybody's guess. The fact that one of Sandy's deputies had even noticed the disturbance in the floor of the antiquated

basement room was amazing. The deputy told them he had done a quick check of the room and had been turning to head back up to the main part of the church when he'd noticed the dirt and dust on the floor showed marked disturbance around a stack of beat up old boxes. He'd looked around and then moved the boxes uncovering a metal ring that had ultimately proved to be the latch opening an almost invisible door in the ancient floor. Flashlight in hand, he'd walked the corridor and after a quick look turned on his heel and summoned Sandy.

It was as she'd seen it inside her head down to the very last detail. Stones made up the walls with graying mortar holding them together. Off to the left were the elaborate coffin and the makeshift bed, if she could call it that, which had been Bathory's killing ground. It was all there in surreal reality. Only the smell was different. Vague in the vision state, here it made her gag.

The visual and olfactory assaults were bad enough. Throw in the vibrations that swarmed her senses, and she found it was becoming difficult to breath. The distance provided by the visions was gone, replaced by a freshness that brought it all too alive. The room, that is, not the woman who was sitting up on the bed with her back against the rock wall, her eyes wide open and staring.

Something was different though, and it was that shift that kick-started Cat's mind. She shook free of the clouds of unreality and looked hard at her surroundings. It struck her then, making her wonder if Bathory had begun to change her pattern. Then she remembered why it was that the countess killed in the first place, answering her own question before she even asked it.

The woman propped on the bed was middle-aged with gray-streaked hair and was what Cat would call dumpy, for lack of a better description. The woman had nothing the countess would be driven to possess. Not youth, beauty, or pleasures of the flesh. She had nothing of value for Elizabeth Bathory. It seemed clear to Cat that this woman's sin was more likely than not that she had gotten in Bathory's way. The price for that sin had been her life.

"How?" she asked Martin once she got her bearings back. Martin had stepped closer to the woman to get a better look.

Squatting next to the woman without touching her, he balanced with an ease that defied his age and health. His head tipped from side to side as he looked the woman over.

"She just squeezed the life out of her," he said at last.

"She's got to be an Amazon." Sandy looked on in disbelief.

"No," Adam answered as he too surveyed the room. "She's been back a few times and each time she learns more and becomes stronger. She was able to overpower this poor woman with little trouble at all. There's little that can stop a creature of this nature."

"Jesus." Sandy whistled. "I know what you told me, but to see this is mind blowing. It gives me the creeps. Man, we've got to stop her."

“We’re not done,” Cat told him as she walked to the casket. Stopping about a foot away she studied the deep rich wood that held a polish so high she could see her own black-ringed reflection. The inside was covered with a gorgeous satin soft as a cloud. It could have been made yesterday. The only flaw was the fine layer of dust that covered the bottom. She could make a pretty good guess what the dust was, although she didn’t want to make that guess out loud.

She hesitated, afraid to touch the casket or the offending layer of dust. She was afraid of what it was going to tell her. Perhaps her skills would be better put to use on the woman still on the bed. She didn’t move away. Her hand hovered near the coffin without making contact.

“Martin?”

“Let me,” he said from behind. She jumped, not having heard him move towards her. Her whole focus had been the gray spread of dust on the otherwise beautiful satin.

Stepping around her Martin put a hand inside the coffin to touch the dust. He was hesitant at first, his hand hovering with his fingertips just touching. After a moment, he put both hands down, palms first. He closed his eyes as he always did and all the color, what little there was to begin with, drained from his face. Adam saw the change, crossing the room in a heartbeat and just in time to catch Martin before he crumbled to floor. So far Adam was two for two.

“What the hell?” Cat exclaimed.

With Adam holding Martin, Cat faced the coffin once more and repeated the movement that Martin had just made. At first her fingertips ghost-touched the fine dust. When no fireworks exploded, she put her hands palm down on top of the offending substance with her fingers digging in to the ash-like substance.

As soon as the powder flowed between her fingers, images began to whirl through her mind full of screams, blood and terror. All that had been Elizabeth Bathory flashed behind her eyes in a matter of seconds and her heart beat so fast Cat suspected she was darn close to a heart attack. The wickedness that had defined Countess Bathory’s life filled her with such dread and revulsion that it was all she could do not to snatch her hand away, spin, and retch. By the grace of God, she didn’t. Instead she forced herself to keep her hand where it was while letting the images run their course, hundreds of faces flowing by in a succession of life and death. The metallic taste of blood that filled her mouth brought bile rising into her throat. Mixed in was the enchantment that permeated this woman who embraced evil with mystic enthusiasm. Cat shared the quickening of Bathory’s pulse as her delight with killing overwhelmed her. So many faces.

So many deaths.

At last she recognized the faces of the final victims and she able to pull herself free of the horror that had lain in this coffin. This was a level of evil that Cat found difficult to comprehend. Before today, she’d believed she had a good handle on the kinds of demons the

Anima Mundi hunted, but now she wasn't so sure. Bathory was hell on earth. The history books had come nowhere close to giving justice to her story. There weren't words ugly enough to describe the monster.

"Jesus," she breathed, at the same time convincing herself that throwing up here was not a good idea. "I need some air," she managed to gasp before turning and almost running towards the door.

## Chapter Twenty-four

“Dirty boy.” Elizabeth stepped out of the tub, her body tingling in a most delightful way. Water dripped on the thick rug and she shook her hair spraying even more water everywhere. She laughed and leaned over the tub.

“Giving up?” Patrick asked.

In answer, she dropped a bar soap at his groin and reached her hand beneath the water ignoring the soap to take his penis in her grip. Squeezing hard enough to inflict pain, she kissed him at the same time. His body tensed but he responded with enthusiasm to her kiss.

“Bitch,” he murmured against her lips.

She squeezed harder. “That’s Countess to you.”

His breath exhaled as she released her grip. “Whatever you say, beautiful. I’ll call you empress if it makes you happy.” He stretched his long legs in the tub and tipped his head back to look at her through lowered lids.

She stood and looked down at his glistening body. She liked the sprinkle of hair on his chest and the way it trickled down to a dark patch at his groin. He was lean and muscled without an ounce of fat. The way he drank she would have suspected that underneath his clothes was hidden a soft and yielding body. Another surprise had awaited her. His affinity for alcohol had done no visible damage to his handsome frame. His stock kept rising with each new discovery.

“Why don’t you slither back in here? We can warm this water up.”

She smiled and turned towards the bedroom. “Enough water sports,” she told him. “It’s time for a little different game.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Hurry.” She stopped in the doorway to run her hands over her breasts, letting them slide down across her stomach and between her legs. “We’re just getting started on tonight’s activities.”

He was smiling and leering as he said, “Baby, you could kill a man.”

“Yes,” she purred and turned her back on him. “I could.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, my God.” Quite an expletive considering she didn’t even believe in God anymore. Too many letdowns, too many promises broken. Except right at this second. God was the only thing that made sense.

Cat had dropped to the grass and was gulping in air as fast as she could. It was either that or puke all over the lawn and her clothes. Her arms and legs shook like the earth below her was pulsating. Every ounce of effort she had went into keeping her breakfast down.

Martin came out of the church supported by Adam. Martin slumped beside her on the ground while Adam prowled. Sandy came out a mere two minutes later his face as ashen as Cat’s felt.

“She has to be stopped,” Martin declared. “She has to be stopped now.”

“No shit.” Cat had rolled to her back where cool grass caressed her head. Staring up at the blue sky, she concentrated on breathing slow and easy. Her stomach had stopped rolling even if her eyes still burned with the images of dead women and blood. Lots and lots of blood.

“No shit,” Martin repeated and that got Cat’s attention. She pushed herself up to a sitting position and squinted at Martin. It even stopped Adam’s rhythmic pacing, and he turned to stare at the older man.

How?” Cat was wondering how in the world they were going to find this elusive, death monger of a woman who had many years on them and an ironclad pact with the devil. Stopping her would require nothing less than a miracle and speaking for herself, she was fresh out of miracles. It seemed to Cat that they were a day late and a dollar short every step of the way with this bitch. Pissed her off royally, too.

“She will find us.”

Adam stopped his pacing and asked “Why?”

Adam beat her to the punch, the same question on the tip of her tongue. It wasn’t often, like never, that the prey came looking for them. This was a switch Cat was none too fond of.

“I didn’t put that quite right,” Martin told them his British accent deep as emotion choked his words. “She will find me.”

Adam was standing at the bottom of the steps, and he gave her one of those “what do you think” looks. Cat shrugged. It wasn’t that she believed Martin was wrong. In fact, it was the opposite, she was dead certain he was right. It was just that it wasn’t like him to lie down and wait. He was what coaches like to call proactive. So to sit back and wait was not his way. She was beginning to wonder if the cancer was more progressed than he’d been letting on. Maybe it was doing something not so wonderful to his thought processes as well as his body. Whatever it was, he’d been acting more than a step out of normal, and that was starting to worry Cat. She had enough worries on her plate right at the moment that she didn’t want to have to look over her shoulder at the boss.

“She will find me. I’m who she is looking for. She searched for my ancestors, and she’s searching for me now. It is a game that does not seem to have an end.”

“Okay,” Cat was thinking as she talked. “How about you back that pony up just a touch. You might very well be right, Martin, except that we can’t just sit around here and wait. We need to get to her before she gets to us. Or worse yet, kills another woman.”

“She’ll come for me,” he persisted.

“Yeah, that might be true, but you’re not bait.”

Martin’s face held a sadness that wrapped about a hundred years around it. He took her hands in his and glanced up at Adam. “We use the tools we have, and right now that is me. I’m old and I’m dying. Let me do this one last thing.”

\* \* \* \* \*

What Martin wasn’t telling any of them was closer to the truth and that was the fact that he was tired and frightened. Age and cancer were not doing noble things to either his body or his mind. The end result was that there were two sides to him now. There was still the tried and true Anima Mundi hunter who’d spent his entire life doing the right thing all the time. That man was still somewhere deep inside him. That man was the one excited because he’d found the object of his lifetime search and her ultimate destruction was within his grasp.

Then there was the other man, the one he hadn’t realized slumbered inside his soul. He was the one who now longed to understand the secrets Elizabeth Bathory held. It was true that he believed in the power of the good, and yes, it was important to him to destroy those forces in the world that created pain, death, and destruction. At the same time, Elizabeth Bathory was one of the old ones, a true evil force that understood things about which he could only theorize. He didn’t want to die still wondering. He wanted to know. Damn it, he needed to know.

So he played the game according to the rules, at least for the moment and used his dear friends, his successors to help him reach and grab tight to the gold ring. He would destroy

Bathory because that was his destiny, his family's legacy. At the same time he would learn her secret, and that was a promise he made to himself. He had earned the right to know.

The immediate problem was where had she gone? This church and the shabby parish houses were not up to her rather high standards, and that gave him a touch more focus. She would set her sights on something more elegant and blessed with plenty of old money. Before he could voice his thoughts, the same young man who had come to them earlier with the discovery of the hidden room made another appearance. This time he didn't hesitate but began talking in front of them, his eyes moving from face to face as he spoke.

"I think you'd better look at this," he handed Sandy a file folder opened to show piles of papers held in with a clip and a four by six Polaroid taped to the inside. "She was staying here according to her probation officer who just showed up for an unscheduled home visit since she was overdue checking in."

"Fuck me running," Sandy muttered.

Catherine was leaning over his shoulder to get a better look at the picture, and her eyes narrowed as she gazed at the picture. The look on her face told Martin she was burning the image into her mind.

"I saw her last night." Sandy continued as he flipped through the pages held in the file by a slim silver clip. "I swear to God I saw this woman last night."

Adam moved in to take a look at the folder Sandy held open so they could all see. "Where?"

Sandy looked up from the file. "I took my girlfriend to the Rooftop Restaurant for a 'please forgive me' dinner since I've been working so many hours. This woman --" His index finger stabbed at the Polaroid. "-- was there."

Adam squinted, studying the picture. "You're sure it's her?"

"Yes and no." Sandy scrunched up his face and gave his head a slight shake. "I wouldn't want to be on the witness stand and have to swear to it but the resemblance is more than uncanny. What's throwing me is there are some real differences I can't explain."

Adam kept up his questions. "Why did you notice her?"

Sandy laughed though it held no humor. "A guy always notices a woman on the make. Man, this gal was dressed to the nines with her boobs -- Oh, sorry," he said as he looked back at Catherine. "I mean her breasts were all but falling out of a very expensive black dress. She was looking to score. Definitely looking to score."

"Did she?"

"Oh, yeah and big time, too. I recognized him in a heartbeat. Everybody in town knows the guy. Even though I was supposed to be having this romantic dinner with my girlfriend, both of us were fascinated by the whole thing. We spent more time watching her work on the pick-up without being completely obvious than we did talking each other. Let me tell you, it was better than any television reality show, with a fabulous dinner to boot."



“So who’d she pick up?”

“None other than rich boy Patrick Robinson.”

Adam whistled a low appreciative sound. “She must have been something then.”

“Trust me, it was a show worth hanging around and watching. She just tossed out the bait and reeled him in like he was a teenage boy looking to get laid for the first time. Oh, man, excuse me again,” Sandy said looking once more at Catherine.

“Don’t worry about it,” she told him and gave his shoulder a squeeze. “I’m more interested in your unedited version of events since you seem to be the only one who’s seen this woman. Or rather,” she added, “the only one who’s seen her and lived to tell about it.”

“That’s a creepy thought,” Sandy said.

“So where does this Patrick Robinson live?” Martin broke in.

“South Hill,” Adam told him. “The very old and very rich section of South Hill.”

“Then that’s where she’ll be,” Martin declared.

“How can you be so sure?” Sandy asked, taking the closed folder from Adam and tucking it under his arm.

Martin stood up straight, his voice firm. “Because she will go where the money is, and if this man is as rich as you say, then that is where she was heading when she left here.”

“I know where he lives,” Adam told them. “In fact, not only do I know where he lives, I know him. We had classes together in law school.”

Martin nodded and turned away from the group. “Let’s go, then.”

“Wait,” Sandy said. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to find her.”

“And then?”

“And then we’re going to destroy her.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

“So what’s he like?” Cat asked Adam when they had piled into his vehicle and were winding their way through town and towards the steep roads that fed into the affluent South Hill. Cat left her car at the church in order to ride with Adam and Martin. For a trip like this, one car was plenty.

“We weren’t exactly buddies, but I heard the stories.”

“Stories? Give ’em up, counselor. Now is the time for frat stories if there ever was one.”

“Not frat stories. Be real clear about this, we weren’t friends. Classmates only.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Get to the meat of it.”

“Long story short and nothing that was ever proven, but he was accused of raping one of the women in our class at law school. The alleged victim ended up transferring to a school on the coast, and in my mind that said a great deal. Robinson didn’t miss a beat. He had what Grandfather would call a shit-eating grin plastered on his face and showed up for class day after day like nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. No one that I know of had the balls to ask him to his face if there was even a grain of truth to the rumors.”

“Sounds like a hell of a guy.”

“Bingo. He was rich, good-looking, and could sweet talk the devil out of ice cream. I don’t think much has changed since our law school days either.”

“Exactly her type,” Martin added from the back seat.

Adam nodded. “That’s what I was thinking.”

It made Cat fume. She hated when people like that got away with atrocities for no other reason than they were wealthy, especially when it involved abusing women. It was sick, and it made her blood boil.

“Maybe she’s killed him, too,” said Cat. “Would serve him right.”

“Robinson is not a nice man, and in his case, I’d have to agree with you, Cat. Except if what I’ve read about Bathory is true, and correct me if I’m wrong, Martin, chances are she won’t kill him, because his tastes are too compatible with her own. She likes to surround herself with kindred souls.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning not only was Robinson into dominance, he liked his sex rough and nasty, or so I’ve been told. The reason they hooked up last night, if I were to guess, was because kindred souls find each other. Just like Elizabeth was able to use Amanda, another woman cut from the same cloth.”

It made sense in a skewed way. People who were into deviant sex seemed to have a radar detector for finding each other. That being the case, it made perfect sense that someone as warped as Bathory would gravitate towards someone like Robinson. Two peas in a pod.

“I suspect you’re right,” she said.

“He’s more than right.” Martin added. “Besides, even as strong as she is, the countess cannot exist on her own. This was a woman who gave new meaning to the term narcissistic in her own day, and I doubt that has changed one iota. She cannot exist in a vacuum. She has to have admirers, slaves if you will, who will tell her whatever she wants to hear, who will bend to her will and serve her every need or want. If she finds a man with breeding, money, and a taste for her brand of erotic violence, then she will be in a position to create the world she’s been longing for century after century.”

Cat didn’t like the sound of that. The whole idea was a nightmare in the making. The woman had been tearing through this city over the past few days leaving dead bodies like crumpled napkins all over the place, and that was without any help. If she found someone with the right connections, she could become unstoppable, and they couldn’t let that happen. She had to be stopped and now.

Adam turned onto a street lined with massive oak trees and large homes set well back from the street and each defined by wrought iron fences crafted between large brick pillars. Acres of tended grass flowed from the front of each to the edge of the gates that were locked against the masses, keeping the old and established family homesteads safe in their worlds of money and influence. He drove down the street slow enough that they could see without drawing unwanted attention. She watched in awe as they passed one impressive home after another. Who would guess that these palatial homes were hidden on a narrow street that would fail to garner attention from drivers on the main thoroughfare? The smell of money permeated the car and the windows were rolled up.

Adam pulled to the curb near one of the largest houses they’d passed since turning onto the narrow street. The afternoon was fading fast and the sun was beginning to set in the west casting long shadows across the emerald green lawn of the estate. There were no lights on in the home although there was a low sleek Mercedes parked in the driveway.

“She’s here,” Adam growled low in his throat.

The chill that crawled up her back gave credence to his words. "I second that motion," she whispered back.

"The car," he added a second later. "I noticed that car parked down the block while we were at the church. I recognize the plate."

Sometimes she forgot the detail thing Adam did. If he said he had seen this car with this plate number at the church, then it was a damned safe bet he had. A photographic memory could be a wonderful thing. They'd found the bitch, and the adrenaline was starting to kick in.

"Martin, what do you sense? Can you feel her?"

"Yes."

"How do we get in?"

"Not yet."

"What?" Both Adam and Cat said the word in unison.

"We are not ready. We must to go back to Adam's and prepare. We will return after dark."

"Let me get this straight," Cat said in slow measured words. She was trying to sort it out in her mind and make sense of what Martin wanted them to do. "We've located a madwoman after trying to track her for days, and now you want us to just drive away, come back in a couple of hours, and run the risk that she might be gone before we get back?"

"She won't be gone."

Okay, now she was sure Martin was losing it. To leave now that they'd found her was crazy. It would give Bathory the chance to bolt and kill some other innocent person or God knew what other horrible, unthinkable thing. For all they knew, even as kinky as he was, that Patrick guy could be laying up there in a pool of his own blood like the unfortunate minister back at the church.

Cat turned to look at Adam. The same look of disbelief was mirrored in his face. She reached over and put her hand on his arm.

"Martin this is crazy," she twisted to look at him in the back. "It goes against everything we've ever been taught by the Order. Hell," she added for emphasis. "It goes against everything you've taught us for that matter."

"I know," he said in a quiet tired voice, turning his head so that he was looking out the side window. "I'm asking you to trust me on this one."

"Jesus," she muttered, pulling her hand from Adam's arm and slumping in her seat. "I hate that word. Every time a man has said trust me, I've gotten fucked. Excuse my French."

This time it was Adam who laid a hand on her arm. "I think we have to trust him this time."

She was not going to say it out loud and not even Adam's pleading look could make her do it. It wasn't that she didn't trust them, she did. It was that this whole situation had her feeling rattled and questioning everything she knew or thought she knew. It reminded her too much of what had happened with Michael, and she wasn't ready to go through that again.

"Fine, fine, fine," she muttered at last, although trust aside, the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach was not about to go away.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a little truth and a little lie. They were not ready to take on Bathory in her current fortress. That much was true. The lie was more difficult to explain even in his own mind.

As Adam pulled closer to the home, Martin's nerves had begun to buzz. He could once again smell the lavender and feel the heat of her body. His hands were shaking as he clasped them together and leaned his head against the back of the seat. Unease rolled in his stomach.

Adam and Cat talked in low tones as they drove away. Neither of them was happy with him, and he didn't blame them. If they didn't think the cancer was eating away the last of his rational brain cells, he'd be surprised. It was true enough that he felt hideous even on the best of days. Right now it was somewhere a little below that.

The further away from Bathory they drove, the more his stomach settled. His body ached as though he'd been beaten, though that was a feeling that came with the territory these days. At first the ache would come and go. Now it was there, a constant companion through both night and day. The upset stomach was a new complication that had come on in the last several weeks. Just one more sign post on the way to the grave. He could deal with the aches and pains. What he didn't need was the distraction of nausea. He had to clear his mind and determine what it was he was really searching for. It was a given that he wanted Bathory taken down once and for all. She had to be stopped from coming back ever again and destroying families like she'd done to his. She was an evil that was infectious, and that infection had to end.

Even so, he needed to know and she was the only one with the answers. It was wrong to lust after the knowledge she possessed. It was the devil's prize. The funny thing was that she owed him. Elizabeth Bathory had destroyed his family centuries ago and had destroyed his chance for love five decades past. If she owed anyone, it was him.

His hand balled into fists tight enough that his nails drew blood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam dropped her back at her own car, and he and Martin went on ahead. Cat sat in the Escalade for an easy ten minutes with her eyes closed and her senses alert. Vibrations

rolled through her good, bad, dark, and light. War was coming, and it was coming for her. She focused on the woman they knew to be Elizabeth Bathory and wished it could be that simple. One woman, one demon, one kill. Something she couldn't define butted in around the edges making it feel far more complicated.

With a sigh she opened her eyes, started the car, and drove back to Adam's. Dusk was settling in around her as she drove, the city alive and unaware. The murders would make the news, frightening little old ladies and putting law enforcement on alert. Only a handful would know the whole truth, and the rest would go about their lives thinking the evil couldn't touch them. There was no way to make them understand otherwise.

"Oh, crap," she said under her breath as she pulled to the curb and stopped. There he was standing in the center of the porch with his arms folded and his dark eyes watching. It was like coming home late from a date and finding her father waiting at the door. This was worse. It didn't take a genius to know what he wanted, and it had nothing to do with the hunt. She wasn't up to another heart to heart. He didn't understand how difficult it was for her, and she'd already been pushed way past her limit.

"We have time," was the first thing out of his mouth.

"Look, Adam, we can talk about this later."

"Bullshit."

That got her attention. Maybe he was spending too much time around her because he was starting to sound like her. Come to think of it, in the last few hours both Martin and Adam had picked up her potty mouth. She'd never realized she could have that kind of effect on folks. It wasn't that she minded influencing other people; she'd just prefer that it was something nobler than her habit of using off-colored language.

"Your grandfather's going to wash your mouth out with soap."

"Don't change the subject."

Cat ran her hands through her hair and let out a loud breath. "God, Adam, I don't want to talk about this."

"And I don't really care."

"You're a pain in the butt."

"Back atcha."

Couldn't argue that one even if she wanted to. She had been called a pain in the ass by some of the finest folks in Canada. Might as well go international. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"No."

"Why does it matter so much?"

"Because you matter."

"We have so many other things to worry about at the moment."

“No we don’t. Right now it’s all about you and why you had to run off to the hospital.”

“It wasn’t the hospital exactly.”

He took her hand and brought her down so that they were both sitting on the top step of the porch. Looking out at the late afternoon sunshine, he stroked the back of her hand.

“So tell me exactly where it was you had to go and why.”

It almost hurt to say the words out loud. As the events of the day had unfolded since her chat with the doctor, she’d almost convinced herself that as long as she didn’t have to say the words, it wasn’t real. Stupid, yeah, but she could make herself believe it.

“There’s a chance I have breast cancer.”

“What kind of chance?”

“The x-rays and the ultrasound show some masses in my left breast. They’re small and could very well be benign, but because my mother died of breast cancer, I’m a high-risk person.”

“And?”

“And I’ll be going in for a biopsy as soon as this is over and I get back to Canada. They believe that they are fatty tumors. It’s just the family history thing that makes it iffy.”

“Cat, I could spank you.”

“Kinky.”

He threw an arm around her shoulders and hugged her tight to his side. “You’re not alone in this, and damn you, if you pull a stunt like this again, I swear I’ll have Grandfather put a curse on you.”

“You mean he hasn’t done that yet? I got the impression he doesn’t think much of me.”

“To know you is to love you. The two of you will do just fine.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do.”

“You know, Bell, you’re a cocky son-of-a-bitch.”

“Ever met a wolf that wasn’t?”

She laughed and liked the way it released the coiled tension in her body. “Got me there, big boy. Of course, since you’re the only shape shifting wolf I know that sort of stacks the deck in your favor.”

“I am, among other things, a pragmatist. I’ll take whatever works.”

Adam leaned close and kissed her deeply and thoroughly. “We’re in this together,” he whispered against her lips. “Forever. Don’t shut me out again.”

She wasn’t sure that was a promise she could make.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Night fell as a slow and gentle fade to black. The light on the nightstand glowed warm yellow, casting rays of light to touch the furniture, carpet and drapes with its golden fingers. Elizabeth would have to make some changes to the room, which, while rich and well furnished, was a little too masculine for her taste. It needed her refined touch to bring it to a glory that only royal blood could provide.

Besides, they would need to outfit the suite with the toys that would bring their games to their proper conclusion. How she wished she had her treasures of long ago. She'd been the most proud of the Iron Maiden, a mechanical joy that appeared to work as if by magic. The fools, so ignorant, had believed she was capable of magic instead of understanding that it was as simple as mechanics. Still, it had been a wonder, and the elation she'd experienced each time one of her young and nubile girls had stepped inside and the spikes had pierced flesh, allowing blood to flow freely, was beyond description. Their blood had kept Elizabeth young and beautiful, the envy of all who had the honor of her presence. The adoration and even the fear had been an aphrodisiac with the power of this century's narcotics.

She missed those times and the satisfaction that had filled her life. Nostalgia was sweet, though far from crippling. This was a new time with different challenges but different rewards as well. The cars and houses with the warmth and light that hadn't even been dreamed of in the century of her birth were delightful bonuses. The clothes that stopped short only of the imagination and the freedom women enjoyed were even sweeter.

She'd ruled her husband with the iron will she'd been born with, though she'd had to use her wits and imagination to make it appear he was the man. He'd been entertaining during the first years of marriage and then had become a boring drudge. Despite her outward show of mourning, her heart had filled with glee the day he'd died. It had been a release even if the conventions of the day had tied her hands. A little anyway. For the public, she'd



been forced to appear as the proper widow. In private her games had taken on new levels of excitement.

Little had ever stood in her way, then or now. The downside of the world today was that her freedom in taking her delights was a touch more complicated. She had to choose her donors with more care and just as carefully dispose of their bodies. She wouldn't hide them, she was proud of what she did but she didn't want a trail leading back to her either. She would not be stopped this time, and it was her excellent intelligence that would see her through to uninterrupted eternity. She would not be put back into a box to sleep for another hundred years or even ten; she would not allow it.

All she needed was to be rid of that man. Once upon a time he'd been handsome, at least if he looked anything like his great-great-great-grandfather or however many greats it had been. In any event, that man had been strong, virile, and handsome, not to mention a very satisfying lover. She'd had him in the palm of her hand, or so she'd thought. Yet after taking her body, the bastard had tried to take her soul. He'd been angry with her over the loss of his daughters, and she'd used her considerable wiles to soothe him in the best way she knew how.

From all appearances, her plan had been successful. She'd continued to live her life and take her pleasures at will. Then her world crashed when he'd turned all against her, exposing the deepest and darkest of her secrets.

At first he'd believed he was the victor and that vengeance was his. He had been wrong because he had underestimated her greatness. They'd robbed her of life and that was all. Once in that box, the faithful had hidden her away in one Godforsaken place after another. They believed, rightfully so, that she would find a way to return. Death of the body could not destroy the power of her soul or the magnitude of her will.

She hadn't known of the Anima Mundi, not in the beginning. Alone in the darkness of her beautiful coffin, she'd heard the whispers and had come to believe they would try to destroy her. Those people had been searching for her all this time, and she had followed their spirits as they'd searched the world far and wide. Just as she waited for the right person to come along and set her free, she'd listened in the darkness to the whispers and promises of the Anima Mundi. Each generation had their tasks and their personal vendettas, but always his family searched for her, sensing that she'd return one day to exact her vengeance on the family that had so long ago put this all into motion. They should have realized then they couldn't stop her, and he should know as much now. She was stronger, older, and wiser. She would be the victor.

Elizabeth had felt them coming long before she'd seen them pull to the curb where they had sat to watch the house. Sitting unseen in the window seat in one of the upstairs bedrooms, she'd studied the dark vehicle visualizing their faces, smiling as she thought of what they were saying to each other.

She was a little surprised when after a quarter-hour they pulled away from the curb and drove off down the tree-lined street. Elizabeth had been certain they would sneak their way in and go for the ambush. Just as she came back each time stronger and wiser, this grandson whose blood she would soon take had the benefit of generations of knowledge, and he was wise enough to use it.

In the dim light she looked down at her hands, admiring the smooth and unmarked skin. Swinging her feet to the floor, she stood up, her naked body shivering in the cool evening air.

On the bed behind her the young woman watched Elizabeth with wide, wild eyes. Four-inch silver duct tape muffled her whimpering while her hands and feet pulled against white fiber rope tied to the four corners of the bed. Spread-eagle, the pretty girl's smooth body glowed in the fading ruby light. There wasn't so much as a single mark to flaw her pale, perfect skin. Patrick had fabulous taste; she would have to compliment him later. As she'd predicted, he was proving to be invaluable. The man had a talent she intended to mine.

Elizabeth sat down on the edge of the bed, running her fingers lightly across the girl's flat stomach, across her pubic hair and down the inside of her leg. As the girl squirmed against the touch of her hand, a smile spread over Elizabeth's face.

Always we hope someone else has the answer  
Some other place will be better.  
Some other time  
It will all turn out.  
This is it.  
No one else has the answer.  
No other place will be better  
And it has already turned out.  
At the center of your being you have the answer.  
Search your heart  
And see  
The way to do  
Is to be.

-- Lao Tzu

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Cat liked the darkness on streets like this one where the trees were as old as time. They swayed against the light breeze creating blue-black shadows that danced around them. It was a surreal landscape that appealed to the frustrated artist in her. She often wished she could paint and thus capture the beauty of the landscapes that hid in the darkness.

Under the cover of night, power rolled through her arms and legs, up her spine, and through her hands, power that would fade away as soon as daylight began to take over. Perhaps, she thought, there was a little vampire in her because it was the night that gave her comfort and courage.

It was easier for her to wait in the shadows than it was for either Adam or Martin. Maybe it was more the gender difference than her affinity for the darkness. Men had that tendency to want to plunge straight ahead and take the bull by the horns, where women often took a sneakier approach. Yes, sneaky, and she wouldn't apologize for that stand. Anyone who'd been around a group of girls or women couldn't deny that the weapon of choice was more often than not subterfuge. Equality issues aside, there were differences between the sexes, which was not to say one was better than the other, only that they were different. She was fond of the saying different but equal. It fit, and that was all there was to that.

Now, however, the differences were playing to her advantage. They had pinpointed their target and at least for the moment had the ability to mitigate any more harm. They had no control over who or what was inside the house, but they could prevent anyone else from entering. Minimize the collateral damage was the first rule of the Anima Mundi. Despite her earlier fears, it appeared that Bathory hadn't run leaving the fox still in position and ready to be cornered by the hounds.

She didn't think barging in to take Bathory on face-to-face was the right move. The lady was a monster that spit in the face of all the rules. Like there were any hard and fast rules. The point was that Bathory was sneaky, clever, and far too experienced not to be expecting them to attack with full frontal force. She would be waiting for that.

No, Cat decided, this coup was going to take a little time and a lot of thought. She knew they were here; it was in the air like crackling electricity. Cat would like to think she could see inside Bathory's world, but she was far too good to let her in, and she suspected that Martin wouldn't fare much better. That left Adam with his ability to read the air around them. Sounded weird, she knew, except that it was a true story. She would swear the man could actually read the wind. Must be the wolf in him.

Along the brick driveway that arched from the pillared entry on the east to an identical pillared entry or exit on the west were round lights set into the ground and giving the old brick a rosy glow. Large, hand-crafted lanterns burned brightly at the front entry and on the garage that had four double wooden doors. In the house itself, one light was on in a downstairs room and two more lights burned in windows on the second story. The third story was dark.

The moon had come into its full glory pouring liquid gold onto the grass. She wondered if they'd have any trouble with the wereanimals tonight. Hopefully Adam could handle that one. One necuratul a night was plenty in her book, but she'd learned to expect the unexpected. There was so much that wandered just beneath the surface of the conscious mind. That dog racing by in the shadows might not be a dog at all. It might be the next-door neighbor. An open mind was not only a good thing to have in this business; it was critical. Things were not always as they seemed.

Tonight had a different feel to it. They were alone, just three hunters and their prey. Well that and possibly the prey's errand boy if she'd allowed him to live. So far anyone that had gotten within two feet of the woman had ended up dead, so it was anybody's guess if Patrick Robinson was still breathing.

Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back and listened, opening both her mind and her body to the universe. "Tell me what to do." She whispered low enough that the others wouldn't hear. She wasn't talking to God per se, more like the magical forces that had her back. God hadn't done such a good job at watching her back, so she'd opted for something a little less definable.

What came to her were blurred reds and purples, black and white all swirling together in a blend of shapes that she couldn't quite make out. The smell of burning flesh filled her nose and bile rose in her throat. She choked it down and forced herself to concentrate.

Her eyes came open with a snap, the vision too garbled to make sense of and too pungent for her to hold on to. Only one thing came through with startling clarity. The undeniable certainty that the woman must die, body and soul, or the evil would go on and on.

Adam and Martin were watching her, impatience rolling off their bodies like ocean waves at high tide. Despite the hunt being Martin's charge, they were waiting for her ready signal, and they weren't much liking it. She nodded at last and they all sprang out to make their way towards the house in the pattern they'd agreed upon before leaving the safety of Adam's SUV.

Being the youngest and most nimble of the group, Cat climbed the fence, dropping over to the other side with only the tiniest of sounds when her feet plunked down on the soft grass. She was able to swing the gate open from the inside wide enough to let Adam and Martin pass through with a minimum of movement and sound.

Adam slid into the shadows, headed towards the rear of the house. Cat made for the tree next to the garage intending to climb it high enough to enable her to drop undetected onto the roof. Her goal was one of the upstairs windows. Martin was taking the direct approach right through the front door.

She had her gun, her knife, and her partners, yet she wasn't feeling comfortable with this one; in fact, she was as jumpy as a cat. She'd called in favors from the universe and that still didn't leave her with that warm and comfy feeling. This crazy woman had her as jittery as if she'd just downed a couple of espressos. The sooner this thing was done, the better.

\* \* \* \* \*

Patrick stood in the open doorway and groaned. "How in the hell do you expect to clean that up?"

She took a step away from the bed, licking her fingers at the same time. "Not to worry, darling, I don't intend to clean it up at all," she told him as she walked towards where he stood. "You can do it later."

"Me?"

"Oh, yes, my love, you will do this for me tonight, and if you want to live, you will take care of my little messes on many nights."

He opened his mouth to say something more and then closed it without a word after taking a good look at her face.

"Smart boy," she told him with a wicked smile. "Now --" She touched his arm, leaving a smear of red. "-- we have bigger fish to fry."

"Bigger than a dead girl in the guest room? You've got a fucked-up sense of logic."

"Yes, my love, far bigger than this." She waved her hand dismissively towards the bed. "They're coming for me, and we have to stop them."

"The police?" A note of real fear edged his words.

"No, not your silly police. These people are far more dangerous than mere law enforcement."

“The FBI?”

“Oh, you’re such a delightful boy,” she said, catching his hand and pulling him away from the room. “Anima Mundi, but I’ll explain about them later. Right now we must get ready.”

After she’d washed the blood from her body, glorying in the way her skin glowed, she dressed in a pair of slacks and a beautiful white raw silk blouse. Her hair was full and rich as it tumbled down her back. She took a moment to clasp the pearls around her neck. Her lovely, precious pearls.

“We need your guns,” she told him as they left the master bedroom.

“Guns, are you nuts?”

“Be careful, my pet.”

“You are, bitch.”

“Guns,” she repeated, ignoring the tone of petulance in his voice.

“In the study.”

She followed him to yet another beautiful room, where he took a key from his desk and opened an exquisite carved wooden gun case. He handed her a twenty-two, and he took what looked like a thirty-eight, although she couldn’t be sure of her guns.

“Are they loaded?”

“Of course. Every one is cleaned and loaded. What good is a rusty, unloaded gun?”

She ran her fingers over his cheek, a hint of stubble rough against their tips. “Excellent point, love. What a find you are, Patrick. We’re going to do well together.”

His eyes narrowed as he studied her face, a hint of skepticism tingeing the dark eyes. Always healthy in her book. She liked her men and women compliant, but it was more exciting when there was that touch of defiance. In fact, when she considered his reaction to her game, she decided he’d taken the sight of the bloody body with little more than irritation. Delicious irritation. If she were looking for confirmation that she hadn’t lost her touch when it came to finding the right companions, that was it. Her flawless intuition brought the right people to her. It was part of her magic.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Elizabeth opened her mind to the energy that swirled unseen around them, feeling it flow in and through her like a slow-moving snake. He was here, the strongest and an heir to a legacy that went far beyond riches. His family had come from the same world as she had, and they’d been after her since the beginning. This one, old as he was, was the strongest in many generations of common blood. He required caution and yet at the same time made the game all the more thrilling.

Then there was the woman. Her pulse raced as she pictured the face in her mind, the thick shiny hair, her wonderful long legs and full ample breasts. She could imagine the feel of those breasts bare and warm against her lips. This hunter, though not as young as most of her sacrifices, was going to be so sweet. Elizabeth would take her blood and drink the life

from her body but first she would take her pleasures with the hunter. When Elizabeth's very special skills had the hunter panting and pleading for release, then she would take what was hers to take.

The only problem was the third man, the strong silent one. He was more of a mystery to Elizabeth. She could feel the strength of him roaring through the air as he came closer and closer to the house, and yet she couldn't touch him, not like she could the other two. He was her first priority, the hunter who had to go down hard and fast before anything else. There would be no toying with this one and no time for the pleasures of torture or sex. He would have to be ambushed and killed. A sad waste.

Outside, the three circled the house. The old man came at the front, the woman taking the roof, and the younger man at the back. In her mind she could see the shadows move, coming ever closer. She opened her eyes and looked hard at Patrick.

"Take the old man at the front," she told him. "Do not hurt him, just stop him."

"What are you going to do?"

"Trust me," she said her mouth a grim line. "And just do what I tell you."

Patrick hesitated, looking bewildered. It was one thing to see what she had done, but it appeared to be something altogether different when she barked commands at him. She did not need him to become a problem at this particular moment.

*"Do it."*

Her harsh words snapped him out of his indecision. With a nod he made his way to the front hall. With the exception of the lights in the two upstairs rooms, the house was swathed in darkness. She loved the dark and moved with silent and deadly footsteps.

In the kitchen, she slid one window open just enough to push the barrel of the handgun through. Crouched low, she watched outside with eyes accustomed to the night, seeking the shadow that moved as if it was part of the dusk. She could feel him yet she couldn't see him, and the frustration began to build within her. He needed to show himself and quickly before the woman upstairs made it too far. Patrick could subdue the old man; she was certain of that. But time was important right now, and this man must show himself.

Had she blinked she would have missed the feather-soft movement to the right of the window ten feet or so from the back entrance. The great and beautiful lilac bushes provided a perfect cover for a large, powerful man, but even with his skill, she could detect not only his presence but also his movement. With a steady hand she pulled the trigger.

The shot shattered the silence of the night. As she heard his body hit the ground seconds later, she sprinted for the stairs, taking them two at a time. The woman would be on the move as well, the moment she heard the shot. Hopefully Elizabeth could cut her off at the pass. Time and experience were on her side; she'd been at this game centuries longer than the woman hunter, and she was new enough that the smell of inexperience clung to her

like a bad perfume. Advantages were on Elizabeth's side. She had to trust that Patrick could subdue the old man and not screw it up.

Moving like a cat on the stairs, she made it to the landing in a matter of seconds. In the hallway she paused, closing her eyes to focus on the woman. Once again in her mind's eye she could see the long legs striding across the roof towards the third floor room directly above, where the girl's still-warm body lay sprawled and bloody across the bed. In a swift movement Elizabeth whirled towards the hallway light switch, reaching out to flick it and plunging the long corridor into darkness.



## Chapter Twenty-eight

The intrusion was abrupt and she almost lost her balance on the slick tiles of the huge roof. The woman's power was so great it was as though she'd reached inside and yanked Cat down face first. "Jesus" was all Cat could manage as she paused to catch her breath. She'd known Bathory was strong, but this was incredible. She guessed the distance that had been between them before tonight had provided more of a buffer than she had imaged because her probing inside Cat's mind was a violation that was indescribable.

Then there was the shot that came from the rear of the house. She hoped to God it was Adam shooting because the alternative was not something she wanted to think about at the moment. She knew being a hunter had more than its share of risks, but she would not lose Adam. If she lost him, it would be because of some stupid thing she'd done herself, not to this bitch and that was a promise.

In fact, the thought of her hurting the one man who actually had a clue about what made Cat tick gave her a full-out kick in the butt. Bathory was dangerous; Cat would give her that. And now that she had help, she might believe she was unstoppable. Cat had news for the bitch. She could look inside Cat, the power was there, but she'd better not forget that Cat could do the same thing right back.

As she inched forward on the pitched roof, the light in the room she'd been heading for went out. She stopped and closed her eyes concentrating on Bathory. The cat and mouse game was getting complicated and even though they were three, the feeling of being outnumbered, or out maneuvered at least, washed over her. She pushed that aside and focused.

There was another third-floor window that she was pretty sure she could reach with a minimum of noise and a better than average shot at not falling off the roof. She had to trust

that the guys were doing okay on their end and concentrate on her own task. She inched her way across the tile working hard to be as quiet as possible.

The window wasn't locked, which was nothing short of a miracle. On the other hand, what kind of fool besides Cat would be creeping around in the pitch black on a roof so steep that the fact that she wasn't laying on the ground with a broken back was a miracle? Crawling inside without so much as a whisper she released a pent-up breath. Until this second, she hadn't been sure she would be able to make it inside intact. She did make it, though, and once her eyes adjusted to the room, she could see it was some type of storage area, an attic of sorts. As much as she hated to do it, she pulled the small penlight from the pocket at the side of her pants leg and ran the light across the cluttered floor. Careful not to disturb a thing, she tiptoed to the door and opened it.

The hallway, like the rest of the house, was dark. She didn't dare use the tiny light. She had no idea where her target was and wasn't going to risk giving her position away. She couldn't hear a thing, nary a hint of movement from Elizabeth or Patrick. What she also wasn't hearing was either Martin or Adam and that put her nerves on edge. They were good hunters though too good to be brought down already by this woman.

At least that was what she was telling herself as she inched down the hallway with her hand on the cold wall. The stairs ahead were wide with a deep wooden railing. She tried to look over but she still couldn't make out a thing in the inky blackness. Where was she? Where were Adam and Martin?

Keeping low to the floor she padded down the stairs with her back to the wall and her eyes straining in the darkness trying to catch even the tiniest of movements. It was too quiet, making chills bubble up her arms and back. She didn't like this. Cat had no control, and that was not good. She couldn't seem to sense Bathory and wasn't picking up a single image. It was like Bathory was a television that had been turned off, which didn't make sense. Cat could track her, she could. She'd always been able to track these monsters. Their arrogance left their minds open and waiting for someone like Cat to step inside.

So why? Why couldn't she sense her presence? She hadn't left; Cat knew that with dead certainty, and she continued to inch down the stairs. At the bottom step another hallway stretched ahead long and empty only this time instead of being in total darkness, a small sliver of light showed from underneath one of the doors. It smelled like a trap and Cat would be wise to turn and move away. Wise wasn't always the course of action she chose.

Cat's feet had her moving down the inky hallway towards the promising sliver of light. She didn't want to open the door; her body shook with a foreboding strong and solid rushing up and down her spine as if to scream no. In spite of the warning, her hand reached for the doorknob. The door swung open without a sound and as her gaze fell on the bed with the ornately carved frame, a scream rolled up in her throat. Darkness overtook her before the sound could leave her lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

People can be such fools, he thought, as he looked down at the handsome man who doubled over in pain, his life pooling away into the dirt of the rose bed. He might be aging and riddled with ill health, but stupid he was not. This man mistook him for old and incompetent. The price for that miscalculation was very high. Then again, the moment Patrick Robinson had laid a hand on Elizabeth Bathory, he'd sold his soul. The bargain had been struck, and Martin was simply collecting.

He'd seen it a hundred times through the years with the rich, the bored, and the kinky. They fell with ease to the darkness, embracing the necuratul with a lover's kiss. Seduced with little more than the flick of a finger, they traded their souls for the thrill ride offered them by the devil's own.

So too had this man. He'd fallen quickly, not that Martin was surprised by the speed and ease with which she'd taken him. Her skill was legendary within the Order, her beauty well known. Perhaps once she'd been a promising young woman who could have made a name in history far different from that which had ultimately been written. The truth was that she had made a choice many years ago that had left a trail littered with broken bodies, shattered lives, and deliverance into hell. Free will was the devil's game and, in Bathory's case, a winning hand.

Martin's family had been her keeper, her watcher, and they had failed not once, not twice, but enough times that the actual number was a mystery. He was the last and final hope for her deliverance to the gates of hell. He had the skills, he had the knowledge, and he had the desire to do the right thing.

Martin watched the man bleed to death in his tended bed of flowers. Death wasn't so much a mystery to Martin as a nuisance. He hated the way he felt, hated the way he looked and the weariness that pervaded every part of his being. He had accepted it for a long time. Had accepted the fact that with birth comes the undeniable death. It was the circle that was human existence. At this moment, standing in the same place as the hunted, he wasn't certain he could do what he needed to.

Reality wasn't quite what he'd expected.

Damn it, but he didn't want to die. He didn't want to be old and ill, didn't want to hunt anymore. He wanted what had been denied to him for so many years he'd lost count. He wanted pleasure. He wanted the warmth of youth in his bones and to have the tight fresh skin of a young man. And she could give that to him.

She could give that to him.

The shot fired out the kitchen window most likely killed Adam. He had heard the thump of Adam's body hitting the ground. He didn't take the time to investigate. He had dropped Patrick with one skillful plunge of the knife, and now he had to find her. Martin would end this one way or the other.

Halfway up the massive staircase he heard a tiny gasp. He wasn't sure if it was Catherine or Elizabeth. He paused and listened hearing only the slightest rustle of

movement. It sounded at the far end of the hallway and so he pushed himself forward and up the stairs.

As quiet as a mouse, he walked the hallway not hiding though not announcing his arrival either. At the door where a light shone golden underneath his hand paused on the doorknob. With a deep breath, his decision made, Martin turned the doorknob and pushed the heavy oak door open wide.

She smiled as she turned to greet him, her expression seeming to say that she'd been expecting him. "Welcome Martin," she said with a smile that lit her beautiful face.

She was far more beautiful than the history books had given her credit for. He reminded himself the body was not hers but something she had taken from another. The beauty he was seeing was a mixture of hers and the forgotten Amanda. It didn't matter. The sheer force of her beauty just about knocked the breath from his chest. Even her intrusions into his dreams had not prepared him for the effect she had on him.

His eyes stayed on her face, her look one not of surprise but of expectancy. She'd known he was coming.

"Of course I did," she answered his unasked question. "I've been waiting quite a while for you, Martin. It is our destiny, you see. We were meant for each other."

"How?"

"You can ask that after all you've seen and done these long years? You should know better than most that all things are possible."

"Why me?"

She smiled and then turned to the bed where she busied herself with the task she'd been working on when he opened the door. Catherine was lying across a blood-soaked bed, the linens and blankets tossed aside so that her captor could spread her out. Her clothes had been removed in a rush, tossed aside as if nothing more than trash. Catherine appeared to be out cold, but the movement of her chest let him know she was still alive. Elizabeth was taking strips of cloth, probably ripped linen, or at least that's what it looked like from where he stood, and was tying her hands and ankles to the thick wood bedposts.

"What are you doing?" It was then he noticed the other body discarded in the corner and the most probable source of the blood that spread out on the bed beneath Catherine's prone figure. She was a young girl, eighteen or nineteen at the most, ravaged in a way that resembled the first two women they had found earlier in the week.

"Becoming alive and young again, what else?"

"Not like that."

"What a fool you are, Martin. You can't play both sides of this field. Pick a side. My side is filled with pleasures you can't even begin to imagine. Or stay on the side you've always chosen and die like the sick dog that you are."

She didn't look at him, keeping her eyes on the task of tying Catherine to the bed. Her voice was husky with the note of persuasion he had heard in his dreams.

He was drawn to her, to the lithe curve of her hips and the long fingers of her smooth hands. The light glinted off the hair that framed her flawless face. Just seeing her made the aches in his body fade and the years drain away from his face. In his bones he felt the twinge of youth that she promised, the glory of light movement and of lungs so full of health and vigor that running a marathon would be like a walk in the park. He longed to take her hand and lay it against his cheek. He wanted to feel her soft lips against his own. The ache in his body was not the ache of old age and infirmity but of longing and pent up desire.

The rest of the world faded away, the here and now existing only for the two of them. The promises were worming their way into his heart and his mind, and he pushed away from the past. He moved like a man walking in quicksand from the spot he'd stood rooted to since opening the door. Holding his hand out to her, he yearned for the magic of her touch. In the back of his mind he still knew what he needed to do, what it was his sworn duty to do, and yet he inched towards her, small step by small step.

Her smile was victorious, her eyes darkening as she held out her hand to him. His steps faltered just outside of her reach. It occurred to him that with one more step, the circle would be complete and there would be no turning back. Running through his mind like a never-ending tape was something his father used to say often: *The road to hell is paved with good intentions.*

## Chapter Twenty-nine

She came to in an explosion of light and pain. The back of her head felt like it had been smacked with a concrete brick, which in turn made the light in her eyes burn like an inferno. Jesus, whatever she'd been hit with had rattled her brains enough that she was having a hell of a time focusing. In fact it took her a few seconds to realize two very important things. One, she was as naked as a newborn babe. Two, she was trussed up on a huge damp bed like a vestal virgin ready for sacrifice. Neither one was good. She knew what this devil could do having seen her handiwork up close and personal.

The third thing she noticed once she stopped hyperventilating was that Martin was standing a foot or so away from the madwoman with a look on his face that scared her almost as much as being a trussed up like a sacrificial turkey. He was looking at this woman like he was enthralled. He was holding a gun, holding being a relative term. It was more like he had a gun hanging from his hand that at the moment was dangling at his side. This was not, she repeated, not, a comforting picture.

She'd been hunting the dark side for half a decade, and this was the first time she'd found herself at the mercy of the necuratul. She had to say it was not comforting. That bitch had gotten the rags tied so tight around Cat's wrists and ankles that it hurt like hell when she struggled to free herself. She suspected a lot of practice had gone into these knots.

Bathory turned and gave Cat a cursory look when she realized the dead had come back to the world of the living. Her smile was so wicked that goose bumps rose all over her uncovered body. She would be embarrassed to find herself in such a compromising position if it weren't for the fact that she was scared to death Martin was falling victim to Bathory's wiles. She had never encountered anything like this before, and Cat had the sinking feeling that she was going to die while Bathory was going to eat Martin alive. She meant that literally and figuratively.

*Think, think, think.* There had to be a way out of this mess. She was naked, her head was ringing, and she couldn't move. Her options were a little limited to say the least. For lack of anything better to do, she opened her mouth and screamed.

Bathory spun so quick Cat barely saw her move. There was no denying the hot sting of the hand across her face. The slap was so vicious it made Cat's ears ring. Add one more complication to the mix.

"Shut up, bitch," she growled then dismissed Cat as she turned back to Martin.

He gazed over at Cat the look in his eyes more surprise than alarm. "Martin," she screamed again, wincing in anticipation of another blow but realizing that she had to get Martin back before she sucked him in. She readied herself for the assault.

This time her slap made Cat's eyes swim, and it took every ounce of willpower not to lose consciousness again. But it was worth it. Not giving up even when things looked about as black as possible had its rewards. Her shot in the dark hit its target.

Martin backed away from Bathory with a look of revulsion on his face. "You cannot have me," he said in a low, tired voice that held iron underneath.

"Yes, my darling, yes, I will have you." She turned her back on Cat once more, advancing towards Martin, her movements sure and steady. She reached him at the same time Cat noticed the backs of her own hands were splattered with dried blood. She told herself not to throw up.

"No." His voice was growing stronger, and yet he still wasn't raising the gun at his side. Cat willed him to shoot. He didn't.

She wondered if he'd been hurt and that was why he couldn't shoot. Had his arm been injured, his neck? What?

"Shoot her," Cat yelled. "Shoot her!"

Bathory's laughter seemed to come from every corner of the room, filling it with a sound so hideous it made her want to scream again.

"He's not going to hurt me. He wants me, and he wants what I can give him. Don't you, Martin dear?"

"No," he said again, this time his voice trembling like a child who'd been scolded. The iron of a moment earlier was missing.

"Yes," she said, softer now, backing him towards the open doorway and coming close enough that she stood just inches from him.

Cat couldn't see Bathory's face but knew in her sinking heart that she was winning in this stand off. Whatever power it was that she held over Martin, she was winning. The tears started to fall from Cat's eyes. Damn it, she couldn't stop them. Everything was going wrong. It was all so futile. Cat was going to be killed and Martin ... she didn't even want to think about what Martin was going to become.

Worst of all, she was having one of those epiphanies people talk about. Shape shifter or not, mated for life or not, she didn't know. What she did know as she laid spread out in all of God's glory was that the man she loved was lying in the darkness and cold with a bullet in his body. If he died it had all been for nothing.

The great Anima Mundi, the hunters and protectors of the innocent, had failed in their most important task. Evil had won.

She closed her eyes and waited to die.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thank God for Catherine. If she hadn't screamed, he might have gone into her arms, sacrificing every good thing he had ever done to embrace the side of an evil he couldn't stomach. Her screams had brought his mind back from the brink and in a flash of enlightenment, he knew what had to be done.

If not for the mirror on the far side of the room his path would not have been as clear. He had heard the movement first. Four paws padding in near silence up the stairs and down the hall in his direction. As the steps came nearer, they shifted from four to two and by the time the image became clear in the mirror, Adam limped, his body close to the wall and unnoticed by Elizabeth. Martin backed towards the open doorway, hoping that she would follow her prey so intent on her victory that she wouldn't notice Adam until the last moment. Surprise was the sole advantage they possessed.

She did as he hoped, her body pressing against his. At the door Martin threw his hands out to his side, thinking as he did about Jesus being nailed to the cross. In the mirror his eyes met Adam's. It was that moment Elizabeth noticed Adam. She smiled and Martin knew she believed that her conquest was complete.

He took one look at Catherine and then his eyes met Adam's in the mirror once more. With a slight nod, Martin gave Adam the permission he was waiting for but didn't really want. No words were needed. Each of them understood what had to be done. The only thing left to be done.

The bullet slammed through Martin's body, coming to rest in Elizabeth's heart. The look of surprise on her face was complete, so sure she had been of her victory. In the last few seconds before her mind and body shut down, her eyes pierced his, her pupils black and full of madness. Elizabeth leaned forward and kissed him hard on the lips, her tongue parting his lips and pushing inside, hot and insistent. Surprised by the force of her lips against his, Martin fell back and away from her. Adam caught him before he crashed to the ground.

Vaguely he could hear the rush of breath escaping Elizabeth's lips and saw the blood flowing from the wound in her chest. In the background the sound of Catherine's cries were more like the sound of willows in the trees than the cries of anguish they really were. There was an unreality to the conclusion of his life. He expected something more in this final



moment where his life faded from his body, leaving only his soul to find its place in the greater universe.

He tried to mouth the words of apology, gratitude, and love that he felt for the two who had taken this last journey with him. He wanted them to understand that he had been conflicted in his final hours, the desires of the man who still lived deep inside the old body and the hunter who had spent a lifetime trying to do the good and honorable thing. It was all there in his mind, muddled and faded. The words would not come as hard as he tried.

Focusing on the face of the man who knelt beside him, he relaxed. Adam's arms cradled his head and shoulders in a gentle embrace. He couldn't speak, but then, he didn't need to. With only moments of life left in him, he closed his eyes and sent his thoughts to these two young people who deserved so much more than he was leaving them with. The effort depleted what little was left, and he sagged against Adam's strong arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

She couldn't help it, the sobs overtaking her as she watched with her head turned towards the door and the damp, bloody sheet against her cheek. It had taken a few minutes to figure out what Martin had been doing until she'd glimpsed Adam coming up behind him. She was surprised that Elizabeth hadn't noticed him as well but her concentration had been targeted towards Martin, and she had made the fatal mistake of not being completely aware. She guessed even one as old and experienced as Countess Bathory could make mistakes. A tiny bit of encouragement in an otherwise dire situation.

Even though she couldn't see the gun in Adam's hand, there was something ominous about the nod Martin had given him and a ball formed in the pit of her stomach as she'd watched. She heard the shot and felt the pain as the bullet had ripped clean through Martin to find its final target in the heart of Elizabeth Bathory. She gagged although she had managed to keep herself from vomiting and possibly choking herself to death since she was still trussed up on this hideous bed. She wanted to rip free of the bindings and run to Martin. She didn't even care that she was naked as a newborn, she just wanted to breathe life back into this man who had been so instrumental in bringing her life full circle.

From her prison, she watched the life flow out of him but not before he hit her with one last message. "Forgive me."

"Oh, Martin," she whispered.

Gently Adam laid Martin's body down on the floor and stood. His leg was dark and bloody, his limp a sure sign that the shot she'd heard earlier had missed its target landing instead on a strong, muscular thigh. He stepped over Martin, leaning over the prone form of Elizabeth. He reached down and searched for a pulse.

"Dead." He said it bitterly although she knew his emotions were not for the evil woman who had caused so much heartache.

Then he moved towards Cat, crossing the room fast for someone who had to be feeling weak. Even if it had missed most of the important parts, that bullet still had to hurt like hell. He was as naked as she was although she didn't need to ask why. She'd seen him change before. His hands made quick work of the bindings and in a minute, she was free. She didn't bother with clothes; instead she scrambled off the bed and into his arms. He wrapped her in a bear hug, the thud of his heart loud and comforting to her ears. He planted a kiss on the top of her head and then pushed her away.

"We've got to get this cleared."

He was right and she nodded before making a dash for the bathroom. Time was important but she'd be damned if she were going to slip her clothes back on with her backside coated in blood. It took two minutes to run a damp washcloth over her body, washing away the traces of another ruined life. Then she hurried into her clothes.

In the space of five minutes, Adam had carried Martin's body to the SUV parked at the edge of the driveway. She found him dressed and on the front lawn calling Sandy and talking in a low, serious voice.

"Let's do it," he told her when he folded the small phone and slipped it into his pocket.

"What about the girl and that Patrick guy?"

"They'll have to go, too. Sandy will cover it."

The Division didn't always understand what they did or why, but the cooperative relationship had distinct benefits for both.

She wanted to take care of the dead woman. Wanted her destroyed for all time. Countess Elizabeth Bathory would never come back again, ever. She had done her deeds too well and too often. The time had come for her to say a final goodbye.

It was shocking to see the change in the woman's face when they returned to where she was spread out on the bedroom floor. The change in her face was subtle but distinct nonetheless. The face Cat had seen as she'd been tied to the bed, the smile with the perfect white teeth and the eyes as deep as an ocean had been Elizabeth's. But as her life essence had been taken away Amanda returned, the features not quite as pretty or perfect though the edge was there that had undoubtedly been the draw.

She should feel bad for this Amanda except that she didn't. She hadn't been much more of a credit to this society than Countess Bathory had been to hers. They'd both left their mark on the world, and it was black with the edge that identified it as not just the misadventures of a lost soul but also the cruel and selfish work of true evil.

Poor little Amanda got what she desired. After all, how many lives had she destroyed before sharing herself with the woman history labeled the first real vampire? They were kindred souls and now they could spend eternity together because she was jolly well going to send both of them to hell and lock the door behind them. Neither one was going to find their way back this time.

The innocent girl discarded in the corner was another story. She, like the other victims, had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her sin had been to accept Bathory's invitation. There was nothing any of them could do for her now. Cat wondered if anyone would even miss her.

The odor of gasoline was strong throughout the house by the time she finished making her way to the front door. It was a shame that so much beauty would have to be destroyed because of the malevolence that had seeped into the very hardwood of the floors. It couldn't be helped. She had touched both the man who owned the house and the very structure itself. They didn't have a choice here, it all had to go or their work would not be complete.

She looked at Adam who waited for her on the lawn. He gave her the nod and she struck a match, dropping it without ceremony into the trail of gasoline that was going to be Elizabeth Bathory's funeral pyre. The flames shot through the house in a golden fury that took only minutes to engulf the huge house in a blaze of fire.

They walked, or rather she walked and Adam limped, to the SUV where Martin's body waited. With the lights off, Adam pulled the black vehicle into the street and away from the fire. After a few blocks, he flicked on the lights and turned towards town. Sandy had made arrangements to meet them at the funeral home near the river. All they had to do was leave Martin with him and he would take care of the details. There would be no police; there would be no questions.

## Chapter Thirty

In the paper and on the news, the conflagration that consumed one of Spokane's oldest and finest homes, killing the last surviving member of a founding family and two of his friends, was heralded as one of the greatest losses the community had suffered for over a hundred years. There was nary a peep about arson, murder victims, or an unidentified vehicle leaving the house shortly after the fire started.

Nor was there mention anywhere of the elderly Englishman who'd been brought to a North Division funeral home with a bullet hole in his chest.

Sandy was one hell of a magician.

Once again, Cat couldn't sleep even though she crawled into bed with Adam, neither one of them saying a word. Even with the comfort of his body next to hers, she couldn't get Martin's death out of her mind, or the words he'd sent to her in his last moments. There was nothing to forgive him for, and it broke her heart to think that he thought there was. He had been a great man who she would never forget, and she didn't believe Adam or any of the Anima Mundi would either. When greatness touched a person, it stayed with them.

The one thing they had to do today was send Martin home. They had made a few calls when they'd gotten back to the house, and in the space of an hour the arrangements had all been in place. Sandy pulled strings and by three in the afternoon, Martin would be on a plane heading for London.

She wished she could go with him. She didn't like the thought of him making his final journey alone, but she also knew he'd make the journey in peace with all the powers of the Anima Mundi keeping him safe. Galena promised to meet his body at the airport and escort him to the cemetery. If she couldn't go with Martin, it made Cat feel better to know Galena would be there for him.

At two-thirty they drove to the small private airstrip to say their goodbyes. The casket was rich black and beautiful, and she had little doubt that Martin would have been pleased. The funeral home people had a way about them, handling the loading of the casket with such gentleness that it brought tears to her eyes.

They rolled it towards the plane, stopping before loading it into the hold and motioning for them to come closer. They knew that she and Adam needed to say safe journey. Adam, his strong beautiful face clouded, touched the top of the casket and said something she couldn't hear. Then he stepped back and looked at her.

Cat's eyes were filled with tears, making Martin's final home blur like a window on a rainy day. Her heart filled her chest, the sorrow so deep and consuming that it was all she could do not to out and out sob. Instead she laid her head against the cool lid, pressing her hands palm down, as though she were holding him in her arms. Closing her eyes she shut out everything and everyone except Martin.

"Farewell, my friend," she said, her cheek still pressed against the top. "Sleep well."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Her hair beautiful and shining in the light of the candles, her long black velvet dress a sign of mourning and yet cut so low that her lovely white breasts all but fell free of the soft fabric. Leaning over him, she smiled, her teeth white and straight in her unlined porcelain face. She is so beautiful, so terribly beautiful that I wish I could reach up and touch her cheek and feel the softness of her inviting breasts. I want to lay my head against her bosom and take in the soothing scent of lavender that rises from her throat.*

*"You won't stop me," she whispered against my ear, her breath hot. "They couldn't before, the old man failed yet again and you, my sweet, will fail as well."*

*Fear starts to wrap its icy fingers around my throat at her gentle words. "Who are you?" I ask though I can barely make out the words.*

*Her laughter floated through the room I find myself in, where the shadows dance on black walls and what moments before felt soothing and sensual now felt alive with the throb of terror.*

*"Your nightmare, your lover, your executioner."*

*"Who are you?"*

*She leaned over me again, still smelling of the lush and lovely lavender. Pressing her lips against mine in a hard kiss, she spoke without breaking the contact. "You may call me Countess." She ran her tongue over my lips. "And my kiss is my mark. Just ask your friend Martin how he liked the taste of me before he died."*

*Before I can move, her hand came from behind the rich black skirt and in one swift, sure movement, she slit my throat.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat's eyes flew open as she jumped back from the elegant casket, staring wide-eyed in disbelief and true confusion. As comprehension dawned, the last thing she heard before the blackness dropped over her eyes was the sound of her own scream.

 THE END 

## Sheri Lewis Wohl

Sheri Lewis Wohl has loved books since the moment she could pick one up. Her goal in grade school was to read every book in the library and while she didn't quite make her goal, she came pretty close. It was clear that becoming a writer was a natural path. Born in the flat lands of eastern Nebraska, Sheri was raised in Spokane, Washington where mountains, pine trees and lakes are plentiful. A graduate of Eastern Washington University, Sheri has spent many years in finance with the federal government. Her heart, however, still lay with good stories and she returned to school earning a Masters Degree in literature through California State University. Her master's thesis was on the 19th century vampire story "Carmilla" by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, further cementing her love of stories that chill and thrill. Few stories are truly complete without a touch of romance so for Sheri even her scariest tales include a little love.

With three grown children off on their own, Sheri lives in Northeastern Washington state with her husband Steve, two dogs -- a St. Bernard and a German Shepherd -- and a stray black cat that moved in and never left.

Visit Sheri on the Web at [sherilewiswohl.com](http://sherilewiswohl.com).