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GRAVE ILLUSIONS
BY LINA GARDINER
Chapter One

John Brittain slapped the shot-glass onto the bar and stared into the empty glass until it started to blur. He pushed it away and waved off the approaching bartender. He'd had enough. He stood and headed for the door.

Outside, he shivered in the crisp air. The street was darker than usual. Whether he liked it or not, the cop in him never completely dropped his guard. Streetlights were out on the whole block. Not a good thing in a shadowy, criminally active neighborhood like this one. He'd report it anonymously when he got home.

Next to the brick wall on his right, something triggered his peripheral vision. His footsteps slowed, senses switching to full alert. Like velvet in the night, a woman came out of the shadows and brushed past him.

"Hello there, handsome," she said, her sultry voice invading his senses.

"Not interested," he muttered and continued down the sidewalk.

Dressed from head to toe in skintight black leather, looking like someone straight out of his long-ago teenage fantasies, the dark haired beauty leaned into him. She pressed her firm breasts against his chest and suggestively licked her delectable red lips.

If she was a hooker, this neighborhood was looking up.

"Looking for a good time tonight?" she asked.

"You're kidding, right?"

Even though he tried not to touch her with his hands, too many other body parts were tingling on contact where her body touched his. Until he bumped into the wall behind him, he didn't even realize she had him on the retreat.

With her hands propped on the wall on either side of his head and her mouth inches from his, she positioned herself so her pelvis made intimate contact against his. "I'm in the market for a man. Are you up for it?"

He sucked in a ragged breath and squinted at her, wishing for the second time tonight he hadn't been drinking. Of course he was interested! He was a living, breathing male with libido fully intact. And right now every part of him was revved up and ready to rumble. As much as he didn't want to do it, he let his gaze move down to the mounds of flesh crushed against him.

Once again the urge to touch became overpowering. He gritted his teeth. He, of all people, didn't deserve a woman who looked like her. He had a self-prescribed penance to pay, and hooker or not, she was too much of a prize. He placed both hands on her arms and moved her gently away from him.

"Look somewhere else, honey. I'm not in the market for little girls, no matter how pretty."

She laughed. "How old do you think I am?"

His gaze traveled up her trim thighs. Then to her exquisite milky white skin where her cleavage tantalized him. With an exaggerated sigh he tore his gaze away and tried to focus on her dark eyes, but a sliver of pain shot through his left temple. He looked away. "Not old enough."

"You might be surprised." She ran two fingers along his jaw. "But, you've got ethics. That's always good."

"Honey, why don't you go home and get your mother to tuck you into bed."

"We'll meet again." She stepped away from him.

He turned to say something equally pointless but she'd disappeared into the shadows. He stared into the dark and squinted, but there was no one there. How the hell had she vanished so fast?

* * * *

The next evening Britt wiped the last of the shaving cream off his face with a towel and slapped on a palmful of aftershave. Pressed against the edge of the bathroom sink he stared hard at his reflection. He looked like hell. Since he'd been kicked off the force, he'd been through hell. For that matter, he felt as if

he was still in hell.

Had it been two years since he'd made the mistake of confronting his partner about taking bribes on the beat? Randy had slugged him in the jaw, and he'd responded by punching Randy in the gut. In the gut!

If only he could take back that moment.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, clenching his teeth. How many times had he wished for that one favor? One miracle in a good cop's lifetime?

Good cop? He made a derisive noise in the back of his throat. Good cops don't kill their partners.

He tried to push the memories away, but he couldn't. They'd been stirred up again because yesterday, out of the blue, his former captain, Drake Abbott, had telephoned him. He wanted Britt to meet him at the precinct, but he wouldn't explain why. Britt had reservations about going. Cop killers should never hang around police stations. But Drake was a good guy. One of the few Britt respected. He had no choice but to agree. He owed his friend that much. Drake had stuck by him when everyone else had turned their back on him.

On the way to the Police Station, Britt convinced himself he was happy enough. It had taken over two years, but he had made peace with his transition from cop to cabby. Even so, he couldn't forgive himself for what he'd done to deserve this life.

Now, here he was, walking down those familiar corridors again. His gut clenched at the sights and smells inside the building where he'd spent more than ten years of his life. He shouldn't have come. He didn't need reminders of how his life could have been if he hadn't screwed it up.

When Britt reached the office, Drake rose from his chair and hurried across the room to greet him. "Glad you came." Drake grabbed his hand and pumped it hard. "Just a second. I'll close this door then we can talk."

Britt saw the woman immediately—long, luscious legs in dark hose led up to a short skirt. Shoulder length sable hair, flawless skin and full lips that instantly elevated his blood pressure. He swallowed before he said, "Hello."

She didn't speak, just continued to stare at him, sizing him up like it was her God-given right.

Britt groaned inwardly. Drake better have a damned good reason to bring him here, because the way this lady was eyeing him made him feel extremely uncomfortable. Strike that. Extremely *aroused* and uncomfortable.

"Okay." Drake rubbed his hands together as he sat behind his desk. "Let's get down to business right away."

"Aren't you forgetting an introduction?" Britt tipped his head toward the eye candy in the corner.

"Right. This is Jess Vandermire, Lieutenant of our new unit. Jess, I'd like to introduce you to one of the best cops I've ever worked with, John Brittain."

Britt started to ask Drake what new unit he was talking about but cringed instead as Drake added the last. Even though he felt honest-to-God gratitude at Drake's statement, guilt surged through him. He

didn't deserve that kind of praise.

"Mr. Brittain." Her voice slipped over him like silk. Crazy as it sounded, he felt as if she'd physically caressed him—with her tongue!

He shivered. Embarrassed by his reaction to her, he mumbled something hopefully unintelligible, before dragging his gaze back to Drake. He had a sinking feeling Drake was going to ask him to do bodyguard duty or something equally distasteful. He'd decided a long time ago that he'd never stoop to that type of job. He'd been one of the best cops in the city, and if he couldn't be a real cop, he sure as hell wouldn't settle for the next best thing. That's why he'd become a taxi driver. Driving a cab was about as far from being a cop he could get.

"Before you say anything, Britt, listen to what I have to tell you." Drake screwed up his leathery face. "Fact is, I'd like to offer you a job with the police force."

Britt felt as if a sudden weight had fallen on his chest and was affecting his breathing. "Not funny, Drake. You know that's not possible. Hell, I'd give my eyeteeth to be able to come back. But not with my partner's death hanging over my head. No one will accept me, and I don't blame them."

"Did you say eyeteeth?" Drake said.

The lady's eyes sparkled dangerously at Drake. Talk about giving him the *"you'd-better-watch-yourself look."*

Drake suddenly went a sickly pale and said to the woman, "Sorry, Jess. That was in bad taste."

What the hell did Drake mean by that? Britt stood and scraped the chair back with his legs. "Never mind. I'll just pretend you didn't ask me to return. I'm leaving."

"No! Hear me out first."

Britt glared at Drake and raked a hand through his hair in frustration. "I'm a freaking outcast, man! I'll never be able to come back. And, to be honest, I can't believe you'd even suggest I could, even if I was innocent. Which we both know I'm not. So stop yanking my chain."

As far as ticked expressions went, Jess Vandermire's registered at least an eight on a scale from one to ten. Apparently, she didn't like the way the conversation was going. "This offer is legit," she said. "The real deal. You'll be a New York City Cop again with full pay and benefits."

Britt threw his hands into the air. Christ! Didn't these two understand the word no? "If you think I'll work with some private company, I'll tell you right now, I'm never going to work as a damned bodyguard. Not even if you call me a cop in the process." His shoulders slumped. No way could he tell them how much saying those words hurt; how much he still wanted to be a cop.

"Nah, it's not like that at all," Drake said. "I'd never ask you to be a bodyguard. You'll be a New York City Police Officer again. Your record will be *expunged*."

Even though Drake's voice emphasized the "expunged" part, he looked squeamish as hell. Britt didn't miss the fact that his eyes kept darting toward Jess.

Britt bit his bottom lip and squeezed his hands into tight fists. "Can you expunge the fact that I killed my

partner?"

"No. I wish I could." Drake at least looked repentant.

"So do I, Drake. So do I." He looked at his shoes and swallowed.

Suddenly, Jess Vandermire said, "The unit I run is a top-secret operation. Absolutely no one outside the Special Ops team can know about it. Before I can give you any details, you have to decide if you want in." Her soft, velvet-smooth voice was about as erotic as a voice could get.

He gaped at her. Didn't she just hear what he'd said? And, damnit, as much as her voice affected him, he was too irritated to be distracted by her. Did they think they were talking to a rookie, for Christ's sake?

"Isn't that slightly backward? If I don't know what the job is about, how am I supposed to make an informed decision?" Britt countered.

"You're not. You have to decide if you want in without knowing the full details. You should know, however, that this unit isn't for wimps. It's a dangerous job. People will die. If you accept the position, your life will be on the line every night."

"And that's different from being a cop how?"

"Cops aren't necessarily in constant physical danger. You will be."

* * * *

Jess watched John Brittain frown, saw the rigid jaw muscle flex. His eyes registered anger and could probably instill fear about as efficiently as anyone she'd ever met. Of course, *she* wasn't afraid of him, but that look could come in useful if he accepted the job. Yeah, he was tough all right, but could he handle the whole truth?

She leaned forward. "Now's the time to ask yourself if you want back on the force bad enough to risk dying for it. Only the strongest and smartest cops will make it out of this alive. We need you, Britt. We need the best we can get. I wish I could tell you more, but right now isn't the time."

"What are you going to do, infiltrate a biker gang or something?"

"That, Mr. Brittain, would be a cakewalk compared to what this unit will have to do."

"Is that so?" He put his hands on his hips.

"And then some," Drake added.

Jess looked at Britt. He looked plain haggard, though she liked his hazel eyes, the firm line of his mouth. She'd bet he wasn't the kind of man who'd back down in the face of danger. She could smell fear from Drake, but nothing from Britt. He wasn't in the least affected by what they'd just told him. His expression remained deliberate, calculating. She was impressed by his cool demeanor. He'd be an asset on her team.

Britt shoved his hands into his pockets. "The best I can tell you is I'll consider your offer."

Drake wouldn't accept a negative answer right now, and Britt knew it. Jess marveled at how men could

interact with each other without saying a word. Drake nodded his head and let him go.

Later, after Britt left to think their offer over, Jess crawled into the chair he'd been sitting in. No use trying to absorb the former occupant's warmth, he'd been out of the chair for too long. "Do you think he'll say yes, Drake? He looked pretty indecisive when he left."

"I'll admit he's been through a lot the last couple of years, but he was never a man to jump in without weighing his options. That's what made him good. He thought quickly, but he also made sure he took the time to make good decisions when time allowed. I'd sure as hell like to know what happened with his partner. It still doesn't feel right. I guess everyone has some evil in them, but Britt—he's not a killer."

"If that's true, he won't do very well on my team. I need killers. The best killers in the game."

"I'm not sure if he's the killer you're looking for, Jess, but there's one thing I do know. I'd stake my pay check on John Brittain's loyalty. If you can gain it, you can trust him with anything you ask of him."

* * * *

The next evening, Britt waited for Jess at a table in the back corner of the bar. She noticed he'd chosen a spot where he could see everyone coming and going, his back to the wall.

"Nice to see you again." He stood and pulled a chair out for her. Though obviously not exuberant about being here, she sensed he was pleased to see her.

"Let's get one thing straight, Brittain. I'm a cop just like you. I'm *not* a lady, so don't stand up every time you see me. And don't ever hold my chair for me again." She'd seen the appreciative way he'd looked at her. It wasn't as if that had never happened to her before. In fact, it seemed as if she got the eye more now that she was dead than she did when she was alive. Even so, her physical response to him surprised her. He was the first man who'd made her think about sex for a long time.

A momentary frown scuttled across his forehead. "Fair enough. I shouldn't have done that. But don't compare me to you. I'm not a cop anymore."

She sat across from him. Saw the way he looked her over, the open appreciation in his expression. For an instant she felt that old ache returning. The loss. She pushed it away.

"Care for a drink?" He raised one hand to hail the waitress.

"No. They don't carry my brand here." She looked at the two empty shot glasses on the table. By the smell of booze on Britt's breath they weren't the first two he'd had. "I take it you've decided you're not going to accept the offer after all?"

"What makes you think that?" His thumb and forefinger rasped across his unshaven chin.

"It looks to me as if you'd rather be drinking than having a serious job interview."

Eyes narrowing, he sat straighter in his chair and lowered his voice to a near whisper. "Let's just say I don't see much future in working undercover for the police force. I don't know what kind of game you've got going, but keeping the regular cops out of the loop worries me."

"Really." She tapped her long fingernails on the tabletop. She could tell it irritated him, so she continued doing it. "Of course it's absolutely essential for the so-called 'regular' cops' safety that we keep them

uninformed. If they find out what's going on they'll be in grave danger. It's as simple as that. Only the toughest men and women can handle this information, those who have their wits about them." She looked at the shot glasses then at his watery eyes. "I don't need an alcoholic on my team. Fact is, you wouldn't last one night."

"Hey! I'm not an alcoholic." He slammed a hand onto the table, making the two empty shot glasses clink together.

"Really? Smells like you've had at least four shots before I got here."

His eyes widened. "That's some sniffer you've got."

She picked up her purse and rose from her chair. "Yes—something you might do well to remember in the future."

"What are you doing? Is the interview over?"

"It never began," she said.

"Sit down."

She hesitated only because she saw determination in his eyes. "I haven't got all night, Mr. Brittain. Either you want the job or you don't. I've told you it's dangerous. You have to be at the top of your game if you want to survive. Being anesthetized with alcohol will only help you die quicker. I don't have time to waste on people who won't make it past the first night."

"I'd sure as hell like to know what this is about before I give you my answer. What happens if I say yes, then don't like the job afterwards?"

"You could quit, but I wouldn't recommend it. We won't have time to protect you if you drop out. Our mission isn't to be bodyguard to cops who can't cut it. And believe me, you'd be better off staying with the unit. There's safety in numbers."

"God almighty, just what the hell are you people up to?"

"Believe me, God has little to do with it. I do believe He's on our side though." Jess watched Brittain carefully.

Trying not to think about him as a man with needs she'd like to satisfy, she turned her thoughts to how he'd ended up as one of her recruits. He wasn't like the rest of the misfits and criminals, the dregs of society, she normally recruited to her team. She could tell Britt had been a decent cop just by looking at him. He was tough, but she had no doubt he had loved his job and performed it to the best of his ability. She understood that kind of thinking. Even a woman in her position had her standards. And she believed her standards were high considering what she was up against.

She looked at him again. His eyes burned into hers with the determination of someone who wanted to believe in himself but had been knocked down a few pegs. He had the stuff to be a cop again. He'd be a good man to have on her team. He knew about man's inhumanities to man. But he had no idea there was another level of inhumanity out there, darker and more sinister. And much more inhumane.

How would he take the news that they were hunting vampires?

Chapter Two

"Do you think this new guy will be able to handle the truth?" Jess's brother, Father Regent Vandermire, asked.

Jess watched a look of helplessness creep into her baby brother's features.

"I don't know, Reej, I just don't know. He's got some sort of a spark, something I haven't seen in any of the others. I'm just not sure."

Regent pulled off his collar and threw it onto the desk. Then he paced to Jess, putting his hands on her shoulders. "We've made it this far, dearest. We can do it."

Jess looked at him and wanted to cry. If only crying was possible. She needed him, but his body was failing. He was seventy-two years old, and he'd aged while she'd remained young.

He'd fought vampires with her for the last fifty years. If it hadn't been for him, she'd have been lost all those years ago when she'd been bitten. Only Regent wouldn't give up on her. He had invoked every saint, said every prayer, and finally resorted to holy water, incense, scripture, and baptism. It was baptism that worked. It burned her flesh, but the prayers kept her body from evaporating. Somehow, through his belief and love, he'd managed to save her soul from total damnation.

"You look tired, Reej. Maybe you should go to bed early tonight. I can handle things on my own."

Regent sighed and rubbed his emaciated face with bony fingers. "If only you could find someone to take my place as your protector. There are other priests who I could trust to do it, but they're not much younger than I am. You need someone young, someone unfaltering; someone whose faith can keep you both strong."

"I'm a big girl, I can look after myself."

"It's not that simple, love, and you know it. But I thank God every day that he lets you fight the vampire within so that you can battle the vampires without."

Jess forced a laugh. "There'll be a few vampires 'without' tonight, Reej. Without bodies! I'd better get going." She crossed the room in a heartbeat and blew him a kiss. "I love you, baby brother. You're the light in my life."

She'd said that to him every night for the past fifty years. And she meant it heart and soul. Well, if she'd had a soul and a beating heart.

"I love you too, dear. Take care tonight. I've felt an unease these past few weeks. I can't explain it. I'm worried."

"There's nothing that I'm afraid of, and you shouldn't be worried. I'll be cautious, just like you taught me. I won't take any unnecessary risks."

Regent sat down in his chair. He looked so frail tonight. She bit her lip. "Get some sleep, Regent. Dream lovely dreams for me and I'll see you again tomorrow night."

"Be safe, Jess."

"I will." She slipped through the window of the Rectory and ran across the rooftop. Then she somersaulted to the lower roof of the garage and dropped to the ground with barely a sound. Her hearing remained as acute as it had the first day she'd been bitten. She could hear cockroaches and other vermin scurrying around in the dark, as well as the cacophony of sounds that assaulted the city. Nighttime was always best. At least then the noises weren't quite as offensive.

Suddenly, the dark heavens peeled back, producing a glowing orange moon. Full and powerful. The evil lurking inside her surged like a rush of adrenaline. The urgent need to drink blood came upon her quickly, but she squelched it. Even though it was a constant battle, she'd learned over the years how to control her dark needs.

She pulled out a small, specially created packet of blood from an inside pocket, ripped it open and drank the liquid quickly. Even that was abhorrent to her, but without it she'd die—or even worse, become one of those creatures of the night she hated. She walked a very fine line—one she hoped never to cross.
* * * *

Britt got into his taxi. He still didn't know if he wanted the job Jess Vandermire had offered him, but the hard truth was he did want the boss. Strange how lust could change a person's perspective. No sense deluding himself though. He couldn't have either.

His gaze went to his old cop's badge pinned to the taxi's dash. He kept it there to remind himself of what he'd lost. His attention was so fixed on the badge he nearly didn't see the guy step off the curb until he was directly in front of the taxi. Britt's foot jammed on the brake. The car lurched to a screeching halt only inches from the guy's shins.

He reached for the door handle, ready to jump out of the car and give the guy a piece of his mind, but then the guy bolted. At least Britt thought he'd bolted, until the taxi's back door was wrenched open and the tall, thin man dove into the backseat, slamming the door shut behind him.

"Drive!"

"Buddy, you shouldn't throw yourself in front of cabs in this part of New York," Britt snapped at him. "You're likely to get run over. If you want a cab, just hold up your hand and we'll stop."

"Of course. I don't know what I was thinking. Please, can you start driving? Now!"

The fellow kept looking out the rear window. Was he in trouble with the law? Involved in something criminal?

"Everything okay, fella?"

The man looked at him. "What? Oh. Yes, yes, fine, fine. Just drive, will you. I want to go to Saint Eugenia's Church. The quicker the better."

John tightened his hands on the wheel and stepped on the gas. He glanced in his rearview mirror and noticed a set of headlights coming up behind them. The vehicle appeared to be following them, so he made a quick change into another lane and turned down a side street.

As soon as he dared take his eyes off the refuse strewn alley that doubled as a shortcut, he looked for the vehicle's headlights behind them. They were gone. Either he'd lost the tail, or there hadn't been one to start with. The latter was a definite possibility.

The man in the back remained silent. If they hadn't been followed, why wasn't this guy complaining about his driving? "We're nearly at the church," Britt said, for lack of anything better to say. Once again his fare didn't respond. He just sat with his shoulders taut and his eyes staring straight ahead.

A few minutes later, Britt stopped in front of the church. Only a couple of lights were on inside. It might not even be open. Definitely not holding a service.

Britt turned to his fare with one arm draped across the bench seat. "Maybe you've got the time wrong. It doesn't look too lively in there."

"Thanks." The man threw a twenty dollar bill at him. Then he jumped out of the cab, tore up the twenty steps to the church, pulled open the main door, and disappeared inside.

Someone must've been waiting for the guy, Britt decided, because these days, churches had to keep their doors locked due to vandalism. What would be so important to rate an after hours meeting at a church?

He knew there could be many good reasons, but his old cop instincts were stirring. Something wasn't right.

Britt watched the building for a minute before slipping the gearshift into drive. Then, with a silent self-admonition about listening to his damn instincts, he slammed his hand against the steering wheel, jammed the gear lever back into park, and yanked the keys out of the ignition.

He climbed out of the car and mounted the stairs two at a time. Grabbing the wrought iron door handle with both hands, he pulled the ten foot solid oak door open far enough to slip into the church.

Inside it was quiet. One small security light shone in the sacristy behind the altar, and a couple of small spotlights cast shadows onto the center pillars of the huge, century-old church. He couldn't see a soul.

He almost laughed at the poor choice of words. There should be plenty of souls inside this building. Heavenly souls.

Then he heard whispering. He headed toward the back of the church. Out of childhood habit, he looked up at the crucifix, dipped his finger in the holy water and made the sign of the cross before proceeding down the aisle to the sacristy.

The sacristy door was open. Inside the illuminated room, altar gowns hung on the back wall, and a small oak desk that had seen better days was crowded into a corner. An ancient black telephone took up one whole corner of the old oak desk, and a burning cigarette lay in an ashtray. Since there was no one in the room, he moved back to the center aisle. It was then the little red light over the door of the confessional caught his eye.

So, his fare had been in a hurry to make confession. Must have friends in high places if priests kept their doors open for him to confess after hours.

What was he thinking, following the guy in here?

Treading lightly, an act that seemed to make his shoes squeak, he moved toward the church's front door. The whispering from the confessional interspersed with bouts of weighty silence made him aware of the solitude and peace he felt here. Scoffing at himself, he attributed his gullible feelings to his childhood upbringing. He'd learned the hard way that life can turn sour and no amount of belief can help you.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he dipped his head, closed his eyes for a long overdue silent prayer, then wrenched open the heavy door and stepped outside into the night

The church door shut behind him with a discernible click and he started down the stairs to the street. Before he got far, he sensed he wasn't alone. He stopped in his tracks. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He spun around to see who was behind him.

Jess stepped out from behind one of the church's columns and simply stared at him.

His heart jumped and he took a couple of shallow breaths.

"What are you doing here, Britt?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Too bad, really, because he liked the parts the leather outfit didn't cover. For that matter, he also liked the parts the leather *did* cover. The knee-high boots with six inch spike heels looked impossible to walk in, yet as she walked toward him, she moved like a cat.

"Does a man need an excuse to be at a church?"

"Maybe. Why were you in there?"

He shrugged. "That's between me and God." He wasn't about to tell her he'd been spying on a cab fare. She'd want to know why, and he wasn't about to tell her it was because his instincts had started buzzing. Since the guy was just making confession, his instincts were obviously rusty. Not something you confess to a potential boss.

"I see." She stopped and stared up at the opulent structure and sighed. "This is one of the most beautiful churches in the city. I used to come here when I was young."

"Really? Why do I think I hear 'not any more' in that statement?"

"Because you do." If he'd ever heard wistful, this was it. So why didn't she just go back to the church if she wanted to? Not his business. And he certainly didn't have the right to preach to anyone. He'd practically turned agnostic since becoming a killer. Somehow he felt the church would prefer it that way.

"I guess you and I are in the same boat. I haven't exactly been a model Catholic myself."

She looked at the church again. Then she shook her head slowly, turning to him and giving him an almost pleading look. "Maybe you should go back to the church."

He couldn't believe she'd just said what he'd been thinking about her. He mumbled but didn't really say anything—his trademark when uncomfortable. He couldn't forgive himself for what he'd done to his partner. Going to church and asking for forgiveness might give him absolution according to church doctrine, but it would never be enough for him. He'd killed not only a partner, but a friend.

There was no going back.

He touched one finger to his forehead in a semi-salute. "I'd better get back to work. Be seein' ya."

"Wait."

He stopped. All he wanted was to get as far away from his thoughts, this church and her, as quickly possible.

"You've got the job if you want it."

He heaved a sigh. "I'd feel better if I knew what the job consisted of. I know I shouldn't be telling you this, since you're a prospective boss and all, but the problem is, I have anger issues. Maybe you haven't heard?"

"My team members often have anger issues. Being a Special Ops member sometimes helps them vent those feelings. Get them out of their system."

"And just how do they do that?"

She put a finger to her lips and whispered, "I'd tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

"Yeah, real funny. That's the oldest one in the book."

"I'm not joking, though."

He frowned and leaned back. Somehow he had the feeling she really was serious. Whatever this Special Ops team did, he was beginning to think he'd be better off as a taxi driver.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Please don't say no yet." Even though she said it nicely, her eyes sparkled dangerously. Maybe she had some anger issues herself.

"Okay, look, I really don't think I'm interested, but if you want me to take a few days and make up my mind, I will. *But* I'm not committing myself to you or your team. If you don't like my parameters, just say so and I'll walk away."

"You'll have to train first, anyway. You can start at ten tomorrow night at Saint Michael's Gym. The training will be every night at the same time."

"Just out of curiosity, and without risking sudden death, can you tell me what the salary is?" He rubbed two fingers against his temple. He still had his ex-partner's widow and kid to help out—*anonymously*, of course. Lately, it seemed as if he did too many things *anonymously*. If he kept it up, no one would even know he existed.

"More than you ever got as a cop on the beat."

A horn beeped on the street and he looked around to see what was going on. "If this job is so dangerous, why..."

He turned back to face her. She was gone. Frowning, he walked along the edge of the steps and looked down the sidewalk both ways. No one walked through the muted pools of light beneath the streetlights.

He looked back at the church and realized that except for the muted night lights on the pillars inside, the church was now dark. Where had the guy from his cab gone? Had he and the priest left by a back door?

And, why did Britt suddenly feel like crossing himself again? Maybe even saying a quick Hail Mary. Suddenly the night seemed darker. For the first time since he was a kid, he felt as if there were ominous shadows lurking at the edges of the darkness—watching him.

Chapter Three

Jess strode into the gym, aware of everyone's scrutiny. She stopped in the center of the room and looked the recruits over. No sign of John Brittain. Too bad.

"Has everyone filled out their application forms?" she said, circling the haphazard group, trying to judge how far into the program each one would make it. The tall man, who looked like a Grizzly bear, probably weighed 300 pounds. She called him Griz. His wife and child had been killed by a neighborhood psycho, and he'd been on the path to becoming a vigilante when Jess found him. He had to get out his frustrations, and she had the perfect venue for him to do it. But could he take it when he found out what he'd be fighting? Probably, though she'd seen the strongest of men crumble under the strain of fighting vampires.

Terry Grant, the only woman in the bunch, was slight, yet she was rough around the edges and had a black belt in a couple types of martial arts. Jess had seen the woman in action. She was impressive. Terry lost her husband to a vampire and, unlike most of the others, knew exactly why she was here. She wasn't pretending to be hardassed; she'd make the cut.

Tat Brophy, the con slated for death row, hosted tattoos everywhere, even on his face. She still might cut him from the team. Sometimes they had to scrape the bottom of the barrel, and sometimes it paid off—sometimes it didn't. She still wasn't sure about this guy. When she eyed him, he sneered at her. Probably thought this was his road to freedom.

"What's the gig here, babe?" Tat stepped forward. Or rather hitched himself forward in an attempt to look cool with that gang-style gait he'd probably grown up using.

"Mr. Brophy, you know information will be given to you upon acceptance of your abilities. I have to be sure you're physically fit. If and when you get the job, you'll be told what it is."

Jess looked at her chart. Tat Brophy had murdered his parents and the next door neighbors because the power had gone out and he couldn't finish his video game. Jesus! Maybe he should be working for the other side. Even though the warden had to release him from prison after his sentence had been served, Tat remained under strict security in a special kind of halfway house for violent offenders who were secretly used for special task forces. He wasn't allowed out on his own—would never be. Officers picked him up for training with Jess's team and brought him back to his room when they were done.

They needed killers though, and Tat would have no qualms about what they had to do. Bottom line, he'd be on a tight leash. The ethics of using someone like him bothered Jess. But seeing the good recruits die for the cause wasn't any easier.

"Tat, friends call me Tat."

"That's nice, Mr. Brophy, you'll address me as Ma'am from now on or Lieutenant Vandermire."

"That'll be the freakin' day," Tat said under his breath.

"That day had better be today, Brophy, or you'll have an appointment with the gas chamber tomorrow." Jess approached him, looked him in the eye and watched him cower like the weasel he was.

When she turned away from him her teeth were still aching from the desire to sink them into the asshole's worthless neck.

It was then she spotted Britt standing inside the door with his arms folded across his chest. He'd cleaned himself up. Got a haircut. Right now, he didn't look like he belonged here with this group of misfits.

"Britt. Glad you could make it. Don't be late again." She turned back to the group. "I want everyone to drop and give me fifty."

"Fifty what?" Griz said.

"Push-ups, Mr. Moran. Are you up to it?"

"Lady, I can handle anything you want me to." He dropped and started doing one handed push ups.

Surprised at the agility for a man his size, she watched him. "Showing off will get you killed in this job, Moran. I suggest you think about that long and hard in the future."

Terry Grant was doing her push ups without breaking a sweat. No surprise. Jess continued around the room, monitoring the status of each member.

"Didn't expect this, Brittain?" She watched a bead of sweat trickle down the side of John's face as he did his tenth push up. No doubt he'd spent most of his time drinking and driving his taxi since he got kicked off the force. He was out of shape.

He ignored her and kept counting. She watched him for a moment, then became aware of the biceps rippling under his cotton shirt indicating strength she hadn't expected. He had been working out. Maybe he hadn't spent *all* of his time bending his elbow for exercise.

By the time midnight struck she'd given them a good workout. But this was just kindergarten stuff. They had a long road ahead of them yet.

"Okay, that's it for tonight. See you all tomorrow night. Same time, same place." She turned and walked away. She could feel Britt's gaze following her. He wanted to talk to her. She'd find him later tonight.

* * * *

It was three in the morning when Jess spotted Britt's Taxi stopped at a red light. Like her, he always worked the nightshift. Crossing the street, she opened the cab's passenger side door and jumped in.

"Morning." Apparently not in the least surprised to see her, he still said, "Surprised to see you're still up at this time of day."

"I always work the nightshift. I know what *my* reasons are for doing that. What are yours?"

The corded muscles in his neck bulged and he gripped the steering wheel tighter. He looked straight ahead. Didn't even glance at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Lady, you've got some gall coming here and expecting me to spew out information at the drop of a hat. You want me to do a job without any information. You get me into that gymnasium and make me do a workout then walk away without a backward glance. What the hell's up with you anyway?"

"Calm down, Britt. That's why I'm here. I promised you information, and I'm here to give you some of it."

"Just some?"

"For now."

He turned his head and stared at her. Unreadable eyes searched hers. "Jesus, lady, you're a hardass. What made you this tough?"

"Now that would take quite some telling, but I don't share those kinds of stories with mere acquaintances. If and when we become friends, I'll rethink that question and *maybe* I'll answer it."

He pulled over to the curb and stopped the car, opened his door and got out. She followed him, watching him pace up and down the sidewalk. Sounds of the city at night were muted and eerie. Unpleasant odors wafted through the air from bars and takeouts. Rats rustled in Dumpsters not far from where they stood. She could hear them and smell them. Foul little creatures.

"This is a bad part of town to be taking a stroll at this time of night, Brittain. Do you make a habit of it?"

"Only when I've got a bug up my ass," he said turning quickly and scowling at her.

"Must be painful."

"What the hell are you people up to? Why the secrecy?"

She touched her lips with her forefinger. "Shhhh." Had she heard rustling of the unearthly sort? Her senses grew more vigilant, and she backed up slowly toward an alleyway not far from them.

She gritted her teeth when Britt dogged her steps. Before she reached the mouth of the alley, she held one hand in the air to halt him. Someone was there, all right. She could sense the evil, as if a dank odor had spilled down the street toward her.

There was fear in that smell. Whoever hid in the shadows was afraid of her. Good.

"Help you?" she asked softly, looking into the shadows with night vision as clear as a wolf's. The creature stood there, drooling.

"Nah. I ain't here to cause you any trouble, Jinx."

"Why are you here then? Hoping to get some intel for your boss? Who is your boss, by the way?"

Britt didn't pay attention to her warning to stay back. He'd followed her to the alley. No doubt to play out some macho scenario. She hoped he didn't get in the way. And damn, it was too soon for him to know the whole truth.

"Is this guy bothering you, Jess?" Britt said, pushing his shoulders back. His voice became louder and more authoritative.

"No, Britt. Things are just fine here, aren't they Bergeron?"

Britt stood in awe of Jess's ability to find this man. How'd she even know he was there in the dark alley? Britt had been a cop for years and prided himself on his instincts. Yet he hadn't sensed the guy. Not to mention the unyielding tone in her voice which made him realize she was a force to be reckoned with. Her every movement was deliberate, yet silky and smooth. And, if Bergeron's reaction to her was any indication, probably just as deadly. Maybe a little too mesmerized by the way she moved, and by the shape of her finely formed glutes, he turned his attention to the person she called Bergeron.

Her hypnotic voice washed over the little weasel, and Britt didn't attempt to interfere. He could make out the outline of the man in the shadows, a small, thin frame. Really weird eyes reflected strangely in the moonlight.

"This is your lucky day, Bergeron, because I'm going to let you go this time." Her gaze switched back to Britt for a second before she focused on Bergeron again and said, "The next time I catch you following me, you're going to regret it. Or maybe there won't be a next time. Maybe I'll find you instead."

Britt grimaced as the smell of urine filled the air and the guy in the alley whimpered and slunk deeper into the shadows until Britt couldn't see him. He wasn't sure if he'd ducked into a doorway or had just disappeared.

Jess continued watching the darkness, her form straight and impressive in her leather outfit.

Suddenly, as if the memory burst free inside his head, he remembered that night outside the bar. It'd been *her* pressed up against him. Why hadn't he remembered that until now? His pulse kicked up about ten notches when he thought about how her body had felt pressed against his. He wanted to grab her and shake her, to demand she tell him why the hell she'd done that. Instead he stuck his hands into his pockets and forced a calm tone into his voice as he said, "He's gone."

"He isn't gone. He's in the corner at the back of the alley. He's hoping we don't see him, but I still do, and I'm not going to tell him to get lost one more time."

Suddenly Britt heard the guy practically wailing as he scrambled over the alley's back wall.

"Hell, that's some vision you have. I can't see a damned thing but pitch black down there."

"I have a condition that gives me very good night vision."

"Never heard of any such condition."

"Lucky you." She walked back to the taxi and waited for him to open her door. He did. Confused by the fact that she wanted him to open her car door when she wouldn't let him pull out her chair in the bar, he rubbed the back of his neck. Then, halfway around the car to his own door, he smiled. Of course! She had no intention of making anything easy for him. She'd already started his training. He had the

feeling this was just the beginning.

"How'd you know that guy was there?"

"It's a matter of training. We all have the ability to use our senses more than we do."

"Right." Cynicism dripped from that tiny, one syllable word. "Snatch the pebble from my hand, grasshopper. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"No. I'm not talking about transcending to another level of consciousness. No gurus or martial arts specialists necessary. Everyone has more sensory ability than they know. Most of it happens subconsciously. If you become aware of those abilities you can enhance them."

"Where do you want to talk?" Britt asked. It was time to change the subject and he didn't care how obvious it was. He didn't believe in mumbo jumbo. Life was what it was. Good guys versus bad guys. You used your brain and your brawn to get you through. Not senses. Not intuition. Shit! Next thing he knew, she'd want him to use feng shui in his taxi to make his karma more—more what? He didn't even know what karma was supposed to do.

"Real subtle, Brittain. I can tell you were a good ole boy cop. Nothing but the mean streets and the cops who patrolled them, right? On second thought, it might be too soon for you to use your subconscious abilities. Maybe you'll have to work on conscious ones first. Like manners, for instance."

"Since when do cops have manners?" Britt gave her the "I knew you were really a woman instead of a cop" look. You *do* want chairs held out for you.

"Go to hell."

"You're right. I shouldn't have said that. It was out of line. Look, why don't we grab a cup of java somewhere? Then we can figure out how much I need to know versus how much you're willing to share and hope there's a compromise in there somewhere." He stomped on the gas pedal, lurching the taxi into traffic. "Sure, pick a quiet spot. I prefer to work without too many people recognizing me."

Britt slowed the taxi for a pedestrian crossing the street. "If that's the case, then I'd ditch that leather getup you're wearing. Every hot-blooded male within a city block will remember seeing you in that." He regretted his words immediately, but only because it let her know he'd been looking. Their eyes met for a second before he looked at the road again. He frowned.

"Every hot-blooded male, huh?"

His innards twisted as the velvet seduction of her voice caressed him again, just like it had that day in Drake's office. That irritated the hell out of him. And it reminded him that there was no sense deluding himself. Even if he wanted to work with this woman, it would be for the wrong reasons. He'd never be a cop again. So why bother to go through the motions?

"Know what? I'm beginning to realize this whole scenario is too mired in intrigue. Nothing can be so hush-hush that you need a Special Forces unit in the city of New York. We have thousands of undercover officers on the streets. Why the hell can't they handle it?"

She hissed out a long breath and lowered her head, looking at her hands crossed in her lap. "They just can't, okay?"

"Not okay. I've changed my mind. I'm not getting involved in this situation until I know the score. I don't care what your rules are."

"I see."

"I hope you do."

"Stop the car, please," she said.

He tightened his hands on the steering wheel. "Fine."

With the precision of a race car driver, he cut through traffic and pulled into an empty space beside the curb. He wanted to keep her here. Spend more time with her, but he couldn't.

She silently sat there for a minute. "Nice meeting you," she finally said, then got out and disappeared down an alley. Most women he knew would avoid dark alleys in this neighborhood. She didn't seem to mind them at all. His first instinct was to go after her. Protect her. But then, she must be a helluva lot stronger than she looked because without lifting a finger she'd made that guy in the alley so scared he pissed himself. And she had that night vision thing going on.

Cursing, he pulled back into traffic and turned the cab's light back on. His shift didn't end until six and some of the bars would be closing soon. He should be able to make up for the lost time he'd spent with her.

* * * *

At five-thirty, just like every other morning, Britt stopped at a diner on the way home and bought breakfast. With fatigue dragging at his limbs, he grasped the handrail and climbed the four stories to his apartment. He laid his breakfast out on the tabletop of the old-fashioned table, and sat in the ripped chair that had been original to the decades old set.

He bit into his bagel and thought about his reaction to Jess. He regretted treating her the way he had this morning. He'd blown any chance for a good paying job, but he had his reasons. Didn't he? Sure, he could use the money, but selling himself to that woman without knowing the score just wasn't going to happen. He'd killed his partner by not stopping to think about what he was doing. He'd vowed then that he'd never again do anything without careful consideration.

Tipping his head back and letting out a long sigh, he looked around his meager apartment. Who knew he'd end up in a cheap tenement with fewer square feet than the downstairs bathroom at his old place? His ex got that house—and everything else.

This apartment consisted of an open kitchen, with a tiny balcony off the dining area. A luxury in this part of town. His bedroom was really just an alcove off the main room with only enough room for his bed and not much else. Since he didn't own much furniture anymore, it didn't really matter.

After he and his wife split up, he'd lived in a middle-class apartment for a time and had nice furniture. But he'd sold most of it off and anonymously donated the money to his dead partner's wife. She had a kid. His money at least helped her to get by.

A loud knock on his door made him drop his bagel. He rarely had visitors.

"Yo," he said, opening the door. His neighbors all knew he was a cop killer, and the majority of them liked him all the more for it. People in this building had grown up in the tenements and viewed the police as enemies.

"Britt, hola." Maria, his sixty-year-old next door neighbor stepped inside his place, looking over her shoulder.

"Hola, Maria. Aren't you supposed to be at work?" Maria worked at a bakery and had to be there early. Quite often he'd give her a drive in the morning when he'd been on his way home and seen her walking down the street.

"I didn't go to work this morning, Britt," she said, kneading her worn sweater with her work-roughened hands.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"Yes..." Her voice lowered as if someone might overhear them. "I found someone downstairs this morning. In the laundry room."

"Is someone sleeping down there again? Don't worry, I'll have a talk with them and make sure the lock is working on the door so vagrants can't get in."

She put out a hand and touched his arm. "No. He's not sleeping down there. He's ... dead. He looks awful."

Yeah, if he's dead, he probably does look awful, Britt thought. Damn. "We'll have to call the police, Maria."

"No police, Britt. They'll come snooping around here. Blame one of us for killing that poor man down there. Nobody in this building killed him, I'm positive."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Dios mio, you'll believe me when you see him. That man didn't die at the hands of any of our friends or neighbors. Some sick animal must've killed him." She crossed herself and looked heavenward.

"Let's go downstairs and take a look." Britt pulled on his jacket. It was cold in the basement. The landlord didn't believe in wasting heat on something like a laundry room.

A crowd had already gathered around the door by the time he got there. "Stand back, everyone. Don't go inside the laundry room and don't touch anything." He didn't want any of his neighbors to inadvertently incriminate themselves.

"It's just freakin' sick, man!" Julio, a gang-banger who lived on the second floor, turned away, his face almost green. His Adam's apple bobbed ominously.

Britt pushed through the crowd and stood in the doorway. Old washers and dryers lined both sides of the room. On the folding table in the center lay a very dead man with a gaping neck wound and what looked like minimal blood loss.

But it was the man's face that shocked him. Was it really the man Jess had talked to in the alley? He had

to get closer to tell for sure.

"Don't go in there Britt," Maria said as he took a step into the room. "You don't need the cops after you. You know they're going to blame one of us for this."

"Don't worry, Maria. I know how to look without contaminating the crime scene." He moved further inside. In all likelihood the boys in blue would take this opportunity to harass him because he'd killed Randy. Killing his partner had been an accident, something that should never have happened. That didn't alter the facts though. It *had* happened. But looking at the victim's mutilated body he knew even the cops couldn't believe him capable of doing this kind of damage to a person.

As he'd suspected, it was the man from the alley. What had Jess called him? Bergeron?

Bergeron lay sprawled on the table in a strangely angled way. Rigor had started to set in, so he must have died not long after he'd left the alley. His skin held the beginning of a bluish tinge. His throat had been slit, and his eyes were open and reflection free. No wonder he had looked so strange last night. He was albino. His eyes were almost silver.

"What happened to him?" Mrs. Brazowski asked.

"Someone introduced his esophagus to the light of day." He knew bitterness had crept into his words, but this whole scenario reminded him too much of the life he'd left behind.

"Call the cops," he said, and carefully picked his way out of the room. "Will someone stay here and keep people out?"

"I will, but it's not likely anyone'll be anxious to get inside. That's one strange looking dude, man," said Julio.

"He's albino. Being dead just make's him look even paler."

"He looks like a frickin' ghoul."

What were the last words he'd heard Jess say to him? "Maybe I'll find you." Had to be coincidence. With rigor already setting in, there hadn't been enough time for her to find him, kill him, and bring him here. Had there?

Back in his apartment, he flopped onto a kitchen chair and stared blankly at his dried out bagel with congealed cream cheese. He took a sip of coffee. It was tepid. He pushed his breakfast away and went to the patio door. He stepped onto his tiny balcony overlooking the crummy street below. This was his only place for solace, as pitiful as it was.

Bergeron hadn't been killed in the basement. There wasn't enough blood. And, after last night, it was way too coincidental that he showed up dead in Britt's apartment building. So why had he been put there?

Britt heard the sirens and stepped back inside. He didn't want to come face to face with any of the boys from his precinct. Ten minutes later, when the knocking started on his door, he knew it was his ex-buddies in blue.

"Yeah?" he said pulling the door open and crossing his arms over his chest.

His mouth went dry when he saw Devon Bishop. They'd been partners once. Devon was a bigot, a cruel man, and he liked to push people around.

"What do you want, Devon?"

"Britt, you've got a db in the basement and you ask me what I want? I want to know what happened to him."

"How the hell should I know?"

Devon pushed through the door and into Britt's apartment. Britt wanted to stop him, to tell him to get the hell out of his place. But if he refused to let him in, Devon would probably find a reason to put him in jail.

Strange how things work out. He would have gladly gone to jail for murdering his partner, but he hadn't. No way was he going to jail for something he *didn't* do.

"Did you see the guy down there?"

"Yeah, I saw him." The muscles tightened in his neck. Devon hadn't changed a whole lot. Thicker around the middle maybe. A meaner look in the eyes. "Word got out this morning and I went down for a look."

"What do you think happened?"

Britt didn't expect that. "I think somebody slit his throat."

"Not much blood down there."

"No. He was probably moved."

"If that's the case, there was probably a very good reason they wanted that body in this particular building."

"Such as?"

"You tell me. As far as I know, you're the only killer who lives in this building." He tried to laugh but just ended up coughing. His two packs a day habit was getting the best of him. "How long were you a cop, Brittain? Ten years?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"In all your years as a cop, how often did things happen by mere coincidence?"

Britt glared at Devon. "How the hell should I know?"

"Oh, I think you know as well as I do. Never! Things always happen for a reason, because someone decided to prove something, or some dumb schmuck thought he'd be able to outsmart the cops. But never in all my years did a dead body get placed somewhere coincidentally."

"If you're trying to say I killed him, you're wrong. Why would I move him to my own building?"

"Maybe because you know police procedure. Maybe that's exactly what you had in mind. Let the cops think you wouldn't have done that because it's too obvious. After all, you got away with it the last time. Maybe you want to see if you can get away with it again. Is that it? Need to get more jollies?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Devon, what happened to Randy Starr was an accident. I didn't mean for it to happen." Britt took a quick breath and let it out slowly. He'd said all he was going to say on the subject. If he tried to argue his innocence, Devon really would think he had something to do with the death of that poor guy in the basement. Hell, he'd suspect someone if they spent too much time protesting.

"You say you didn't mean to. Thing is, you're the only killer in this building. We've checked everyone's records. Even the gang-bangers who live here look tough, but they've never really been into anything more serious than petty larceny."

Devon's dispatcher's voice came over his radio. He was told to meet the coroner downstairs.

"This isn't over, Brittain. I'll be back. I know you're involved in this somehow. I won't stop until I find out how."

"You'll be wasting valuable time. Meanwhile, whoever ripped up that man is getting away."

"I don't know if I'd call that freak downstairs a man. Did you look at him? He's all white, like some kind of freakin' albino. His teeth are filed to a point and he's got weird tattoos. If you ask me, maybe it's not so bad that someone's taken that defect off the streets." He stalked out and slammed the door closed behind him.

Britt slumped into a chair. He felt as if he'd been running a marathon. His heart pounded and he could feel a fine sheen of sweat on his brow.

For a moment he was tempted to contact Jess to see if she knew anything about this, but decided against it.

Whatever was going on, he'd be better off to stay out of it.

* * * *

Britt tried to remind himself of that fact when Jess showed up at his place at eight o'clock that night.

"I'm here on a case," she began. At least she didn't just push her way in like Bishop had.

"I thought Devon Bishop was the detective on this case."

"It's been passed to me."

"Why?"

"I could tell you if you were part of my team, but as it is..." She shrugged.

Bishop would be more than a little pissed that his case had been handed off. Britt frowned at her. "So why are you here at my place?"

She looked down the hallway. "Going to invite me in, or shall we raise our voices so all your neighbors

can hear?"

Britt leaned out the door and noticed at least two other doors partially ajar down the hallway. His neighbors had a tendency to be nosy when cops were in the building.

He backed up and allowed her access. "C'mon in, but you're wasting your time. I have nothing to do with this."

"I'm concerned, Britt. Concerned enough to be here right now. The fact that Bergeron was killed and brought here to be found is worrisome. Somehow, you've been connected to me already. I'm not sure how that happened, but you may *have* to accept my offer now. If I'm right, your life is already in danger."

He looked at her long and hard. Tried to look past those lips that he longed to taste. "Does that mean you're going to tell me what this job of yours is all about?"

She heaved an exasperated sigh and walked away from him. He liked the way she looked in her silk skirt and kitten soft sweater that clung to her curves. Her long hair hung softly down her back and he longed to touch it. Probably not a good move. He could imagine her flipping him over the couch if he tried something like that.

"For now, stay alert. There are dangers in the city that you know little about. You'll need to protect yourself."

"Honey, I'm an ex-cop. I've seen just about everything bad that can happen. And don't worry. I'm quite capable of looking after myself."

"Not this time. This is way beyond your realm of expertise. Besides, this job requires specialized knowledge and equipment."

"Such as?" He stared at her. He'd seen just about every sick thing possible in the line of duty. What was left?

She turned. For a moment he felt as if her eyes had changed, gone suddenly lifeless. Instantly, he was aware of something deep and dark hidden behind her façade. Something in the depths of her eyes. It didn't make sense, but right now he felt as if he could be sucked into the dark abyss beyond the blackness of her pupils, if he looked into them long enough.

He tore his gaze from hers. Felt as if he'd physically extracted himself from a force much stronger than him. As suddenly as the sensation of being trapped in darkness forever began, it was over. Looking at her now, all he could see were the echoes of a pain so horrible he might not want to contemplate its origin.

"Wear a cross," she said.

Even though her expression shook him to the bone, he was able to get out a sarcastic laugh. "You've got to be kidding."

"No. I'm *deadly* serious." Head up, jaw tilted forward, she frowned at him.

He held his hands up in the air and tried to stifle a grin. He could see anger building in her. The last thing he wanted was to piss her off any more than he had. By her furious expression, he decided she must have

one hell of a temper. But unlike the rest of the force, she at least treated him like a human being.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. It's hard for me to be semi-involved," he said, gazing at her seriously. Did she realize he'd just told her something he didn't normally divulge to anyone? "I was once a cop, remember? My instinct is to try to figure things out. But since I'm a suspect, that's probably not a very wise idea."

"Good call."

He turned from her. His gut twinged. "What were you doing at the church the other night?"

As he waited for her answer, he sat on the couch and spread his arms across the back. He watched the tip of her tongue as it moistened her lips. The way her eyes looked him over.

"I might ask you the same question," she said.

"Easy. I left a fare there. The guy seemed disturbed, upset, so I thought I'd make sure he was okay."

She put her hands on her hips and tipped her head at him. "Really."

"Yeah. Really. The guy was acting strangely. There weren't many lights on in the church and I wondered what he planned to do there. I told you I have an innate curiosity that, once upon a time, made me a good cop."

"So, what did you find out about him?"

"Nada. The guy was in the confessional when I got inside. I figured I'd leave him to it." He didn't tell her that the lights went out in the church and the guy didn't come out.

She looked at her watch. "I'm late for an appointment."

Entranced by her lithe form and smooth movements, he watched her walk toward the door. "I thought you came to talk to me? Since we haven't had much of a conversation, I assume you'll be back?"

"Would that be so bad?"

"Depends on why you come. If it's about that poor sap downstairs, can't say I'll be thrilled. How did you know his name, by the way?"

"Britt, please don't patronize me. You know quite well we met Bergeron in an alley the other night. It was dark, but you saw enough of him to recognize him again."

Britt met her eyes and tried to see the truth behind them. "Maybe."

"It's not a coincidence Bergeron was left here by some human tomcat leaving his prey at your doorstep to show how good he is at his job."

"Strange way to put it." He stood and crossed to the door. "Why would someone do that?"

"To scare you."

"It didn't work."

"Maybe it should have."

He let his gaze slip over her smooth skin, willing himself not to reach out and touch her. They were within arm's length and he had to force himself to remain still.

"You don't want that?" she said.

"Don't want what?" Damn, he wanted whatever she was offering.

"You don't want some killer leaving you presents, right?"

"Hell, you know I don't."

"Then think about my offer. Things are likely to escalate if you don't.

She'd killed the mood. He no longer wanted to ravish her. "If I were a suspicious man, I might think you'd done it in order to recruit me."

"That would be a logical line of thinking, if I weren't a cop." She smiled at him for the first time. He felt that strange feeling zap through his brain, but once again was able to clear it away.

"Good night." She opened the door and stepped into the hallway, then looked back at him. "And Britt, humor me, will you? Wear a cross."

"I don't own one," he grunted, not wanting to admit he'd be even remotely desperate enough to consider it. If he renounced his faith, he had to renounce its symbols too.

"There's one in an envelope on your table. Consider it a present from a friend."

He looked back at the table to see she had left an envelope. How'd she do that without him seeing it?

It was no surprise when he turned back to the hallway and found her gone—again. He sighed and slammed the door shut. It seemed she was as good at sleight of hand and she was at disappearing.

Chapter Four

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Very funny, Jess."

"Regent, I swear this guy is the best bet for a vampire hunter I've ever seen. Of course, he doesn't believe in vampires yet, but he's strong. Stronger than he knows."

"Jess, honey, vampire hunters are dangerous. Especially to you. Even if you teach him yourself, there's no telling whether he'll turn on you or not. Man has a tendency to want to kill those things he's afraid of. You have to be sure he's the one person on your team you'd trust with your life. Because you'll eventually have to do just that, trust him to help you keep your humanity."

Jess flopped down onto the old sofa that had been in Regent's office for at least forty years. Dust

particles billowed out in a mushroom cloud around her. "I think you should hire a housekeeper again, Rej."

He laughed and gave his sister a wink. "I can't seem to keep them. They get spooked by visitors in the night, or by the work notes they find on my desk. Do you know how many times I've had to go to the Bishop and explain myself? It's a wonder I wasn't excommunicated years ago."

"Ah, you're too good for that Regent, dearest."

"You shouldn't call me dearest any longer, Jess. It dates you. That's something an older person would say. You're going to have to get hip. Use verbiage the younger people use today."

Jess patted the couch beside her without setting off another dust cloud. "Sit beside me, and for just a few minutes, let's be brother and sister, not vampire and protector. We haven't been ourselves for such a long time."

"You know why, Jess. I'm old. I'm afraid for you. We have to find someone who can take over for me. I don't have many good years left."

"Regent! Don't talk like that. I swear you're getting more morbid every day. Are you depressed? I can't blame you if you are, after spending your whole life keeping me in the light."

"That's been a joy and you know it. I've been blessed by God to keep you from being taken over by the darkness." His face clouded. "But you and I know the truth. The demons are always there, always waiting for you to let down your guard."

"Not that again. Sit down right now, I insist. Let's watch reruns of Buffy the Vampire Slayer on TV."

Regent sat beside her and took her hand in his. "I swear you watch these programs just to annoy me."

"Would I do that? I'll be good to you tonight and watch The Bells of Saint Mary's with you." It was an ancient movie they had on VHS tape and had nearly worn out.

Regent had taken off his collar. He wore simple black slacks and polo shirt, his usual attire. The skin on his arms was wrinkled and slack, his face a drooping resemblance to the young, vibrant brother she'd always known.

"If this man is who you think he is, we'll have to teach him as soon as we can."

"He's not quite ready yet. He needs a little time."

"He's still an outsider?" Regent ran a hand over his eyes. "He isn't on your team yet, is he?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure it'll happen any day now. How could he resist a cause like ours?"

"You've told him what the cause is?" He cast a hopeful look in her direction.

"Of course not," she said, regretting it when he slumped against the couch and sighed. He looked as if his world had just caved in. Why? They'd spent fifty years of fighting vampires together. Why would he be devastated by this?

"Turn the volume up so I can hear it," he said, and tuned her out. Their discussion was over; he'd be asleep within minutes. She sat beside him, holding his hand until well after midnight.

When she finally left him, she stepped through the window onto the sloping rooftop and stared up at the dark sky, enhanced by the light of the waning moon. A shadow caught her attention. Then she saw a person running away. She tipped her head and listened. Besides having fabulous night vision, she also had superfine hearing. Urgent footfalls on the dry blades of grass reverberated through the night. They were moving away from her at a steady pace. Not a vampire. Their ragged breathing gave away their humanity.

Someone had been outside the window, listening to what she and Regent had just said to each other. Hairs rose on the back of her neck. Maybe Regent had a good reason to think she needed a new protector. He was no longer physically capable of battling the enemy, and she risked his safety by just being here.

* * * *

Britt picked up the bubble envelope Jess Vandermire had left for him and tore it open. Inside lay what looked like a Clergical cloth. He'd once been Catholic and recognized some of the symbols embroidered on the raw silk.

A silver cross big enough to fit in his palm lay nestled inside the cloth. Holding it up in front of his chest, he looked at himself in the mirror. Imagine, Britt the lost lamb wearing a cross again. Would the sky fall if he put it on?

A noise outside brought him out of his thoughts. He shoved the cross back into the box and tossed it onto the table.

He went to the tiny balcony overlooking the street. Below, cars sped by and someone shouted obscenities down the street. Could've been kids having fun. It could've been someone getting mugged.

The sound he'd heard a minute ago had been closer though. Almost as if something had been right outside his window. Craning his neck and leaning carefully over the edge of the rickety railing, he looked at the roof two stories up. The escape ladders were all locked in place. Must be his imagination. He shrugged and stepped inside.

Protection, Jess had said. Without thinking, he scooped up the cross and lifted the chain over his head. Childhood horror movies and vampires came to mind. He laughed at his wild imagination.

Still, what would require a man to wear a cross for protection? The cop in him wanted to be more scientific about whatever was going on, but his religious upbringing made him believe in the power of the cross. Not in a physical sense, of course, but more in a spiritual way.

He wasn't exactly sure what Jess thought the cross would do for him, but his sense of unease lessened a bit when he put it on. Maybe that's what she'd had in mind all along. She did tell him to go back to the church the other night. Rubbing his fingers over the cross, he realized there was something engraved on the back—the initials 'JV' in old script. Jess Vandermire? Or maybe a relative? The cross looked too old to be hers. Either way it was valuable and probably cherished. Why would she give it to him?

He shook his head. The only way he could find out was to ask her, and she kept refusing to answer his questions. He heaved a sigh. He needed sleep. Tomorrow things would click and he'd be able to figure out what was going on. He'd always prided himself on his investigatory skills. Maybe it was time he put

those skills to use again. He'd been letting his instincts atrophy for too long.

But asking him to wear the cross hinted at things that were too bizarre for words. Surely she didn't really expect him, an ex-cop, to believe a simple cross could protect him from evil. He knew most things evil walked around on two legs and carried weapons. Even so, he paced around the apartment until well after 1 a.m. Finally, he crawled into bed, but couldn't sleep. Instead, every time he closed his eyes, he kept seeing images of Jess dressed in leather. Picking up his pillow and slamming it over his face didn't work either. For God's sake, he was acting like a teenager.

After taking three deep, cleansing breaths, he closed his eyes and began counting sheep.

Or was it wolves?

Wolves in lamb's clothing?

Damn it. He punched his pillow and flopped onto his side. What was the secret group the police were running? Who were they targeting? And why had that strange looking boy been killed and left in his apartment building?

There were too many unanswered questions for an ex-cop who couldn't leave an unsolved crime alone.

At least thinking about crime got his mind off the leader of the Special Ops team. Damn! Now he was thinking about Jess again. He groaned and got out of bed to get a glass of water. The bedside clock winked three o'clock.

He didn't bother to turn on the lights.

Just as he reached for a glass in the cupboard, he heard a floorboard creak behind him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and he stiffened. His rusty self-defense tactics sprang to the fore, and he swung around to tackle whoever was behind him.

Eyes glowed on the other side of the room and for a moment he almost screamed. That would be most unseemly for a big, tough guy like him, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Who are you? How'd you get in here?" He reached out and grabbed the first thing he could find on the countertop. An empty beer bottle.

The eyes blinked.

"If you don't tell me this minute, I'm going to bash your brains in." Stupid comment. Especially if the intruder had a nine millimeter pointed at his heart.

"Meow."

He reached for the light switch and turned on the kitchen light. A cat? Britt couldn't believe it was a damned cat. Blinking in the wash of sudden light, a very thin animal with a scraggy tail sat in the middle of his kitchen, as if it belonged here.

But where had it come from? He pushed back the urge to touch the cross still hanging around his neck. Even with the patio door open, there was no way a cat could get inside. Unless the animal belonged to the circus.

He opened his apartment door and tried to shoo the thing out into the hall with his foot. The cat yowled a quick complaint, then moved out of Britt's way and scooted under the kitchen table. He didn't want to leave.

Britt strode to the patio and searched above and below for a logical solution to a cat being able to stroll into his apartment. There was none.

Chapter Five

Jess moved around the gymnasium with a timer in her hand. She heard footsteps. Without looking up, she knew Britt was here. He'd already broken a cardinal rule. He was late, but then she hadn't expected him to come at all. She thought she'd seen the last of him after their last meeting.

Without being obvious, she worked her way around the room, and stopped in front of him. He was on the floor, doing sit-ups with the rest of them.

"John, I'm glad you decided to give us another try. I didn't think you'd come."

"Yeah, I know. And after the other night you have every right to tell me to get lost." He put his hands on the back of his neck and started doing sit-ups again. "I'd like continue with the training for a while, until I decide for sure."

She crouched down next to him so no one else would hear what she said. "That's fine with me—this time. Just be aware this is your last chance. Normally, people don't get a second chance around here."

Tonight he looked disheveled, as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to be here and made the decision at the last minute. He needed a shave. A contributing factor toward his extra tough appearance tonight. God help her, she wanted to run her hand down his face and then let her fingers find his carotid artery and feel the life pulsing through him.

"Understood, Ma'am. Can't promise I won't be a pain in the ass though. It's part of my rough-edged charm."

"Do I look like I was born yesterday, Brittain?" She forced her mouth into a grim line or she might smile again. Normally, people had a healthy respect for her and she didn't need to spike up her tough exterior. In fact, she usually had to assume a false serenity so people wouldn't be terrified by what she was. But with Britt, when she ratcheted up her aura of danger and laid it bare for him to see, he appeared to be unaffected by the truth that lay beneath the surface.

"How many other people have committed to this job without knowing the score?"

"Everyone but you." She got up and turned quickly toward a group working on self-defense. "Griz, use your senses! Feel the presence of someone sneaking up on you. Don't just use your ears; you won't last long that way."

"How'd you know he wasn't doing what he was told? You weren't even facing him."

"Easy." She smiled, a rarity for her. What was it about Britt that made her feel like smiling? That alone should tell her to cut him from the team. "I used my senses."

"Ah." He tipped his head in a half-nod to let her know he didn't believe a word of it.

"I see my reluctant pupil needs a lesson in sensory ability."

His eyes darkened in a sensual look that sent a rush across her cold flesh, making it warmer than she ever thought possible. She didn't need to imagine what he was thinking about, because the way he was looking at her left little to the imagination. No senses required!

They were working in an old warehouse on the docks. It was large enough to house several situation rooms at the back of the building.

"Okay Britt, follow me."

He hesitated when he realized they were leaving the main group. At least he still didn't trust her and that *was* worth smiling about.

"Over here." She opened a door and he followed. "For all intents and purposes this room is exactly like an alley in the worst part of the city. No telling what you might find down there, especially after I turn out the lights. Your job is to walk down this long, dark tunnel and try to forget about your five senses. Rely on your gut. Your intuition."

"Dark alley. Beautiful girl. Piece of cake," he said.

"Think so, hot shot?"

He turned to wink at her, but she was gone. "Damn it, woman. How do you do that?"

"I use my senses." Her whisper echoed through the room. He couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Then the lights went out and he took a couple of steps forward. Aware someone was in front of him, he stopped and waited. What was the goal of this exercise? To catch whomever it was, or to prove he could sense them? Jess hadn't given him enough information. He'd have to play it the way he thought it should go.

The other person didn't move either. He slowly took a step closer and then closer, until he felt the person was close enough to touch.

"How long should we stand here sensing each other?" he finally said. He knew it was Jess.

"I'm impressed, Brittain." She used a remote to click the lights back on. "You're the first person to ever sense me first time out. Do you have a bit of psychic in you?"

"I'm an ex-cop, not a psychic. I have a gut and it told me you were there. It's as simple as that."

"Uh huh. Your abilities are quite impressive, gut or not. No matter what method you're using, don't get overconfident. This is just the start. Sandbox stuff."

They walked back to the open area of the warehouse.

"Where'd all of those other people out there come from? I thought this was a one-lady show, but now

you have a trainer for each newbie.” It didn't escape him that Jess was his trainer. It paid to arrive late.

"It's necessary. Expedites things. We don't have time to screw around."

"How are things going on the Bergeron case?" he asked.

"You know I can't talk about an active investigation. Especially to one of the prime suspects."

"If that's the case, you shouldn't be training me on an elite police force team either."

"True, but you happen to be an exception. We don't usually get people with your kind of experience. We do recruit cops whenever we can, but mostly we make do with what we can get. The rest of the team are not the cream of the crop."

He frowned. "What you're saying is you need people who are expendable?"

"You're partially correct. But besides that, we also need people who've seen how mean the streets can get. Tough people who can hold their own when they learn the truth."

Had she experienced the mean streets? His gaze slipped down her frame. Skintight leather accentuated her body to perfection. He couldn't ignore how hot she looked in the outfit. It would be much easier for him to concentrate if she didn't dress that way. Maybe that was the plan, distract the enemy first. Then go for the jugular.

"You really won't tell me what's going on will you? Did you at least find out where that poor guy in my basement was killed?"

"Yes, we found the spot."

"Where was it?"

"For me to know and for you to earn when you become a member of the team."

He sighed and hunched his shoulders. "Jess, I admit I'm curious. Damned curious. But I don't like secrets, and I don't like the idea of accepting a job, without knowing the particulars."

"Use your gut, Britt. Just this one time, let your gut tell you what you should do. It's the only way you're going to be able to decide. Because until you say yes, I can't tell you anything more."

* * * *

Britt groaned and threw one arm across his face. What did a guy have to do to get some sleep around here? Besides the noise emanating from every window and door in his apartment, sunshine filtered through his shoddy window blind leaving white spots of light all over him. He had to buy a new blind and soon—and maybe some earplugs.

Lifting himself onto one elbow, he eyed the clock he'd thrown halfway across the room in the wee hours of the morning. It had gone off at the wrong time and he'd tossed it without thinking. By the looks of things, the clock had barely missed the lamp. It hadn't missed the wall. A nice dent now creased the sheetrock.

"Meow." CB jumped onto the end of the bed and dug his claws into Britt's feet.

"Damn it, you can't be hungry again, CB. I just fed you at seven." Britt sat up, ran a hand through his hair, and dropped his feet onto the floor. He'd named the cat CB. It didn't mean a darned thing, but he liked the sound of it.

The furry beast wouldn't leave. Britt tried to make it realize he wouldn't make a good pet owner, but CB didn't seem to care. He liked Britt anyway.

"C'mon let's see what we can find for you to eat," he said.

The last hour or so had been hell trying to sleep. Usually his neighbors were quiet enough, except for Mrs. Vincelli, who had just given birth to twin boys. But that didn't matter to Britt. He was used to hearing the rugrats cry.

The coffee machine bubbled and clicked, then began percolating. The earthy aroma wafted through the kitchen and Britt inhaled the scent while he dug out a can of cat food. CB purred patiently beside a casserole dish Britt had never used. It had probably been a wedding present. If so, what better use for it?

Maybe having a cat wasn't so bad after all. Against his better judgment, Britt liked having the mangy tiger-striped Tom around. So far, anyway. Heck, he didn't even have to have a litter box. CB came and went as he pleased via the fire escape now that Britt had opened the stairs to the roof. Quite an intelligent cat.

With coffee in hand, he crossed to the window and looked out. He could see unmarked cop cars everywhere. "Explains the noise," he said to CB, as if the cat cared.

By the type of vehicles he saw outside, he knew forensic officers and investigators were in the building. Did that mean Jess was here too? He took another drink of his steaming brew and breathed out a sigh of enjoyment. Once in a while, he could almost forget what a dismal mess his life had become.

A loud knock on the door reminded him he never got to feel that way for long.

Draining the last of his coffee, he set the mug on the kitchen table and went to greet the person who, no doubt, would be a police officer on a mission to crucify him.

"Yeah?"

Surprise. Not a cop but a courier. And dressed in a red and white uniform consisting of a pair of stupid looking Bermuda shorts. Reason enough for any real man to quit his job, in Britt's estimation.

He crossed his arms and gave the guy the 'waddaya want' scrutiny.

"Sign here," the courier said, trying to shove some computerized gadget at him.

"What for?" He dropped his arms to his sides. No way could this parcel be for him. He didn't have family any more, unless you counted one angry ex-wife. Angry because he had no money left, so she wasn't able to squeeze him for any more cash. The fact that she earned more money than him to start with didn't seem to bother her. And she'd already gotten half his pension. She called him at least once a year to make sure he was still broke. Hard to believe he'd once thought she was the woman of his dreams.

"I've got a parcel for you. What else?" The guy frowned at him and rolled his eyes.

"I don't care much for your attitude," Britt grabbed the device and scrawled his name across the glass screen. "Where's this parcel?" He still expected it to be a subpoena from his ex. She hadn't tried to take him to court yet this year.

"Have a nice day," the courier mumbled, and shoved a cereal box sized parcel at him. It was heavy. Really heavy, for such a small package.

First thing Britt noticed was it didn't have a return address. Didn't couriers insist on return addresses? Not to mention, the courier hadn't asked his name. The thought that it might be a mail-bomb crossed his mind for about two whole seconds. People might hate him, but nobody hated him enough to kill him. Not even Veronica, his ex.

He gave the parcel a shake. Nothing inside moved. Whatever the box was, it was solid. It was also of little importance to him at the moment. He set the package on the counter in the kitchen, refilled his cup, and went back to the news. There'd been nothing at all reported about Bergeron. Maybe this wasn't Park Avenue, but even in this part of the city, a transient's throat being slit should be newsworthy. So who'd killed the story? Who would have that kind of clout? He knew from personal experience getting the media to lay off a case was nearly impossible. Come to think of it, his ex-partner, Devon, only handled high priority cases these days. The important ones that affected politicians, or cases that had the possibility of making the police force look bad. High priority. So what about this case made the issue high priority? A penniless transient with his throat slit open? Why would that require a full fledged team of police and CSI in the building?

Something definitely smelled.

* * * *

Jess woke with a start. It was always that way. One minute nothing, the next minute life. Every evening she awoke alone in the rectory's basement. She preferred it that way. It wasn't like she had to sleep in a coffin like vampires did in the movies, but since her body was in a deathlike state when she slept, both she and Regent felt it was better for her to sleep where no one could happen upon her.

The sun was losing strength as it hovered near the horizon. Being in it without sunglasses hurt her eyes, but most vampires would fry in the same amount of light, so she couldn't complain.

Half an hour later she arrived at Britt's building. Officers from her unit guarded the doors and monitored everyone who entered and left.

"Lieutenant Vandermire, the forensic people are just finishing up. They want to speak with you," Officer Brooks said, stepping aside and letting Jess enter the stairwell to the basement.

"Thanks Brooks." She went downstairs.

"Jess, over here!" Sampson Case raised his bald head and motioned for her to come inside the room. He reminded her of "Q" in the James Bond movies, only his specialty was vampire forensics.

"This is quite a unique case we've got here," he said, getting off his knees and brushing his gloved hands clean of the floor's debris.

"How so?"

"Bergeron was definitely vamped and then had his throat slit with some sort of curved knife in an attempt to hide the wound." He shrugged. "But whoever did this either wasn't very adept at covering up, or they wanted us to know what happened to the kid. I've sent blood samples off to the lab to verify that VNA is present."

"Bergeron was moved here after being bitten?" Killed was one thing, but he'd been fed on first then brought here to implicate Britt! If she could turn pale, she'd be doing so right now."

"Sure looks that way," Sampson said.

She pursed her lips and frowned. Bergeron wasn't a protector but a slave to a vampire. And a means to an end.

"I sure wouldn't want to be Mr. John Brittain," Sampson said, shaking his bald head. "Does he have any idea what kind of danger he's in?"

"He doesn't even know they exist."

"Poor bastard." Sampson turned back to his work.

"I'm going to talk to Britt right away. See if I can find out anything. Let me know when you're done with your analysis."

"Will do, hon. One way or another, we'll get to the bottom of this."

Jess climbed the stairs to Britt's apartment and knocked on the door. She could smell him, clean and fresh from the shower. She inhaled a deep whiff and lowered her head, grimacing. Don't do this to yourself, Jess. You can't have him. And he *won't* have you.

Knock. Knock.

The door flew open faster than she'd expected.

"It's you," he said with little inflection, immediately backing out of the way for her to enter. "I wondered when you'd be back for that talk."

Jess looked him over. He was dressed in well fitted jeans, and a chest hugging T-shirt. Now she could clearly see how muscular he was. She swallowed down the excitement that slammed into her. He was wearing the cross she'd given him. He'd actually listened to her. Did that mean he was open to the truth?

"How are things going downstairs?" he asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Your neighbors are getting a little ticked at not having their laundry facilities today. I guess what happened to Bergeron isn't quite as important as laundry backing up." She threw her arms up in the air. "Especially that frizzy haired lady with the wild look in her eyes."

Britt laughed, transforming his features in the process. When he smiled, he could almost make her heart palpate. And, that would be a real trick.

"Now, that little gal with the frizzy hair has a brand new set of twins. I imagine she's got good reason to

be panicky about not having a washer and dryer."

"I suppose." Very intuitive for a man. She gave him an internal congrats at being sensitive enough to realize what the woman was probably going through. But how could she convince him he was in danger without scaring the wits out of him?

No matter how she presented it, the truth was repulsive. Best to start out slow and gauge his reaction as she went.

"Good session at the warehouse last night," she said. Stilted, but she wanted to at least make a little small talk before she got into the "you're going to die if you don't listen to me" bit.

"Not bad," he said. "When do I get to try out those interesting weapons I saw some of the people using?"

"Boys and their toys." She picked up a picture of him as a cop. "Why do you keep this?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I should throw it away."

She moved from one object to the other, touching, smelling, paying close attention to his neat but meager belongings.

The scent coming off the parcel on his kitchen counter had her instantly on alert. "What's this?"

"Don't know. Some weirdo courier dropped it off this morning. My name's on it, but I never get deliveries so it probably belongs to someone else." He stopped beside her and ran his hand over the brown paper covering the parcel as if he could figure out what it was from touch.

"It might not be coincidence that someone murdered Bergeron and left him in your building," she blurted, then let his silence hang between them.

"That's crazy," he finally said.

"Maybe, but I need to know if you've had any dealings with Bergeron before."

Britt leaned his hip against the counter. He was so close to her she could feel his body heat. "None, I've never set eyes on him until you talked to him in the alley."

"You're sure?"

"Very sure. I may have been out of the loop for two years, but I'm not feeble-minded."

"This parcel is probably connected to Bergeron as well."

"How the hell do you figure that?"

"Open it." She inched back, wanting to deny that she'd stepped away from him because his proximity affected her equilibrium. Made her think of bodies against bodies in a sexual way rather than the teeth sinking into the neck way. Heated her skin in a way she'd thought impossible.

"And that'll prove what?"

"Open it and you'll see."

"I'm supposed to believe you know what's in this parcel?"

"Believe what you want, but I can tell you right now there's a chunk of gravestone in that box."

"Weird psychic premonition?" he scoffed.

"No. But I'm afraid I'm going to have to tell you more than I wanted to at this juncture."

He took two steps across the tiny kitchen, pulled a chair out from his ratty dinette set and slid it in her direction. "Have a seat."

He grabbed the parcel, slapped it down on the table and tore off the brown paper. As she'd predicted, inside was a chunk of tombstone. It looked old, with bits of moss embedded in the granite.

"Okay, you were right. So spill it. How'd you know what was in this parcel? Did you send it?"

"Of course not." She glanced out his patio door and scanned the rooftops across the street.

"Then how in hell did you know what was inside this innocuous looking package? You didn't even lift it."

"It's a warning from a very dangerous faction in the city. A group of people who kill merely for pleasure and for blood."

"Jesus! What are you talking? Serial Killers? A cult?"

"No." She took a deep breath, and leaned closer to him, close enough that he could kiss her if he wanted to. "I suppose in a way they are serial killers, but not in the way you think. These people have mutated genes called VNA." She glanced at the shiny silver cross gleaming at his muscled throat and swallowed down the small shaft of pain that rippled through her.

"Never heard of it. What's that got to do with gravestones, and blood?" He reached up and touched the cross she'd been staring at. Suddenly, his eyes got big and he shook his head. "Nah, no, no, no, no. You're not really trying and tell me they're friggin' vampires!"

Feeling a little out of focus, Britt reached for something to steady himself. Jess's eyes had changed somehow, and he felt as if his soul was being sucked into a gyrating void where he had little control. Through the strange haze, he saw her slow, languid smile aimed at him, baring eyeteeth that were now three-quarters of an inch long! His stomach twisted and he tore his gaze from hers. It had taken a lot of effort, but he'd broken the connection. Jesus!

"I wouldn't hurt you, Britt." She looked disconcerted.

Jumping out of his chair and taking a couple of steps backward, he put a hand on his chest. His heart pounded like a set of bongos.

With the haze gone, he saw her clearly now. Her eyes sparkled with a dangerous light. Was it his imagination or had her green irises turned dark, almost black? And her teeth! How the hell could teeth grow that fast? It had to be hypnosis or something. It couldn't be real.

But then he looked at her, and it was real. She looked like...

"I am a vampire," she said, finishing his sentence for him. "But I work for the police. I don't drink blood from human hosts, and I don't kill. Not humans, anyway. There is an insurgence of vampires in New York, and I'm afraid they're not as ... nice as I am."

His fingers fumbled for the cross. He tried to say something but nothing came out. There couldn't be vampires. There couldn't be! But as he stared at her altered face, eyeteeth extended. Looking as vicious as a panther's. Those dark eyes staring at him, doing strange things, luring him, hypnotizing him, and threatening to suck out his soul. He knew there were vampires now. There was no other explanation for what she'd ... become.

"Normal vampires only feed to keep to themselves alive. They don't want to bring their kind to light. They are nocturnal predators whose sole reason to take blood is to live. I'm not trying to make them look like your next door neighbor, but for the most part, they aren't a threat. The vampires in the city right now are vicious creatures killing people for pleasure and for profit. They're taking victims at an alarming rate and have to be stopped. They want blood, and they can't get enough of it. No one is safe as long as they're at large.

Normal vampires! Now that was an oxymoron if he'd ever heard one. Speaking of blood, he still felt like his was pooled in his feet. It would help if she'd make herself look like a woman again. Maybe then he could think.

"Something's going on. Maybe even inside the police force. That's why we can't let anyone know about the team."

Britt turned away from her, then thought better of it and spun back around to face her.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Britt. I'm not the enemy. Those who are targeting you are."

"Why would *they* be after me?"

"That's what baffles me. They've been following you for some time. I have no idea why."

"For how long?" He straightened and frowned.

"At least six months. That's when I first found Bergeron on your tail."

"He's been following me for *six months*?"

"Sorry. I know this has got to be a shock."

"I'm assuming if they wanted my blood they could've taken it any time they wanted to?"

She nodded. "For the record, I would have stopped them, but we needed to find out who the Master vampire is. Someone is leading them, helping them to increase their numbers. When I told Drake they were following you, he was concerned. He asked me to keep an eye on you."

"So I've had two people tailing me for six months and I didn't see either one of you?" He grimaced.
"Man, that's really hard on the ego."

"Most humans aren't aware of us. It's almost like we're operating on a different plane of existence. I don't know if it's because people just don't believe there are real monsters in the night, or if it's just that they don't want to believe in that kind of evil."

Britt thought about the times he'd felt as if he was being watched but had put it down to his imagination. He should've listened to the inner barometer that had once made him a good cop. It had kept him alive all those years. When he'd been stripped of his badge, had he let his instincts slip away with his job?

"If it's any consolation, you seemed to be aware of me on a number of occasions. That surprised me," she said.

"Not aware enough for my liking." He looked at her for what she really was. A creature of the night.

Her expression hardened and her eyes glittered with determination when she smiled. "We try to do the best with what we're dealt, Britt. You of all people should understand that."

"What happened to me was at least natural."

She let her guard drop for just a second, and he saw in her eyes how much that statement had hurt her. What the hell. She had feelings.

As if he could push the truth away, he raised his hands in front of him. "So, let me get this straight. All those vampire clubs in New York are the real deal?"

"No, mostly wannabes. A few humans do end up as evening meals though, and some become slaves. It's not one bit as glamorous as they expect it to be."

"No shit." He blinked hard and tried to make sense of everything she'd said. His life would never be the same again. How could he have lived as a cop for so long and not known about this dark world right inside his own city?

Now he understood why the regular cops couldn't know about the secret Ops Unit. They'd be in danger if they realized vampires existed. But why the hell were vampires following *him* .

She moved away from him and sat on his small sofa. He felt as if his eyes were glued to her when she crossed one shapely leg over the other. When his attention returned to her face, she had switched back to normal. Thank God.

"What are you going to do about what I've just told you?"

He stared at her. "That's a good question"

"Vampires are usually solitary creatures. They have their own territory. Ideally, they don't bother honest, hard-working humans. If they have to resort to taking blood from humans, there are enough criminals around who aren't missed. Nor do all vampires resort to taking the blood of humans. Some of us have learned other ways to stay alive without harvesting from hosts." She leaned forward, her gaze piercing him. "But, something's changed. Word is, vampires are congregating, and they're feeding and initiating more and more vampires who don't care where their next meal comes from. No one is safe."

"Isn't initiating more of their kind the sole purpose of vampires?" Britt asked.

"Not at all." It's not like we need to create progeny to enhance our race. We can live a very long time." She touched the side of her cheek and turned her head away from him. "Creating more vampires makes us vulnerable. More visible."

"How long has this been going on?"

"In New York City? A few years. Something big is in the air. I've seen more and more vampire protectors together, and I think it means their masters have joined ranks. There has to be a reason for a solitary predator to want to join a pack." Jess stared at him, as if trying to gauge his thoughts.

"I take it they don't usually let humans walk around if they know about vampires?"

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Never."

"Looks like I don't have much choice then. I've just been recruited to your team whether I want to be or not."

Jess watched Britt with sadness. She liked him. She'd have been completely happy for him if he could just walk away from the sick truth he now had to face.

Vampires existed.

She was a vampire.

The thing she hated most was seeing the light go out of a person's eyes when they learned the truth. It sucked something out of their souls. Even worse, she'd hated to see the look of desire melt from Britt's expression when he realized what she was. It surprised her that she actually cared about his reaction to her. Over the last half decade or so, she'd never allowed herself to become close to any man because she couldn't love and be loved. Not when she was a creature of the night. One who drank blood and lived forever. Her brother might have saved her soul from total damnation, but she was still a monster.

"Unfortunately whatever is going on is somehow connected to you, Britt. Maybe between the two of us, we can figure out why vampires are interested in you."

"Man, this is crazy. It's got to be a bad dream. I'm going to wake up in the morning and feel really stupid about this nightmare."

Against her better judgment, Jess rose and moved closer to him. It was almost as if he had the hypnotic ability over her. She couldn't stop herself.

He closed his eyes for a second and she watched his pulse beating at this throat. She waited, wondering if he'd come to his senses and push her away. She yearned to be in his arms, to feel his body against hers. Since becoming a vampire, she'd never felt this way about a human. So why him?

When she put a hand out and touched his arm, his eyes flew open and widened. He backed away from her.

Why would she have expected anything else?

Even worse, his reaction made her seethe with pain and humiliation. Britt's fear and rejection shouldn't

have surprised her. Shouldn't have made her dark side long to taste his blood, to show him what it was like. If she made him like her, he'd understand her pain. They could be together. Her teeth elongated, and she willed him to stare into her eyes. A gasping sigh exited his lungs, but he couldn't deny her order. He leaned closer to her, bent his head to expose his lovely neck.

Chapter Six

As Jess watched the team work out for the last time, she couldn't believe a month had passed. They were as ready for their first test as they'd ever be.

"Lieutenant Vandermire, may I speak with you?" Detective James, her second in command, asked.

"Sure." Jess followed him to the far corner of the warehouse. Thanks to Regent, James had, like her, maintained enough of his humanity to make the transition to semi-life. "What is it James?"

"Brophy worries me. He's tough. He can kill, and he's not afraid, I'm just not sure he's trustworthy. I think he might turn if they try to recruit him."

"I've been thinking the same thing. If we cut him loose now, though, he might be recruited right away."

"Yes, but there's something else. It's the way he's been looking at me. Even though we haven't told them what they're going to be up against, I think he knows I'm a vampire."

Jess's mouth tightened. They'd done thorough research on every candidate. If Tat knew about vampires, their information on him might be lacking. And not being completely aware of Tat's past life left the team vulnerable. If he had any prior involvement with vampires, he could be a spy. Or he could be sympathetic to their cause.

"Keep an eye on him, James. We can't afford to lose him right now. Or rather, we can't afford for the other side to gain someone with his abilities—now that we've spent all this time training him. Any screw up and he's going back to death row."

"Yes, ma'am."

She and James returned to the group. She could feel Britt's penetrating gaze burning into her. She purposely avoided eye contact with him. He'd worked harder than any of the team members over the last weeks. His body had become more muscular with each passing day as he worked on developing his brute strength. He'd mastered every weapon and could spout every philosophy they'd been taught.

If she hadn't needed him so badly in this group, he would have made a good trainer with the next one. He was ready and he hated vampires. A twinge of impending danger arced through her.

"The time has come for this team to be put into action," she said. "You've all trained hard. You've exceeded our expectations and have outdone any team that has come before you."

The group let out a roar of accomplishment.

"Now comes reality. Tomorrow night we'll head for the streets. Is everyone ready?"

They shouted in unison. "Yes, ma'am!"

"Good. I'll see you all tomorrow night."

She walked away. Sadness seeped into her deeper than ever before. It invaded every pore, every corner of her conscious mind. There was no doubt she'd created an impressive team of vampire hunters. And, like the teams before them, they'd be more than capable. But some of them wouldn't survive. Maybe she didn't physically kill humans, but whenever she trained a team, she felt as if she were leading lambs to slaughter. Granted, they were tarnished and worse for wear lambs, but lambs all the same.

And one of those lambs was John Brittain.

She heaved a sigh. As much as she hated admitting it, she missed talking to Britt. Oh, she saw him regularly, but she took particular care to avoid personal contact with him. Every night after he left the gym, she followed him, as she'd been doing for months now. It concerned her that he still had a vampire watching him. She could always drop in and confront the vamp, but as long as they didn't know she was on to them, she had the advantage. She couldn't afford to lose that advantage until she knew exactly why they were so interested in Brittain.

Now that Britt was aware of being followed, he took every opportunity to shake them and she was impressed at his ability to do so. He'd never shaken her yet, and she could sense that he knew he hadn't. There was a constant aura of frustration surrounding him as he weaved his way home.

He'd probably be able to dodge her soon enough. His intelligence amazed her. His strength impressed her. But most of all his ability to make her *feel* scared the hell out of her. Hence, she avoided personal contact with him as much as she could, which had been hard tonight because she'd known he'd wanted her to speak to him. His thoughts were becoming almost palpable to her.

For now it was best to stay out of his way. Whatever was going on between them was just too complicated and it hurt too much when he looked at her as if she were a freak.

Even though it was true.

* * * *

The moon rode high in the cloudless heavens the next night when the team met. Jess wanted to impart one last pep talk before they saw a wild vampire in the flesh. As usual, Britt stayed at the back of the group, his expression duly serious. Thank God he didn't remember she'd nearly bitten him. The urge had been so overwhelming she'd almost succumbed. It had scared her so badly that she'd made a point to avoid him. Just looking at him now made her ache with regret. If he knew, he'd never forgive her. She could barely forgive herself.

"Lieutenant Vandermire, where are we going and how many vampires do you think we'll encounter?" Terry asked, smoothing her half inch hair with both hands. It was a nervous gesture and the only sign she ever gave when she was worried.

"It's hard to say. Could be one or two. Could be more. This is a new phenomenon. As I've mentioned before, vampires don't usually congregate. Mostly they're loners." She could tell Britt was watching her and she didn't dare look at him right now. She'd been feeling strange all day. Was it fear? Outside of the love she felt for her brother, she hadn't experienced any real emotion for so many years she wasn't even sure what fear felt like any more.

"Where are we going tonight?"

"The East Side. To a hooker's street."

"Hookers!" Tat rolled his eyes, "I thought we were going to fight not f..."

"Brophy!" He knew why they were going. His words were meant to disrupt. Her patience was beginning to wear thin. "If you can't control your baser instincts, I'll have to put you on charge. Either you toe the line, or you'll have to take the consequences. So far you haven't received a paycheck. Tonight's the night to earn some honest money. Aren't you interested?"

Brophy raised his shoulders. "Shit. I'm here for the freakin' real-life video game. I don't care about the money. When do we get to slice and dice?"

Jess watched Britt slide through the group until he had moved up behind Tat. He clamped one hand on Tat's shoulder. Tat cringed, looking at Britt from the corner of his eye.

She remained impassive and pretended she hadn't seen what had happened. "The hookers, for the most part, are human. But female vampires have a tendency to bury themselves in hooker communities. They go unnoticed, have fresh food whenever they want it, and their pimps are a lot scarier."

"Ugh. Takes away the joy from having a good..." Tat moaned aloud when Britt's fingers dug even deeper into his shoulder. "Get off me, man. What are you, some goody asshole or somethin'?"

"I'm a cop. Just like you. We have to be better than the people on the street."

"Oh, pu ... lease. Where'd you get this guy?" Tat said, wrenching his shoulder from Britt's grasp.

Britt watched Tat through narrowed eyes. Why would Jess want vermin like him on her team? The answer hit him, and suddenly his gut felt like putty. All this time he'd thought he wasn't like Tat because his crime wasn't premeditated. Who was he kidding? A killer is a killer, no matter the circumstances.

Before Randy died, Britt had been on the road to success. Life had been good. Hard to believe that in a mere two years it could spiral into such a deep pit. Bad enough being a cop killer. But now he was a cop killer stalked by vampires. How much worse could it get?

He turned his thoughts back to the mission. Except for Jess, and probably James, he'd never seen a real vampire before. His gut twisted. Did everyone else feel like he did tonight? Scared shitless?

Since Jess had shown her true self in his apartment that day, she'd been avoiding him. No doubt it had everything to do with his reaction to her. He'd been repulsed; there was no other way to put it. Another unnamed emotion slammed into him. But since then there'd been a subtle change in the way he felt about her, and he looked at her again.

Tonight she wore her black leather and those six inch spike heels. Hard to believe she could fight in those shoes, but he'd seen her do it. She had some sort of a weapon on her belt, one he'd never seen before. Her hair was pulled back in a French twist. How's that for irony. Beautiful vampire wears her hair in a salon style while battling evil.

As he studied Jess, he was aware of the low thrum of voices asking questions, but he'd zoned out. He'd always done this as a cop. It was his self-preservation technique—his focus.

Speaking of focus, it wavered every time he looked at her. It had taken him hours to come to terms with what she'd told him that night. That she was a vampire. A member of a group of human predators who only remain alive by drinking blood. He'd even considered talking to a priest.

Like that would happen. *Bless me father, for I have sinned. It's been too long since my last confession. I'm now a murderer. Oh, besides that I'm also a vampire hunter.*

He'd never felt so totally alone since his wife left him after he'd been charged with murder.

He shrugged, felt the muscles tightening in his neck.

"Everyone into the van." Jess walked directly in front of him. He'd hoped for one glance from her, but she ignored him.

"I'm sorry, Jess," he said under his breath. Never in his wildest dreams did he suspect she would spin around and look at him with a surprised expression.

Until that moment, he had no idea how far her abilities extended. His own fault. She'd been there for him, helped him out when Bergeron's body had been found in his apartment building, and when the vampire stone had been mailed to him.

She nodded to him, accepting his apology. Suddenly he felt better as he gripped the doorframe and hoisted himself into the back of the van.

A short time later, then van stopped in a neighborhood that looked as if it had been forgotten by the civilized part of the city. They all got out and waited for Jess to give them orders. Even the buildings appeared to have lost their civility, old and damaged brick façades, crumbling and broken, much like the people who walked on the sidewalks.

"Pair up and work your way down the street," Jess said. "I don't want you confronting anyone tonight. Your objective is to identify a vampire—if you happen to find one. There might not be any here tonight. If you do spot one, *do not* approach the target. Return to the van. That's an order." She put her hands on her trim hips. "Another thing. Don't leave your team member alone at any time. Stay together."

"What if a vamp comes after us?" Tat asked, his voice as calm as if he were about to go on a picnic.

"If you have to defend yourself, use the methods you've been taught. Don't forget, vampires are fast, they're strong, and they've got powers of persuasion that can debilitate you if you aren't on your toes."

"Damn, I hate those creatures," Griz spat. "Britt, you with me?"

"Yeah, sure, Griz." Britt fell into step with him. He wanted to look back and see where Jess had gone. There were only six team members on this mission, so he assumed she'd be keeping an eye on them, just as he knew she kept an eye on him every night. It bothered him that Jess felt the need to follow him at night. That she thought he couldn't take care of himself. But no matter how hard it was on his male ego, she was probably right. Fighting full fledged vampires would not be easy, and she'd been around a lot longer than him. She knew their habits and their weaknesses. As much as he wanted to be strong for her, to prove to her that he was her equal, right now he knew it wasn't true. Might never be true.

He pushed thoughts of Jess away and concentrated on his surroundings. This was the most rundown part of New York Britt had ever seen, and he'd seen some pretty bad places. They passed a courtyard

where dealers openly pushed their wares. Some sad addicts didn't get more than a couple feet away from the dealer before taking their hit and sprawling onto the ground where they dropped.

"Britt, we haven't had a chance to talk much," Griz said.

"No, that's true." Britt didn't want to talk right now either. He wanted his wits about him. "Listen, why don't we meet for a beer one night this week? We can talk then."

"Yeah, that'd be great." Thankfully, Griz had picked up on his subtle reminder that it was concentration time.

The sidewalks were strewn with refuse and sleeping vagrants. Alleys opened their dark maws every few feet, making Britt wish he had Jess's night vision. Anything could be hiding in the blackness.

Suddenly, he sensed he was being watched. A three story building loomed on the other side of the street. A crumbling brownstone with broken windows. Looking toward the skyline, he thought, *Yeah, you're up there.* But was it friend or foe? He wasn't sure.

"Hi, honey, lookin' for a little sugar?" A tattered, toothless hooker approached, doing her best to entice them.

Griz growled deep in his throat, making his name even more appropriate. "Get lost," he spat out in a disparaging tone, surprising Britt.

"Cool it, Griz," Britt said in a low, even voice. "We can't judge her. We don't know what caused her circumstances."

Griz grunted and folded his massive arms across his chest. They looked like Bluto's arms, the burly character from the Popeye cartoons.

"No thanks," Griz said gruffly to the hard-worn woman.

His attempt at toning down his rudeness didn't work. The hooker looked as if she might start cursing.

"Actually, we're meeting someone," Britt said, knowing in "streetwalker speak" this meant they had regulars.

"Cheerio, then," she said resignedly and continued down the street in her skintight miniskirt and torn pantyhose.

Britt sniffed. The air was heavy and scented liberally with the stench of poverty. Eau de garbage and rotted wood if his sniffer was correct.

Griz hadn't said a word since their slight altercation. "You okay, Griz?"

"Sometimes I think hookers are even worse than vampires," Griz admitted in another growl.

Griz's comment probably came from a gut reaction to the woman's condition. Given his basically kind nature, Britt didn't think Griz would be able to cut it as a vampire hunter. Even though he had the strength of three men and seemed committed to this cause, Griz just didn't have it in him to be a killer. Britt swallowed hard. Unlike himself.

"Let's continue and see what we find."

* * * *

Jess watched Britt and Griz from the roof of the building. She'd seen Britt look up to where she hid and smiled at his intuitiveness.

The minute a young male hooker stepped out from the alley's dark crevice Britt knew what he was. When Britt and Griz weren't uninterested in what he had to offer, the hooker didn't try to hide the fact that he was a vampire. His elongated teeth were evidence of his proclivities. Britt touched Griz's arm and the two men turned back toward the van, just as they'd been told to do.

Not bad. And it only took him a split second to realize what the hooker was, even before he saw the teeth. He had latent talents that surprised her more every day.

Now to find out what Tat and Terry were up to. She made a run across the roof of the building and easily sailed to the roof of the next one and then the next one. She found James on a rooftop two blocks down.

"How're they doing?" she asked, leaning over the edge of the building to view their pupils who had foolishly stopped in front of a dark alleyway.

James turned to her, fully involved as a vampire. That meant things weren't going smoothly. Something must be happening on the street and James needed his superior abilities. His teeth were bared and his pupils were like orbs of onyx with slivers of silver illuminating them.

"You've arrived just in time. Tat has instigated trouble. There are two vampires moving in. Terry did as she was told. She tried to stop Tat. It's apparent she's worried, but she's following orders and staying with that idiot, even though he doesn't deserve it."

Jess looked down into the alley again. A female hooker had apparently gone for a seasoned male vampire. By the look of him, he'd been around. A lot longer than Jess, who was still fairly young in vampire years.

"Let's go," she said, diving off the side of the building and settling out of sight behind Tat without making a sound. He was completely unaware they were in trouble.

"Tat, you shouldn't have approached that vamp. She didn't run away scared, you know." Terry said, hands on her hips and her voice angry. "Don't you realize the strength they have?" "Let's go."

"Nuthin' the Tat-man can't handle. Besides, that whore was scared. Let's go down this alley and prove we aren't going to let them get away."

"You're an idiot," she said, "and you're going to get us both killed." It was then Terry spotted Jess and James. Waiting behind a stack of old boxes, in a spot where the approaching vampires wouldn't be able to see them, Jess motioned for her not to give them away.

James waited silently beside Jess. They didn't have to vocalize what they'd do next. They'd worked together long enough to know each other's moves.

The two vampires who had been hiding behind Dumpsters were quietly moving along the alley toward

Tat and Terry. They thought they were just moving in to vamp a couple of tasty human morsels. Surprise. Surprise.

Idiot that he was, Tat started walking toward the predators. Overconfident as usual. Fed by delusions of being stronger than the approaching monsters, he was obviously unaware of what he was getting into. The big vampire's eyes were glowing, something Jess had never seen before. She had no idea what caused it, and a sick feeling in her chest spread out to her limbs. With technology improving just as quickly in the vampire world as in the human world, there was no telling if glowing eyes meant these vampires had developed something new. An advantage over the cops? Over other vampires?

By the time the two vamps were in full view, the glowing-eyed predator's teeth were bared in almost sensual pleasure at the sight of the idiot who thought he could take them on.

"Stop right there." Jess's voice reverberated through the air, low and commanding. She and James stepped out of the shadows.

Tat turned toward her, his movements jerky, irritated. His eyes glittered angrily. "Shit, lady, can't I have a little fun?"

"I told you not to approach anyone."

"I'm here to fight. I'm not some candy-assed ex-cop who's afraid of his own shadow."

Jess's eyes narrowed. This man had just screwed himself. He consistently refused to follow orders, and now he was being insubordinate. He was off the team. Her gaze shifted from him to the vampire moving in on them.

"You're in over your head, Tat," Jess curled back her lips and let him see the full truth of her vampirism.

"Damn!" He backed away from her. If she scared him, wait until he realized the full scope of what was slinking toward him. The maddening part was that Tat wouldn't have stood a chance, and Terry would've been lost too. They'd come a long way in their training, but they still had some crucial lessons to learn before they took on vampires who wanted to kill them. Tat's kind of stupidity got people killed.

The male vampire arched his shoulders and bared his teeth. His nails were long and black. He was about Griz's size. The biggest vampire she'd ever encountered. Thankful that James was with her, she somersaulted over Terry and Tat and landed between the vampires and her team members.

It was unspoken; she would fight the big guy. As senior officer and senior vampire, it was her responsibility.

She glared at the vampire, bared her teeth, and sprang into the air, kicking her spiked heel toward his heart. The spike automatically extended another four inches when she became airborne. She missed his chest and impaled his arm. As soon as the silver spike penetrated his flesh it recoiled back into the shoe's heel. A safety feature Sampson had added so she couldn't get hung up. Good thing in this case, since she'd missed the mark.

She landed on her feet at the same time as the big vampire's hand slashed through the air. One of his fingernails scratched across her neck. It stung, but not enough to slow her down.

James had already impaled the female. She heard the dry dust explosion sound as the hooker's flesh

burst into a cloud of dust particles.

Normally, she felt quite confident taking on vampires by herself. But there was something different about this one. It wasn't just his size. There was something about his eyes. Besides the fact that his eyes were glowing, he had a seasoned look about him. She noted his quick assessing scan of the situation. Not just old, he exuded intelligence. Vampires didn't make it this long without superior cunning. Suddenly, she felt like an 18-year-old vamp protecting herself for the first time. When James landed beside Jess, ready for the fight, relief swept through her.

The vampire smiled at them—he actually *smiled*—then leapt up the side of the building and was gone.

Jess put her hand on James' arm as he crouched to spring after him. "No. Not today. We'll meet him another time," she said, wishing that statement weren't true, but she knew it was.

She'd just met a vampire with knowledge so far beyond hers, it terrified her. When she'd been made leader of the team she thought she could take on these vampires and protect New York City from the vile nighttime predators. Now, she felt like one of the recruits. Untried—untested—and maybe unable to stop this ancient foe. One who'd experienced many more battles than she'd even dreamed about, and he had lived to tell the tale. His dark soul emanated with evil so potent it was almost tangible.

Whatever had made her think she could fight this horde and win?

Chapter Seven

Britt pushed reheated beans and pork around his plate. CB purred and rubbed himself against Britt's legs, then wandered off when he didn't get any more food. Next, the cat jumped onto the coffee table in the one room kitchen, dinette and living room and started licking his paw. He had never done that before.

"Get down," Britt said. The cat jumped to the floor and rebuffed him with a hard cat stare. "Cat, you've been a perfect roommate until now. If you start jumping onto the furniture, you're history."

He started to turn back to his tasteless meal when he realized the spot on the table where the cat had sat shouldn't be bare. The gravestone had been there yesterday. Now it was at the opposite end of the table.

He pushed his chair back and went to the coffee table for a closer look.

Someone had been in his place and they'd moved the gravestone, maybe deliberately so he'd know they'd been here. His hackles went up. He picked up the stone and found a flattened hydrangea beneath it. No doubt it was a message, since he'd planted a hydrangea next to Randy's crypt.

His blood pressure skyrocketed. He hated games. And hated threats even more. The need to throw the damned stone out the window surged through him. He didn't do it. The way his luck was running, it would hit some little old lady on the head.

Instead he picked up the phone and dialed Jess. If she had any idea what the hell was going on, he wanted to know. This time he wasn't taking no for an answer.

Jess arrived an hour later. It was barely dusk when he opened the door, expecting to see her dressed in her standard leather, but this time she wore jeans and a T-shirt. She looked like a regular woman, he thought, as he waited for her to step inside.

She entered. "I got your urgent message on my answering machine. What's up?"

"Someone was in my apartment while I was out. Left me a present." He held up the crushed flower. "I thought maybe it was time we had that talk."

"I prefer carnations myself," she said.

Damnit. He wasn't in the mood for her odd humor. "I'm a member of the team now. Fill me in!"

She was as good as he was when it came to keeping her expression neutral. He'd heard about how she'd fought the vampires in the alley the other night, and he'd seen how cool and calm she'd been when she returned to the van. Like nothing had happened. That was talent.

"Fill you in on what?" She sat down on the couch and leaned forward to take a better look at the gravestone without touching it.

"Let's start with Bergeron. Did you find out why he was killed and left in my building?"

"Not yet. But we know where he was killed. Outside Saint Eugenia's Catholic Church. I assume you know the one I mean since you were there the other night."

"Are you saying I was there on purpose?"

"Not really, just checking to see what your reaction might be," she said, still devoid of expression.

He huffed out an irritated breath. "And?"

"You were sufficiently irritated when I mentioned Saint Eugenia's, so I suppose you're clear."

"Funny. You were following me anyway, weren't you?" He folded his arms across his chest.

She ignored him. "We found enough DNA to know Bergeron was killed at the church."

"By DNA, I'm assuming you mean a lot of blood?"

"Not a lot of blood, no."

"Where did it all go? The kid didn't have much left in him downstairs."

"Good eye." She pursed her lips in a thoughtful, yet somehow cynical way and he knew from that expression what it meant.

"A vampire got him?"

"Probably. We're following up all leads. His throat was slit with a curved blade. It was a lousy job, though, and didn't completely cover the bite marks. My forensic specialist, Sampson Case, is working on trace to see what he comes up with."

"Is this forensic specialist part of the Special Ops unit?"

She looked at him casually. "Yes and he's quite good at his job."

"So that means there are more people in this unit than the six scrawny members you had out on the street last night."

"Definitely."

"How big is the unit?"

"Fifty members, give or take."

"Fifty!" His skin went cold. "How big is this vampire problem?" He expected there might be a dozen people in the unit, but fifty? Just to concentrate on vampires?

"To be frank, we're not really sure yet." She leaned back on the couch and stretched her arm languidly across the back of the faded fabric.

Maybe she was cool and composed, but his mouth had gone completely dry. What did all of this have to do with that damned moldy rock on his coffee table? "Any idea why I'm in their sights?"

"Not one iota," she said.

He turned and paced to the window, hands on his hips. His patio door was open and he stared through the screen. "Are they out there right now? Watching us?"

"Yes."

"How many?" His shoulder's tightened, and his hands moved off his hips to form fists.

"Two."

"How do you know that?"

She pushed off the couch and followed him to the door, looking past him to the rooftops on the other side of the street. "I can see them. If the wind is right, I can even smell them."

"What other special attributes are you capable of besides extraordinary night vision, scent, and hearing? Can you turn into a bat and fly out my door?"

Her eyes sparkled, but this time with wry humor. "No. We can't do that. We can, however, jump quite a distance and I'm pretty good at scaling buildings."

He looked down at the street. He was on the fourth floor. Given this new information, his place probably wouldn't take a vampire much effort to scale, and he always left his patio door open. Not that a lock would stop someone with vampiric strength.

He took a couple of steps back. "How'd you become one?" He instantly regretted his question because her eyes grew hard. Became devoid of life.

Her voice was unbearably sad when she said, "I was bitten by a vampire when I was a cop. I was on the beat on the East Side. Not far from where we scoped out the hookers last night. My partner was

supposed to be backing me up, but he wasn't. I made it back to my brother before I succumbed."

He scraped his upper teeth slowly over his bottom lip. Something he often did when he was thinking. "One more question." Actually, he had dozens more but he sensed he'd pushed her as far as he could tonight. No sense making her angry as well as sad.

"What is it?"

"Why did you proposition me outside the bar that night?"

Surprise scuttled across her features.

"You remember that? I'm impressed with your abilities. You do realize vampires have a certain amount of ability to control the human mind. I can make people forget they saw me. If I were a bad vampire I could make you walk toward me and bend your head sideways, exposing your carotid artery." She went back to the couch and sat again. "Works best on the weak willed. Apparently, you're not one of them."

He found it difficult to remember that this woman, this *cop*, was a creature nightmares were made of. He had to constantly remind himself she was a vampire. Shouldn't he be repulsed by that fact?

"Maybe it's time we work on this thing together," he said. "I'd sure as hell like to know why I'm in their sights. I have to know. It's the only way I'll really be able to protect myself from them."

She stared into his eyes and smiled. He felt his gut liquefy. How'd she do that to him? It took everything he had to tear his gaze from her lips. And her body. Damn, he had to remember she wasn't a woman any more. She was a vampire whose teeth grew and could rip out his throat if she was angry with him. Or hungry.

* * * *

Jess watched Britt's expression change from smoldering to that pinched look of underlying dread she'd become too familiar with. Had she been delusional, or for just a second had he really looked as if he wanted to kiss her?

Imagine thinking a human would desire a vampire, especially a human who knows what vampires are.

She admired Britt's strength, his smarts, and even though she didn't want to admit it to herself, his physique. She liked the strong line of his jaw, his nose. And his clear blue eyes that laid her soulless heart bare every time he looked at her.

She'd been doing her homework on him. He was a good guy. Most of his money went to his partner's widow and her child. It was supposed to be anonymous, but since she had his bank records and the widow's account information, it was easy enough to see that the same amount that left his account entered hers. She knew he didn't know the woman well. For some reason Randy hadn't wanted to socialize outside of work. Maybe he was the jealous type and didn't want the other cops mooning over his wife. By all accounts she was beautiful. Or maybe she didn't like cops?

Suddenly, a movement outside caught her attention. She straightened and stared through the screen. A yellow cat dropped onto the balcony and she froze.

"Don't worry, Jess, that's just my cat, CB. I fixed the emergency ladder so he could come and go whenever he wants."

Just his cat? He still had a lot to learn. Her attention didn't leave the vile creature on his patio. Odors of another vampire wafted off its fur. The cat recognized her, too. Its hair stood up on its back.

"Britt, this isn't an ordinary cat," she said.

"What are you talking about?" Britt's breath hissed out as if it'd been ripped from his torso.

"That mangy cat belongs to a vampire. If he's here it's to keep tabs on you for his master."

CB hissed and flattened his ears in response. He glared at her then turned and ran back up the ladder.

"I knew cats shouldn't be able to climb ladders. Just thought this cat was smart," Britt said, dropping lifelessly onto a chair.

"You won't see that cat again. Now that he's seen me here, he won't be back." She leaned into his personal space to get his full attention. It worked, because he looked up to stare at her. "It's quickly becoming apparent we need to work together so this situation doesn't get out of control," she said.

"Situation? Hell, I want to curse, but I can't think of a curse word vile enough for this *situation*," he said, running a hand through his hair. "I've always prided myself on my intuition and investigatory skills, but things are happening around me and I'm totally in the dark. I want to know why I'm of interest to those ... things."

She felt the prick when he said it. And he knew she did because his eyes instantly met hers. This time, no sympathy lay behind their hazel depths. He was angry and not about to drop the issue until his questions were answered. Either she went along with him, or he might go after the vampires on his own and she didn't want to lose him yet.

Still, none of this made sense. He was a human. Why didn't the vamps turn him into a vampire if he was so valuable to them? As one of them he'd keep his skills and gain all of theirs.

As she contemplated the question, she continued to study him. She could hear the warm blood surging through his veins, his heart pumping. Oddly, the sounds didn't stir the beast inside her. Instead, this breathing, muscled, hard-looking man made her wonder what it would be like to feel like a woman again, to be held in a man's arms and...

"I don't blame you," she said when she realized he was staring at her. "I want to know why they're interested in you too."

She'd also like to know why he was making her feel like this. She never thought about sex. Why had that changed since she'd met him? Maybe because he actually looked at her with desire? The mere act of his gaze sweeping over her had the ability to turn the icy blood in her veins molten. But no human could have *real* feelings for a vampire. At least not for long. And not once they realized what they'd gotten themselves into.

"Where do we go from here?"

"I think I have an idea or two," she said. "Want to get started right away?"

"You bet I do." He stalked across the room and into the alcove where his double bed and night table sat. He grabbed a worn leather jacket off the end of his bed and pulled it on as if it were part of his battle

gear. "Where are we going?"

"To Saint Eugenia's."

"After you." He held the door open for her. "One thing though. I'm not a hack driver anymore, I quit my job and I don't have my own wheels."

"That's okay. I do."

"Really? You didn't come on foot tonight?"

She cast him a scathing look. "Don't you mean sprout bat wings and fly here?"

He shrugged. "With everything else I've learned lately, I'm not going to discount anything until I know for sure it isn't possible."

She laughed—out loud! It felt foreign to her. She hadn't done that in years.

* * * *

Saint Eugenia's was in total darkness when they arrived. Not even the security lighting was on. Jess hoped she wasn't bringing Britt into more danger than they could cope with. After meeting that massive vampire the other night she had some doubts about her own abilities. She'd never met anyone remotely equal to her in battle until now.

A layer of land fog flirted just above the dewy grass, something that made scents even more pungent to her. Fog held everything in, contained it. She could smell the residual decaying blood and body fluids that had sunk into the grass beside the church.

She led Britt along the ancient stones at the side of the church.

Holding one hand up, she signaled for him to stop. She sensed a vampire in the vicinity, but she didn't know where he was.

Now she regretted bringing Britt with her. She didn't know enough about those vampires with glowing eyes. She shouldn't have put him in this danger.

At least he wore the cross she'd given him. That would give him a slim advantage. Even old, intelligent vampires weren't immune to crosses.

Because her soul had been partially salvaged by a priest, the cross didn't bother her, at least not crosses that small, but another vampire would feel excruciating pain in its presence. She might feel better about that if this vampire hadn't chosen a church for his killing ground.

Suddenly, she realized why the vampire could kill at the church. He must be like her! Why hadn't she considered that before? Until now, everyone thought she and James were the only vampires with the ability to survive sunlight, crosses, and holy ground.

From out of nowhere, a large form dove from the spire above them and landed solidly in front of Jess.

It was him! The massive vampire from the alley. Without James to help her, she could be in big trouble. She might not win this time.

"Britt. Leave right now," she grated out through clenched, elongated teeth.

"No. I'm staying."

No time to argue with him. She faced off with the vampire. They moved around each other, trying to figure out the best method of attack.

With a lurid expression on his wicked face, and signs of blood on his chin, he mocked her. He'd been feeding when she arrived. At the church! And, he wanted her to know it.

With a powerful leg thrust she burst forward, her heel spike aimed at his heart.

His reflexes were fast. Extremely fast, she realized as he moved away from her. He already knew about the heel spike so that advantage was lost. Normally vampires who fought her didn't survive long enough to be wary of her spike a second time. She grabbed her silver knife, which was ornately carved into the shape of a cross. She lunged at him.

The brute cringed back, but only for a second. The cross pained him, but not nearly enough.

Before she knew it, he'd grabbed her from behind. He whipped her around, grabbed her hair, and wrenched her head to one side, his fangs hovering over her neck, ready to plunge in.

"Britt! Go!" she yelled, more worried about him than herself. "Get out of here!"

Instead of obeying orders, Britt rushed forward with the cross in one hand and a bottle of holy water in the other.

Where'd he get the holy water? She knew it was all over when the vampire's teeth broke through the flesh on her neck. Nothing could save her this time. He'd suck every ounce of decency out of her, and she'd have no will left. Regent wouldn't be able to save her again.

Then, wrenching the cap off the bottle, Britt threw the holy water on the big vampire. Some splashed on Jess too, and damn it burned. But the big vampire had gotten the biggest dose of the water, and he dropped to his knees and covered his face with vibrating hands. His flesh boiled and bubbled. A deep, agonizing howl erupted from deep inside him, a sound that Jess could never get used to. She hated it almost as much as she hated what she was.

Suddenly, the vampire leaped to his feet, turned and ran. She knew his only hope of survival would be to get to his place of safety before he succumbed to the damage the water would cause. He'd be stronger than her because of his size, she guessed, but then her own searing pain blocked her ability to think straight. It felt like hot irons driving into her. She tried to keep herself under control. Screaming wouldn't help her or Britt right now, though the pain bubbled into her throat and she nearly lost it as she fell to the ground. Pain so excruciating she could no longer stand.

"Oh, Jess, I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice. I thought he was going to kill you." Britt dropped to his knees beside her.

"He was going to kill me. You saved my life." Jess pushed herself up on her elbows.

"Oh, my God, your face! Look what I've done to you." He pulled her into a sitting position and cradled

her in his arms. "I'm so sorry."

"I'll survive. But it hurts like hell."

"Is there anything we can do? Is there salve we can put on it?"

"Just one thing ... will work." She felt woozy. Britt wouldn't stand a chance if she passed out and the vampire came back, though it wasn't likely to happen since he'd taken the brunt of the holy water. He had to be in worse shape than she. "Take me to my brother," she managed to whisper.

His clean scent filled her nostrils when he lifted her into his arms. She clung to it as if it were a lifeline. "Where's your brother?"

"Saint Eugenia's Rectory, next door," she said, then closed her eyes and let darkness envelope her.

Chapter Eight

When Jess came to it was mid afternoon. She looked at the electronic clock on her table that told the time and date, something she always wanted to know when she woke. She'd been in the "suspended state" for the rest of last night and part of the day. She was in her bed at the rectory. Though still painful, when her fingers moved over the burned flesh on the left side of her face she knew it was healing at an amazing pace. One good thing about being a vampire, wounds didn't last long, but they hurt like hell until they healed.

She got up, showered and dressed in pajamas. Black satin pjs were her favorite. What else would suit a female vampire?

Slowly opening the door to her brother's office, she peered inside. Regent sat at his desk doing paperwork.

When he heard the door creak, his head snapped up and he gave her a broad smile.

"Love! How are you feeling today?"

"Like warmed up hell."

"John Brittain is definitely all you said he was. He actually saved you last night."

Had Regent even listened to her answer before he started gushing about John Brittain? "He got lucky," she said, dropping into the wingback chair in front of his antique oak desk and propping her slippered feet on the edge of his desk. So she'd only been out less than twelve hours. She'd bounced back quicker than she'd thought possible after taking a dose of holy water.

"Luck had nothing to do with it. If he hadn't used that holy water, you'd both be dead."

"I was surprised that he had some with him." She offered a small smile at Britt's instincts. He hadn't been told holy water would work, yet he'd brought it along just in case. She winced and touched her face. It had worked only too well.

"He pounded on the rectory door, and when I got to it, he rushed you inside and demanded that I do

something to help you.” Regent clasped his hands together as if in silent prayer. “If I hadn't been so worried about you, I think I'd have given him a glass of my best champagne.”

"No! Not your champagne.” He'd been saving that bottle for as long as she could remember. It had probably gone rancid long ago.

"When did he leave?” she asked, trying to look as if she didn't really care one way or another.

"Not until I assured him you were going to make it and you just needed rest in order to heal.”

"You call that *rest*?” She gave him an incredulous look. She called it dead.

"You know what I mean.”

It meant he didn't like to admit she was undead, if that terminology even fit this real life situation, or if it only worked that way in the movies. He had no idea what the physiological effects of vampirism really were. When it came right down to it, he couldn't admit to himself what she really was. She was his big sister, always.

"I guess he proved to be a solid team member. His performance wasn't too bad. He could've just left me there.”

"Not bad! Honey, most humans would have run away. They wouldn't have stood their ground like he did. He told me this vampire is a goliath. I imagine his strength is equal to his size. That makes him at least twice as strong as you. There's no way you could've beaten him alone.”

"Yeah, but I'm twice as smart,” she argued. It was true it had taken a lot of courage for Brittain to stay and fight. The size of that vampire was unusual. Even she felt like taking off when she'd seen him the first time. And nothing scared her—usually.

Regent might not be able to go out and fight side by side with her any longer, but he was the best strategist she knew, and, no doubt, he knew she hadn't told him everything. He always knew.

Worry etched into his wrinkled face as he leaned forward. His blue eyes had long ago faded to gray. The sparkle of youth had become the washed out pallor of age. “Tell me everything.”

"This vampire is different. If I'm right, he attacked me from the back left church spire. The one beside the huge copper cross.”

"Dear Lord! It can't be true. He's able to withstand a cross of that magnitude? He must be *very* powerful.” Regent instantly began reciting prayers under his breath.

"I'm afraid I may have found his killing ground, too. It probably gives him great satisfaction to kill his prey up there—on holy ground.”

"No.” The sound came out of him in an almost fearful sigh. “That would be unheard of.”

"I'm going to call Sampson right away, ask him to join me on the roof. I think we need to check it out.”

"The sooner the better,” Regent said, weariness creeping into his voice. “I won't be able to perform Sunday service knowing some poor soul has been violated up there.” He picked up his teacup and took

a long drink. "What about Britt?"

Jess touched Regent's shoulder. Nothing would stop him from doing Sunday service; he hadn't missed a Sunday in fifty-years. Even so, she intended to make sure the church hadn't been violated by that massive vampire. She needed to give her brother peace of mind.

"What about Britt?" Regent seemed awfully attached to Britt all of sudden. That made her nervous.

"Aren't you going to call him too? After what he's done for you, he at least deserves to be in on the investigation."

Jess put her feet on the floor and leaned her elbows on the desk, staring straight into Regent's eyes. "How long did you two talk yesterday?"

Regent held up his hand and blocked her gaze. "Don't try unsavory methods to make me talk, dear. It doesn't become you."

She laughed. "I wasn't going to, but you seem a little on the defensive. There must be something you're not telling me."

He got up and paced to the fireplace. He threw on a small log and kept his back to her. "Certainly not."
* * * *

Britt paced his apartment. He wanted to go back to Saint Eugenia's and demand to know how Jess was doing. But, of course he couldn't do that. Nor would she appreciate it. He'd have to wait. She'd come to see him sooner or later. At the very least the team would be going out together tomorrow night—if she could make it.

Who knew watching those old vampire movies would help him some day. He hadn't known if holy water would actually work, but he'd thought it was worth a try. Strange Jess hadn't taught that to the team. But after seeing the damage it did, he decided that maybe she had her reasons for not teaching them every one of a vampire's vulnerabilities.

The gravestone and the brown paper wrapper lying on the coffee table caught his attention. He had no idea why he'd kept the darned thing. He picked it up, paper and all, and dumped it into trashcan, then took the garbage bag to the chute in the hallway and dropped it down. Good riddance.

When he got back to the apartment his phone was ringing. He grabbed the receiver and barked, "Britt here." The voice at the other end sent a shaft of exultation through him. "Jess, it's good to hear your voice. How are you feeling?"

She responded positively and invited him to the rectory, saying she'd tell him why when he got there.

On the way, he told himself the urgent need to get there wasn't because he cared about her. *Hell no*. It was because she was the only person who could help him find out what was going on.

That and he really liked her brother. He and Regent had talked till the wee hours of the morning. It still seemed strange to know that Jess was over eighty. Could've been much older though, considering her *condition*. Regent had told him about one vampire they'd slain who'd been over two hundred years old.

Britt arrived at the rectory, paid the taxi driver and got out. There were several unmarked police vehicles

in the yard. His heart kicked up a notch. Had something happened?

The door swung open and two plainclothes officers stepped outside giving him a quick once-over. He could spot a cop a mile away. He gave them his best "I'm a cop too" nod. They accepted the gesture and moved on.

When he reached Regent's office, he heard voices. Was anybody listening, or were they all talking at once? Rather than step into the middle of the active discussions, he leaned against the doorjamb and surveyed everyone inside the room.

Jess knew the second he arrived—he'd bet on it. The side of her face was still marred, but the scar tissue had mostly healed. Amazing.

A bald man in a lab coat stood beside Jess, and he waved Britt in. "Come in. Come in. You must be John Brittain."

All eyes were instantly on him, including Jess's. She looked a little tired but appeared good to go.

"Britt, I'd like to introduce you to everyone," Jess said, still standing beside the bald guy. "This is Sampson Case, my Forensic Vampirologist."

Sampson had put his arm around Jess, and Britt's eyes narrowed. Was he a vampire too? No. He was sure he wasn't.

She continued introducing officers around the room. There were five of them in all, leaders from the other Special Ops Teams.

The first chance he got, he pulled Jess aside. "Why did you ask me here? What's going on?"

"We're just about to go up on the roof. We think that vampire we encountered last night is known as Prometheus. It appears that he's been killing people on the church's roof." She looked at him like the information was very important. Why?

She obviously understood his confusion, because she said, "Most vampires could never withstand being near a cross, especially a cross the size of the one on the roof. There's only one way this guy could've been up there. He has to be like me. He has a partial soul."

Britt blinked. She had a partial soul? What the hell did that mean?

Again, Jess must've sensed his confusion because she continued with, "That means he's very dangerous to us because if he's been killing on hallowed ground, it's a message to everyone that he's a very powerful force to be reckoned with."

"Jesus." A sudden lull in the chatter made his curse word hang in the air. He turned to Regent. "Sorry about that, Father."

Regent held up one hand indicating it wasn't a problem, and everyone went back to their conversation.

"It still doesn't explain why you called me here. With all the expertise in this room, you don't need me."

He kept his voice low so only she could hear him. He glanced around the room, again concluding there

were no other vampires here.

Jess leaned toward him, as if she didn't want to be overheard by anyone either. "Look, it's no big deal. I just figured after what happened last night, you'd want to be in on this."

Britt nodded. The old cop's code. He was involved so he got to take part in the follow-up. It felt good to be a member of the team again.

Instead of letting her know how happy he was to be included, he pursed his lips and set his expression in his most professional mask. "Since you put it that way, I am interested."

The roof wasn't easy to get to. Father Vandermire stayed behind. Britt could tell he wanted to go, but he wasn't physically up to climbing the narrow spiral staircase circling up five stories to the bell tower.

The stairway reeked of pigeon crap. A couple of the cops complained about it, but Britt kept his mouth shut. If that monster vampire had been feeding on the roof, the odor would likely be a hell of a lot worse when they got to the top.

When they finally reached the top and Sampson opened the door, he was proved right.

"Oh dear," Sampson said as he stepped onto the flat bit of roof. "Johnston, snap to it and get the pictures taken while we still have enough light." The sun was just above the horizon. Within the next half hour dusk would be settling in.

The small area of bronze sheeting was circled with bloodless bodies in different stages of decomposition. At first glance, Britt guessed there were at least a dozen corpses.

He suddenly realized Jess wasn't in the middle of the action and scanned the roof for her. He spotted her in the shadow of the cross barely outside the stairwell door. It was as if a palpable force held her where she stood, hunched over and weak.

He got to her just before she collapsed. Sweeping her into his arms, he hurried down the stairs before any of the other cops saw them.

At Regent's office, her brother rushed forward. "Jess!" His wrinkled hand lovingly caressed her face. "I told you not to go up there. You're still too weak from the holy water."

Britt lowered her onto the leather couch and pushed a cushion under her head. She was pale. As pale as he'd expect a vampire to be normally. Her eyes fluttered open for a second then closed again.

His gut writhed at the realization that he'd caused her weakened state. He'd sprayed that holy water on her and burned her horribly.

"I've got to go."

"Britt, wait. Tell me what's up there on the roof." Regent's voice sounded strained and exceedingly old.

He just kept going. He had to get out of here. No way did he want to see the look on Regent's face when he heard what was up there. No way in hell! "Sorry, Regent, I've got to go. Sampson will fill you in."

He'd seen some horrific things on the police force, but he still hadn't wrapped his mind around the idea that vampires hunted and killed in his city. And he still hadn't come to terms with the idea that Jess was one of them. Maybe he'd gone soft since he'd left the force, but he wasn't ready to tell that old man what kind of horror had occurred on the roof of his church. More than that, he didn't want to think about what he'd done to Jess.

On the way home, Britt was surprised to realize he wasn't thinking about the bodies on the church's rooftop. All he could think about was the way Sampson Case had put his arm around Jess, and the way her brother had caressed her face. They weren't affected by the fact that she was a blood sucking vampire. That intrigued him and terrified him at the same time.

He climbed the stairs and unlocked his door. Darkness had fallen.

He turned on the lights illuminating his tacky apartment. Why did his ratty furniture bother him so much now?

He opened the fridge. After grabbing a can of beer, he popped the top and drank deeply. There were four more cans in the fridge and a case under the counter. There'd been a time, after he'd killed Randy, when he would have finished it all. If he drank all of the beer right now, it might even help get Jess out of his mind. The thought dissipated as quickly as it formed.

He wasn't that man any more. He didn't drink to forget. He'd moved on, learned to face his demons. And even though he and Jess had found the vampire's killing ground, it didn't tell him a thing about what this mess had to do with him. Why those creatures were interested in him.

He drained the can but had no desire for another. The bodies on the roof hadn't bothered him. Fighting and taking out vampires sure as hell would not bother him.

He squeezed his eyes closed and remembered the way Jess had looked that first night on the sidewalk. In leather from head to toe, cleavage partially exposed and pressing against him. He'd felt something for her that night.

It should terrify him that she had the ability to wipe away that memory, even if it was only for a short time. God only knew what other capabilities she had besides the ability to rip out his throat and drain him of his blood.

His eyes flashed open. He knew what she was. What she was capable of doing. He could work with her, but there was no way in hell he should be thinking about her the way he was. There was no way in hell he could ever go to bed with her. Was there?

Chapter Nine

Jess revived minutes after Britt left. Simply being in the presence of the cross in her weakened state had caused her collapse. She was fine now. In another day or two she'd be able to withstand the cross with only minimal side effects. An unusual ability for vampires.

The team came back downstairs with ten body bags. They couldn't carry bodies from the church in broad daylight, so they decided to sneak them out under the cover of darkness.

While they waited for night to arrive, the team sat and discussed the logistics of the beast's killing

grounds and when and if he would return. It concerned Jess to know he'd been this close to her brother. There was every reason to believe he could even enter the church.

Just the thought of Regent being in that kind of danger was almost too much for Jess to bear. At one time, Regent could fight vampires with her, but he was now too old and too weak. He'd never survive a battle with a vampire this strong.

Number one on her agenda—always—was keeping her brother safe. As a human he'd always been at risk. Humans didn't have a vampire's strength. But for most of the last fifty years he'd been healthy and strong and an able vampire hunter.

She'd often wondered how hard vampire hunting had been on him. He'd taken vows and killing was a sin. Killing someone clinically dead might not be a sin, but in his eyes, it was still a sin.

But he loved her and did what he had to do for her sake. She heaved a ragged breath and felt years of guilt spread through her body, adding to her lethargy.

No one on the team asked why Britt had left. They probably figured he couldn't stomach what he'd seen on the roof. She knew better. He was a good cop. As gruesome as it had been up there, he could keep it together in situations like that.

Though he wouldn't admit it, Jess knew Regent was troubled by Britt's quick departure. She figured her brother was afraid her future protector couldn't cut it. She could see it in his eyes. From the very first moment he'd met Britt, he couldn't contain the excitement behind those tired irises. She'd seen it in his face when she had surfaced from her bedroom, scarred but healing, that afternoon. He'd really thought Britt was the person who could take his place.

For Regent's sake, she'd never admit openly that she didn't think Britt was the one. Regent was old and frail, and anything that gave him hope was well worth the pretense. If Regent needed to believe Britt could be her protector, she'd make sure he'd get his wish, even if she had to make Britt go along with the farce.

As was her usual routine after spending an evening with her brother, she stepped onto the rectory's roof and sailed to the ground, moving away from the house like a silent cat through the dewy grass. It bothered her that she hadn't sensed the vampire on the church's roof. In fact, she didn't spend much time near the church itself, anymore. Besides that night she'd found Britt there, she avoided the church. Not because she wasn't able to enter. She could. But because she couldn't truly practice her faith. Not as a vampire. An abomination. Evidently, she'd made a mistake that could have cost her brother his life.

A mistake she wouldn't make again.

When she reached Britt's place, she scaled the wall. Usually she went in the front door, but it was late and she was in a hurry. The patio door was locked. Britt was in bed sound asleep. She could move through the room without him even knowing she was there, even if he was a light sleeper.

She thought about that night in front of the brick wall when she'd pressed her body against his hard form. He'd wanted her instantly when he thought she was a red-blooded human. But even then he wouldn't take her up on her offer. He was a good man, though, at the moment, he didn't believe in himself.

Unaware of her watchful gaze, he moaned and shifted slightly. Cursing, she lifted the blanket and covered his legs. Nursemaid she wasn't. What she'd just done was totally out of character. It made her

angry. It made her feel cornered.

Britt shifted again, then settled in more comfortably. Even asleep, he looked so damned sexy.

Gritting her teeth, she left his bedroom. She'd hoped to be able to talk to him tonight, but now that she saw him sleeping peacefully, she didn't have the heart to wake him up.

Why couldn't she stop thinking he looked good enough to kiss? That image surfaced in her conscious mind with a will of its own, and she couldn't make it go away.

While he slept his face was peaceful. His jaw, covered in dark stubble, and his hard, bare chest brought images of what it would be like to be in that bed with him, wrapped in his warm arms, feeling his life infuse her.

That would never happen though. Humans and vampires didn't mix.

She hissed out her frustration. Before she left, she glanced back at him. It was then she noticed he wasn't wearing the cross.

She found the cross on the kitchen table. Keeping him safely asleep with her powers of mind control, she lifted his head gently, slipped the chain over his head and pressed it against his warm skin. The cross sizzled a little in her hand, but the flesh around it felt warm and lovely.

Back on the balcony, she locked his patio door behind her so no other unwelcome intruders from the night might enter his room. She looked at the skyline before her and sensed a vampire on a nearby roof. Her stomach clenched. This vampire had been there watching Britt for weeks. She hated to leave Britt alone. She had no idea when that vamp might decide to come after him. But as much as she wanted to, she couldn't always be there to protect him either. He'd trained hard. He had to be capable of looking after himself.

She tucked her chin down to her chest, said a silent prayer of protection, and scaled the side of the building.
* * * *

Britt woke with a hell of a headache. He lay there for a long time, hoping the pain would go away before he had to lift his head off the pillow to get some pain medication. No such luck.

He stumbled to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet, retrieving the aspirin bottle. When he shut the cabinet door he saw the cross in the mirror's reflection. Slowly, his hand went to it and touched the silver contours. Did he have it on when he went to bed? No. He didn't think so.

But how else could it have gotten there? He only drank a couple of beers. He would've remembered putting the cross on.

A splash of cold water helped revive him enough to find a water glass and take some aspirin. He'd been prone to headaches since he'd killed Randy.

With a sigh, he went into the kitchen. Looked around the room out of habit. Everything appeared to be in place.

First on the agenda, he needed to make a pot of coffee. And despite his headache, his stomach growled.

He opened the cupboard to see if he could find anything for breakfast.

When someone knocked on his door, his heart sank. Until a couple of weeks ago there hadn't been anyone at his door for an entire year, but now he couldn't keep people away.

Still feeling raw, he moved toward the door and opened it with an irritated jerk. "What the hell do you want?"

"Morning." It was Jess. From her almost bored expression, he could tell his method of opening the door didn't faze her.

"Why are you here? It's daytime."

"Gee, thanks for the lovely greeting." She wore a full length black velvet coat that she peeled off as soon as she stepped inside. He was almost afraid to see what she wore underneath, afraid to feel the emotions that she stirred up inside him.

"You know what I mean. How can you be out in the sunlight?"

She tugged at her fitted white blouse that looked as if it was made just for her. A black silk mid-length skirt with a slit halfway up her thigh was nearly his undoing. Lord the woman knew how to dress.

Her eyes went immediately to the cross at his neck, or to his bare chest. Her perusal reminded him that he wasn't dressed. His pajama bottoms were decent enough, but at present they were riding low. He pulled them up and tightened the knot.

"If I want to, and given a little time and preparation, I can move around in the daytime just like you. That's why Prometheus is a concern to us. He's not just a night stalker; he's capable of much more."

"Look, make yourself comfortable while I throw on some clothes."

"Right." She walked to the kitchen area and kept her back turned while he dressed.

"Why are you up and about this early? Don't you usually spend your night hours working?" he asked.

"Yes, but I had to talk to you. I've been trying to figure out what's going on, and I think I might be on to something."

"Really." He pulled his jeans up and zipped them as he walked back into the dining/kitchen area and poured himself a coffee. For an instant he almost offered her one. "What is it?"

"I want to ask some questions about when you were a cop."

"Okay," he agreed with reluctance. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss the past, especially with a headache.

She flicked her hair back and touched her neck, as if feeling for a necklace that wasn't there. "I could be way off here, but I think they're following you because you were a cop. Something must've happened. Maybe something that didn't mean anything to you at the time."

He frowned and plunked down onto a chair at the table, then braced his elbow strategically so he could

hold up his pounding head. Damn, he felt like hell.

"Mind if I close the patio curtains?" she asked.

"Sorry. I should have thought about that." Since the room was so small, he reached over and closed the vertical blinds without leaving his chair. "Light still bothers you?" Who was he kidding, it bothered him today, too. The aspirin should start working soon.

"Just a bit. Sunglasses help, but I'd rather not wear them while we're talking."

"What do you want to know?" He was racking his brain about his work as a police officer, but he couldn't think of anything, outside of his partner's death, that was the out of the ordinary.

"How long were you a cop?"

"Ten years."

"Were you ever involved in anything less than legit? Took money under the table or looked the other way for a price?"

He stiffened, but then he realized she wasn't accusing him. "No. Never."

She looked down at her hands, then placed them on the table. "But your partner Randy took bribes, didn't he? You knew nothing about that at the time?"

"Not until the night that I ... punched him." His words felt like acid in his mouth. Saying he killed someone would never be easy.

"And the punch proved fatal, right?"

"Yes."

"What happened next?"

He gave her a weary look. Why put him through this? "You must've read the files."

A strange excitement illuminated her eyes. "Actually, no. The files are missing."

"What?"

"Missing. Strange isn't it. First your partner's body goes missing before the coroner can do the autopsy, then his personal effects are stolen, and now the files that explain the entire situation are gone. Why would that happen?"

"I don't know."

"Someone is covering up something."

"Hey, it's not me. I would have willingly gone to jail for my crime. I still don't understand how that punch killed him. I thought I hit him in the gut, but maybe I was too close to his solar plexus. I just don't know." He pushed his forehead against his propped hand. "I wanted to see the autopsy report as much as the

police force did so I could figure out what the hell happened."

"Maybe there was a reason the police force didn't get a chance to see his body."

"What are you getting at?" Britt leaned forward, his jaw aching from the tension that suddenly gripped him.

She breathed out a long sigh, as if trying to calm herself. "I don't want to get your hopes up, but in light of Prometheus's ability to function at the church, I think there may be others like him. Vampires who can mix in with humans, undetected. What if your partner Randy was a vampire? After all, you two did work the night shift."

Britt felt the room tilt. He closed his eyes and reflexively grabbed onto the table. "It can't be true."

"Maybe it isn't. But what if it is?"

"Then why would he play dead after I punched him?"

"If he's what we think he is, he doesn't have to play. He is dead in the human sense of the word. That gives us a whole new set of questions. But you're right. Why'd he want to make it look as if you'd killed him?"

Britt sucked in a ragged breath. Even so, he felt the first glimmer of hope he'd experienced in two years. "Maybe so I wouldn't turn him in? He knew I couldn't work with a dirty cop." But thinking that he might have been a vampire? It was just too hard to believe. "I can't even let myself think that he was a vampire. What are the odds?"

"Not so far fetched, I think. I came to you in the first place because they were following you. If Randy is a vampire, maybe he's keeping tabs on you for some reason."

"Okay," he said, holding his hands up in front of his face, palms out as if it could stop the crazy thoughts from whirling around his brain. "First thing we have to do is get Randy's personnel records. They didn't disappear with the other records, did they?"

"No, those records are still at the station."

"He might have been able to fake blood tests and doctor's reports, but maybe we'll be able to find something that will prove whether or not he was human."

"You and I are thinking along the same lines." Jess tapped her index finger against her lips as she gazed thoughtfully into the distance.

"What about his wife? Do we talk to her?" "Do you think she's a vampire too?" He felt the blood drain from his face. "They had a baby. Can a vampire father a child?"

"We can worry about the wife later. She's not the one I'm concerned about right now. And in answer to your question, vampires can't father or bear children, so his wife must be human. And if the child is his, Randy must've been human at some point, too."

She leaned one arm on the table and looked him in the eye. "If Randy is what we think he is, we don't want to show our hand yet. We'll have to be careful about how we handle our investigation. I don't think

we should tell anyone what we're doing. Except Drake. In fact, I've already asked him to get the files. They should be waiting for us at the station."

They really were on the same wavelength. "If this is true, I've been a prize sap for the past year," he said, thinking about the money he'd sent Randy's wife.

"Let's just take this one step at a time. Want to go to the station and check out his records now?"

"Since you operate outside the regular police force, do you have access to records?"

"No, not directly. That's why Drake pulled the records on the QT. They're in his office. Let's go."

Britt had finished dressing and followed Jess out the door before he realized that his headache was suddenly gone. His adrenaline was pumping, and he was anxious to be on the job.

Had Randy's death been faked? If so, why? And why frame him?

It didn't make sense. But what else was new? Nothing had made sense since Jess walked into his life.

Chapter Ten

Jess unlocked the doors to Regent's truck, a brand new SUV sport with chrome roll bars. Everyone in the parish got a kick out of their elderly priest's wheels. They didn't realize he bought vehicles like this for much darker reasons, such as providing transportation for his sister. One of the undead.

Poor Regent. In some ways, his life had been more difficult than hers. Instead of living a good life as a priest, he'd spent it fighting vampires and trying to save a scrap of his sister's humanity. She very much appreciated his devotion and would never do anything to let him down. At least not if she could help it.

But even her darkest thoughts couldn't deter her today. A surge of excitement thrummed through her. If Prometheus had been on the roof of the church they were on the verge of a discovery. Finding Prometheus's hunting ground was a big deal. It would prove that he had abilities believed to belong exclusively to Jess and James, and only because her brother had saved their immortal souls from total damnation through prayers and baptism.

And, thanks to Britt, she had survived the holy water ordeal and then the cross. Without him, she wouldn't have been so lucky. Vampires had their frailties and she was all too intimately aware of her own, especially lately. In fact, Prometheus was the first vampire who had posed a threat to her fifty-year record. He'd been the first one who survived her attack and got to talk about the fight afterwards. She didn't like that. Not one bit.

On the drive to the station, Britt remained quiet. She knew how it felt to be off the police force. It had been decades before she got to go back. In fact, her picture was on the wall at the station along with the other ten rookies who'd just made the cut that year. 1952. She'd been the only woman in the precinct back in those days—well ahead of her time.

She turned a corner and the brownstone station loomed on top of the hill. Squad cars filled the parking lot. It felt strange to be working with Britt after watching him for so long. Of course, he thought of her as nothing more than a vampire. She was intimately aware of the way he scrutinized her, as if trying to figure out how she really ticked. Psychoanalyzing her the way a good cop should. Kudos to him. Not many

people dared to look below her surface. They were usually too afraid they might see the real truth. For that matter, so was she. It had taken years for Regent to coax her into believing in herself again.

She parked the truck and readjusted her sunglasses. "Ready?" She hated the dark circles under Britt's eyes and the desolation marring his features. If only she could take away some of his pain. Unfortunately, he had to learn to do that for himself.

With a quick movement he unclipped his seat belt and opened his door. "Yeah."

It didn't escape her attention that even though he tried to feign indifference, he hung back after she stepped into the building. This was the last place in the universe he wanted to be right now. Too many memories.

She waited for him, pretending not to notice his unease. She knew he wouldn't like it if he realized she sensed his weakness. Besides, she didn't consider his reluctance to go back inside the precinct a weakness. She'd been in the same position herself many years ago, and she understood the relationship a cop had with his home base, his precinct.

"Drake isn't in his office," she told Britt. "He had to attend a briefing, but he gave me the combination to the safe in his room."

They both reached for the doorknob at the same time. His hand pressed over hers and their eyes met. She waited for him to pull back in horror. He didn't. The warmth of his hand on hers felt foreign yet wonderful.

"You're wasting your time," she said, pulling her hand away before he realized that he was touching her. She didn't want to see that look of horror that she'd seen in his apartment when she'd first shown him her vampire countenance. "The door's locked. I've got the key."

After unlocking the office door, she led him inside.

* * * *

He shouldn't have touched Jess like that. It was apparent she didn't like it. At least they hadn't been spotted by any of the boys in blue. That made Britt feel better about being here. He didn't want anyone asking questions.

Britt closed and locked the door behind them. Jess twirled the combination lock on the safe and took out the faded blue file folders stuffed thick with papers.

Britt tried to peer over her shoulder to get a look at the folders while she carried them to the table in the center of the room. "Why does Randy have so many personnel records? My file was only half that thick in ten years. Randy was a cop for less than three years."

She opened the first folder, pulled out the stack of papers, split it in two and handed half to Britt. "Let's find out."

"What exactly are we looking for?" he asked.

"Anything suspicious. Anything too pat."

After poring over every inch of paperwork, Britt rubbed his forehead. Randy's records consisted of the

usual things, leave taken, and performance reviews. Medical records which probably meant he'd been human for part of his time on the force. Unless he'd been able to fake the records somehow. Still, he continued to quarry for something—anything.

What he finally found came as a complete shock. Randy had been written up on several occasions for improper conduct. No action had been taken, and the files had been closed each time. How'd he get away with that? No wonder his file was so thick. Not to mention, as Randy's partner, Britt should have been privy to that kind of information.

Near the end he found a report written two weeks before Randy's demise. Excitement coursed through him as he snatched the paper out of the stack and desperately looked it over. Surely here there would be an indication that Randy was faking his report. He double checked the blood work against the last one.

Hoping against hope that it would be exactly the same as the time before, indicating that it had been copied. Anything that might prove Britt wasn't a murderer. His hands started to shake when he realized there was nothing there.

"Find something?" Jess asked, as if she could sense his turmoil.

"Britt's shoulders slumped and he dropped the stack of papers onto the table with finality. "Not a damn thing except that Randy got away with some improper conduct." Even worse, Randy had had a clean bill of health. "In fact, Randy's last medical said he was in A-one shape. His blood pressure was perfect, his respiration great, even his eyesight was better than 20-20."

"Really." Something in the way she said it made him lift his head and look at her.

"What are you thinking?"

"I think you *have* found something after all. Look at this." She held out a medical form from Randy's first year on the force.

"Same thing," Britt said. "What's different? His health was great."

She pointed at the very small line at the bottom of the page. Randy had been slightly myopic in his first year on the force. He didn't need glasses, but the optometrist made a note that he wanted Randy to have his eyes checked again within a year.

"Wait!" She flipped through his records again. "He had his next eye exam all right, and his vision was perfect the second year. Better than perfect." She raised her beautiful eyebrows cynically. "Right under their noses."

"Couldn't his vision have just improved?" Of course he wanted to believe he hadn't killed Randy, but his own guilt wouldn't let him off that easily.

"Vision might be able to improve slightly, but Randy's vision is amazing. My guess is he had pretty good night vision too."

"I can't accept that. Not yet. We need a hell of a lot more evidence than just good eyesight to make me believe Randy's a vampire and probably still alive."

"We're not done looking yet."

"Did Drake look through this folder?" Britt asked, reaching for a file sitting in the middle of the table.

"No. Not yet. He told me to look them over and let him know what we found. He's been pretty busy trying to keep the task force a secret. He's been doing a lot of covering these days because some people in the precinct are getting curious. Maybe too curious."

Jess's cell phone rang. She answered it and listened silently. Her eyes widened and she looked directly at Britt. "We'll be right there."

Britt grabbed the paperwork off the desk and moved to the other side of the office. He stuffed the folders back into the safe and twirled the tumbler. "Where are we going?"

"Sampson wants to see us right away."

"Any idea why?"

"It seems he's made a discovery. One he's very excited about."

"Are you going to keep me in the dark or tell me what the hell it is?" Britt growled, making Jess's eyes light up with amusement.

"Sampson will explain the whole thing when we get there."

"Where's his office?"

"The other side of town. Let's go."

"He doesn't work at the precinct?"

"No. He's a very specialized Forensic Vampirologist. A key member of our team, but he doesn't work for the police force directly. They couldn't afford his wages."

"Who does he work for?"

"Me," she said simply before she left Drake's office.

* * * *

Sampson's morgue was in a subbasement lab in a geochemical company's complex. Jess led him down pristine white hallways and past uniformed medical types with masks and lab coats and piercing stares that made Britt conscious of not belonging here.

Jess opened a door to what looked like a janitor's closet. It was unmarked and insignificant, but it opened into a theatre overlooking a large morgue.

"There you are, Jess," Sampson said from below the viewing platform. He moved from one slab to another dressed in green scrubs with a clear polypropylene covering, footsies and hat, and a biohazard mask with a clear plastic face shield. He stopped and looked up at her, then with two fingers on his chin tilted his head to look at Britt. "You brought John Brittain with you? Blow me over with a feather."

"What's that mean, exactly?" Britt muttered.

"Look, don't make a big deal over it," Jess said. "I've never brought anyone here before, except Regent and James."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons." Anger danced in her pupils and she closed herself off from him.

Why hadn't she brought anyone else here? Because she didn't know if she could trust them with her secret?

Tearing his attention away from her and returning it to the room below, it hardly seemed possible the bodies down there had been recently alive. Right now, they looked more like ancient mummies than corpses. But then, they'd had all of their blood removed, and in the heat on the rooftop, the conditions must have been perfect to dry them out.

"Are those corpses going to become vampires when the moon is full?" he asked. Maybe they should have covered this in training.

She gave him a thoughtful once over. "You *have* been a fan of horror fiction, haven't you?"

"When I was a kid I watched all the scary movies I could. Just never expected any of it to be real."

"In the real world, turning a victim into a vampire is a very complicated procedure. Only an experienced vampire, who's had a lot of practice, can do it."

"If VNA acts like a virus, why doesn't it turn a person into a vampire when it gets into the bloodstream?"

"VNA can only become active when the victim's blood is ninety-nine percent drained. The vampire has to be very precise in his calculations, a little too much blood loss and the victim dies, a little less and the victim dies. Only an old master, or the occasional natural, can achieve creation without failure."

Britt frowned and looked down at Sampson and the corpses. "If that's the case, where are all of these new vampires coming from?"

Sampson raised his head and looked up at Britt. "Good question, young man. And I think I might be on the verge of solving that puzzle."

"Prometheus is old," Jess said. "If he's a master vampire, he's had the time to master his craft."

Sampson moved to the next corpse and split open the chest cavity with a noisy saw, leaned over the body, and reached in with both hands. "Just like the others, the heart is completely dehydrated." He pulled it out and held it high enough so they could see it. The heart resembled some strange shaped puffball fungus. Then he flipped on a switch and lifted his scalpel to point at a projection on the wall. "Okay, here's what I've found out." A strange looking double helix twirled before their eyes. "As you know, Jess, people who become vampires have their DNA genetically modified when they are infected with the virus."

"Right," she said.

"I've managed to extract some VNA from a couple of the less decomposed bodies." He stopped working, looked up at them and pushed his face mask to the top of his head. "Prometheus is a product of

biotechnology. For all intents and purposes, he's most likely a super vampire."

"Meaning?" Jess frowned and planted her arms over her chest. She didn't like the sound of this.

"Here's my theory," Sampson said, pulling up a stool and propping himself on it. "I've done some extensive genealogical research over the years. Most vampires in the Eighteenth Century were members of the aristocracy so records were actually kept on them. It probably didn't concern them because in those days, most people couldn't read and records never got further than the local village parish hall or church. It appears the vampires reinvented themselves every generation by pretending they were the offspring of the previous vampire. By my records, vampires nearly died out in Europe during the late 1800s and early 1900s, when people became aware and afraid of them and started hunting them. I think the population dwindled to a handful before the First World War. In nature, animals who survive are the smartest and strongest and sometimes evolve to super status in order to maintain their species. I think this could've happened to vampires. The need to survive extinction made them stronger. They had to find a way to save themselves."

He flipped the switch again and another picture clicked onto the wall. "Imagine this. It's World War I. Mankind didn't have time to worry about vampires. They were too busy trying to save their own asses. Vampires most likely became less and less important until society forgot they ever believed in them. Then vampires became nightmare creatures that only existed in imaginations." He smiled, as if he respected what they'd achieved. "I think that inadvertently, the horrors of the war helped them disappear long enough to regroup."

With a quick look back at the row of seats behind him, Britt lined himself up with one and dropped into it.

Bad move. As soon as he'd done that, he realized he was at eye level with Jess's perfect rear-end. He shifted in his chair and tried to focus on Sampson again, but his gaze kept going back to that well-rounded bottom positioned way too close to his field of vision.

"During this time, it appears likely the smarter, tougher vampires realized they had to blend into society to protect themselves from extinction. Being nocturnal is both a blessing and a curse, so they probably set out to create a serum to enable them to go out in the daytime. Of course this is all supposition at this point, but I've got a gut feeling I'm right."

Next, a medical breakdown of minerals and blood showed up on the projection on the wall. Britt had no idea what it meant, but he knew Sampson would explain the information.

"See the way the blood is shaped here? It looks like they've created a synthetic element that allows them to be almost human." He pointed at the image on the wall with his scalpel. "If Prometheus is an example of what they can achieve, I'd say they're evolving into vampires who might never need to be dormant during the day. I think they can probably even withstand direct sunlight. Optimum survival conditions for vampires."

"How long have they had this serum?" she asked.

Sampson shrugged. "No way to tell. I'd love to get my hands on a vial of it. I didn't get enough from the victims to be able to really breakdown its chemical compounds the way I'd like to. It was pretty much gone when I figured out there was something different in the blood. I'll see if I can work something out with one of my outpatients. They're on the streets. They must've have seen what's going on. Surely they can fill me in on the information I'm lacking."

"Outpatients?" Britt frowned at Jess.

"Sampson works with a handful of vampires who want to become human again. He's trying to help them.

"How many of these drug-taking vampires are out there?" Britt asked.

"Hard to say." Sampson answered.

"Yeah." Jess bit her lip and looked at Britt. "Means we've got to get to work. First we'll find out if your dead partner is one of the undead, and if so, why he's interested in you. Then maybe we'll be able to figure out what's going on with the serum."

* * * *

They left the innocuous looking building that hosted more secrets than Britt cared to think about. Jess followed him in her extra dark sunglasses and velvet coat.

"We're going to the graveyard." She looked at her watch. "C'mon, we've got to hurry. If we're going to check your partner's coffin, I'd like to do it before the sun sets."

"Because his body won't be there after sunset if he's a vampire?"

The smile that spread across her face made him more aware of her physically and struck him like a punch. Her sense of humor surprised him more each time it surfaced.

"Uhhhh ... nooo." She stretched the words out, residual humor still evident in her voice. "Because we don't have a flashlight and you won't be able to see in the dark. Vampires don't really sleep in their coffins, you know. If Randy is a vampire, he'll be set up somewhere nice, I imagine."

"Good to know." This time he got behind the wheel and they drove directly to the cemetery. At least he knew where Randy was buried. Hell, he'd spent enough time there agonizing over what he'd done to his partner.

If Randy wasn't dead-dead, it would change everything.

"I didn't think anything about Randy being buried in a family crypt until now," he told Jess when they got within a mile of the cemetery. "Now it just seems a lot creepier."

"Relax. Crypts aren't places of evil. They're just crypts. Vampires don't hang around them. We live our lives amongst society, not with rotting corpses."

He heaved a sigh. "I know I've seen too many movies, but right now those movies are all coming back. I'm trying to figure out what's real and what's not."

"Understandable. For starters, you've had quite a shock finding out we're for real. The vampires' greatest feat was in becoming fictionalized."

"How many vampires are good guys, like you and James?"

"Not many, if any at all."

"How'd it happen? How'd Regent keep you from being like the rest of them?"

She shook her head but stared straight ahead. "I really don't know. It's amazing what he did. He should be canonized as far as I'm concerned. He's got power over evil that no one else has been able to recreate, as far as I know."

"But the church doesn't know what he did?"

"No. If they did, they'd probably excommunicate him. He's worked his whole life for God and has achieved something even the most acclaimed Bishop or clergy could never do. Can you imagine how the hierarchy would take it if they found out about his unsanctioned dabbling in evil? I'm sure that's how they'd see it. Even exorcists have to be sanctioned and there are very few of them."

"I see your point. And James? How'd he happen to get help from your brother?"

A long pause hung in the air. Jess's face had become about as bleak as he'd seen it. "I'm the one who turned James," she said, her hands tightly threaded and still.

"I see." She was the vampire who'd turned James? She'd made him a bloodsucking creature of the night? Well, hell, what did he expect? A Girl Scout selling cookies? She was the real deal.

"That was in my darkest time. Before Regent had fully converted me. James forgave me long ago, but I can't forgive myself. I owe him everything for taking his life. Don't ask me why, but he stands by my side and fights with me every day. He's special."

They drove down narrow roads in the cemetery until they reached the back quarter. Britt knew this place only too well. He'd spent too many agonizing hours here.

The stone crypt sat on the crest of a knoll. "That's Randy's crypt." Britt pointed. "The one with the guardian angels carved over the door."

Jess walked to the crypt and inspected it. "Those aren't guardian angels, Britt. They're fallen angels." After examining the carvings more closely, she bent down to survey the lock on the crypt's door.

"How can you tell they're not regular angels?"

"They've got weapons. See, this one has a knife on a belt and this one is wearing a sword across his back."

"I'll be damned. I didn't notice that before." He looked more closely at the intricate carvings that had probably cost a hell of a lot of dough. "If Randy's a vampire, then his wife would have to know what he is, right?" Britt said.

"Not necessarily. I guess it would depend on how that serum Sampson discovered works. I assume other members of Randy's family are buried here?"

"Yeah, I guess. The crypt doesn't look new. Maybe, Randy isn't even the first in line to be a vampire."

"He might have another relative who was turned ahead of him," she said, but didn't sound convinced.

"Do we still need to look inside?"

"We do." She tipped her head and gave him a grim look. "Sorry, but just having these carvings on the building doesn't mean there are vampires inside. It might mean absolutely nothing except an artist thought it was a good idea to give the angels weapons."

He heaved a ragged breath. "Let's get inside. The sun's about to set behind those trees. I'm not afraid to tell you that I'd rather not be inside this place when the sun goes down. I know it's stupid, but I have a phobia about skeletons. Being inside with bones and not being able to see them makes it even worse." Since she'd shared her deep dark secret with him, it was only fair he shared his.

"Whatever gave you that phobia?" she asked.

"Whoever said Halloween was fun for kids?"

"Don't worry I have a phobia too. It's called Phengophobia. Fear of sunshine."

"Yeah, at least your phobia has a basis in rationality. Sunshine isn't exactly healthy for you."

"Well, don't worry. It'll just take a few minutes to check his coffin. Maybe his remains will still be there and we'll find out we're wrong about Randy being a vampire. Then you'll be so happy you'll forget we're looking at bones."

She took hold of the iron door handle and wrenched the deadbolt right through the solid stone as if it was Styrofoam.

No time to think about her impressive brute strength right now. They still had a coffin to desecrate. He stepped inside, staying close behind her. A faint light shone through the tiny stained glass window in the top corner of the eaves. Dust motes teemed in the thin shaft of light.

To the left and to the right of the door, four coffins sat on shelves two-tiers deep. Another coffin rested on a pedestal in the middle of the room. "Place of honor?" he said.

Moving closer to the casket, Jess blew some of the dust off the brass nameplate. "Barnaby Starr, born 1826 died 1913. Must be Randy's great-grandfather.

"But where's Randy?"

She turned and looked at the two coffins behind her. Brushing dirt off the placards with two fingers, she leaned closer to read the names that were faintly inscribed on the plates. "Not here. Must be behind you."

"Just my luck." The hair rose on his arms as he stepped toward the two coffins and read their nameplates. "This is it." Of course, the coffins were hermetically sealed and there was no real smell of death, but somehow Britt smelled it anyway. Only a little fresh air circulated inside, and even with the front door hanging open he found it difficult to breathe.

Gripping and ungripping his hands, he clenched his teeth and reached out to open the coffin. It didn't budge, so he gave it another wrench. Nothing. He cast a quizzical look at Jess.

She had some sort of brass wrench in her hand. "You have to unlock the ends first with this."

He saw the keyholes then. Jess unscrewed each end. When he heard the hiss of the hermetic seal breaking, he knew she'd opened the coffin.

"Tell me, is it normal to have something like that lying around inside crypts?" He pointed to the brass wrench.

"No. But it might be if the occupants were vampires and needed to be released after burial."

The coffin was about to open. To expose a vampire maybe. But more likely to expose a mummified body and not white fleshless bones. Either way, Britt wanted to run out of here as fast as his feet would take him. But then that wouldn't be very macho. Since Jess was already way stronger than him physically, he at least had to show a mental strong front.

She wrenched on the casket's lid and it opened. A vile, clogging stench filled the room. Britt grabbed the front of his T-shirt and covered his mouth. It didn't help.

They looked into the coffin. "He's here." Britt said.

"How tall was he?"

"Six feet."

"It's not him then," Jess said.

He didn't know why her matter-of-fact tone startled him. She had spent the last fifty years hunting her own kind. Probably visited more than one crypt in that time. He was also embarrassed. The reason he hadn't noticed the size of the body was because he hadn't really looked.

This time he made himself stare at the skeleton. He'd seen lots of death, and all types of injuries and wounds. They didn't bother him. But show him a skeleton and he turned to mush. As far as he was concerned, being in a room with a skeleton was worse than an arachnaphobic being covered with tarantulas. He broke out in a cold sweat. "Who was it? Someone from the streets?"

"Hard to say," Jess said. "Whoever it is is covered with dirt, as if buried in the ground before being put in this coffin. That would probably explain the amount of decay."

Holding his breath, Britt forced himself to examine what was left of the body. Bony fingers lay across the exposed rib bones. Then he saw the wedding rings. He let the T-shirt drop from his face. "It's a woman. She's got wedding rings on."

"Yeah, still could be anyone though. We needed to know whether Randy was buried here. He isn't. Let's go."

"Wait a minute. She's got a ring on the other hand, I can see a little bit of it."

Jess lifted the skeletal hand and the bones dislocated and tumbled into the coffin making noises like dice. Britt's skin crawled.

"I've seen that ring before. Randy had it specially made for his wife. Purple amethyst stones surrounding one perfect diamond. My God, this is Randy's wife! I'm sure of it. He wouldn't bury anyone else with that ring. She treasured it. If she's dead, who the hell have I been supporting?"

Jess reached into the coffin and turned the skull sideways. "Look here. Even though the rest of the flesh is gone, there's still a small tag of skin with two marks on the neck area. She was vamped and it didn't work. He probably buried her in the ground to keep her hidden until he could move her into the family crypt without being noticed. By the amount of decay, he must've had to wait a while. How long has it been since you last saw her?"

"Two years," Britt grated his teeth over his lower lip. "I've been sending her money for the last two years."

After taking a big breath, he leaned in. Fears aside, he needed to see this for himself. He saw the piece of skin that looked like a piece of dried up apple with two dark holes in it. "How could there be skin on this one spot when all the rest of it is long gone?"

"It has VNA in it. Since the vampirization attempt didn't work, the VNA didn't travel far. VNA has the ability to keep tissue intact for a very long time. That's why there's still a bit of tissue left here and nowhere else."

"That's it then. Since Randy's body isn't here, and she's been bitten by a vampire, he has to be a vampire, right?" Damn. It wasn't solid proof. He wanted to know for sure. Wanted validation that he hadn't killed Randy. But things were looking rosier. If you could call finding out his partner might be a vampire rosy.

"Yes. And whether or not it was Randy, someone tried to turn his wife but didn't have the skill. Whoever it was probably didn't know how hard it really is to recreate another vampire."

Suddenly, as if someone had flipped off a switch, the crypt went dark. "Hell, let's get out of here." He hated sounding scared. He'd been one of the toughest cops on the beat. No one had dared cross him then. Good thing they didn't know about his fear of skeletons.

"Relax, the sun just dropped below the level of the window up there. It's not dark outside yet. Your eyes will adjust in a couple of seconds."

Big tough cop! Scared of being in the dark with a skeleton. At the same time, he was too close to Jess. He dragged his attention away from the horrors around him and focused on her. His thoughts were dangerous at the moment. Dangerous because the temptation to pull her into his arms pervaded his every thought. But if he touched her in that way, he'd be lost. He just knew it. He'd been trying to ignore the fact that she was wearing that leather outfit that drove him over the edge. He might not be able to see her in it right now, but he remembered every nuance of the way it fit her. He wanted to explore her mouth with his. Run his fingers through her thick, silky hair. Let his hands wander over her magnificent body. Damn! He'd certainly gotten over his fear of her.

Suddenly, Jess grabbed his hand and led him outside. "Lift your foot, there's a bit of a rise at the door," she said.

When they got outside, Britt took several gulps of fresh air and told himself he was no longer afraid of skeletons. If he kept repeating it over and over, maybe someday it might even be true.

Jess stood still, waiting for Britt to pull himself together. Who'd have ever believed that a big, strong cop could look at a battered body but would be terrified of a skeleton? She found it oddly endearing.

An owl hooted in the distance, and wind whispered through the trees. Other forms of life came out at night. The hunters. The predators. Jess's blood quickened.

With the strength of the undead, she shoved the crypt's door closed and tried to hide the damage she'd done to the stone by pressing bits of crushed cement back into the hole. It didn't completely cover up the fact that there'd been a break-in, but it would be less noticeable from a distance.

"Let's get back to the city," Britt said, moving away from the crypt. Several bright stars sparked to life as the sky drained from indigo blue to black.

"Will you come with me to tell Regent what we've learned so far?" she asked, knowing Regent would be thrilled to hear they'd been working together. The least she could do was give her brother a little encouragement. And if pretending Britt might be her protector was the only way she'd make Regent happy, she'd do it. She had no illusions though. She didn't think she could allow Britt to be her protector. Not when she was overpowered by his masculinity. She stared at him. Hard in all the right places. He'd been muscled when she first met him, but he was even more magnificent after the strenuous training he'd gone through. Slight stubble darkened his chin making him look even sexier. Thoughts of his light beard brushing against her body tantalized her. His only salvation was the fact that he was standing ten feet away from her right now. If she could just reach out and touch—no, the temptation would be too much.

She'd never made love to a human. Would the instinct to bite him be uncontrollable? She couldn't take the chance. And dear God, the way he was looking at her right now, as if he wanted to haul her into his arms and ravish her, could make her break her most heartfelt vow to leave him alone.

She had to leave him alone. She had to!

Instead, she took one step toward him and breathed in his masculine scent.

Chapter Eleven

They came out of nowhere. Three leather clad bad boy vampires with Goth makeup and pins stuck everywhere. Stereotypical. Apparently they watched the movies too. Trying to fit into society wasn't hard for vampires these days. They could hide their true selves in this accepted attire and no one would be any the wiser.

One vampire grabbed Britt and yanked him away to the left. Far enough that Jess could no longer see him with her night vision. There wasn't time to go after him.

She'd trained Britt well. Maybe even better than the others. For Regent's sake, of course. Now, all she could do was hope he'd learned his lessons, because he was going to need them tonight. She couldn't help him.

Scents of other vampires permeated the air. Sounds of vile things slithering through the rotted soil underneath. She tapped her boot heel twice on the ground to activate the silver rod inside, and crouched to spring at the closest of the three vampires coming at her.

Before she moved on them, all three vampires lowered their heads and backed away. A set of glowing eyes in the distance caught her attention.

Unfortunately, the fourth vampire was familiar. Her stomach wrenched.

Prometheus walked toward her with his long leather coat flapping in the breeze, eyes glowing in the moonlight. Just the sight of him would have formed goose bumps on her skin if it were at all possible.

"Randy must be a special vampire to rate this many watchdogs," she said, trying to taunt them. If these vamps were into bragging before battle, maybe she'd be able to find out for sure if Randy was alive.

The other vampires weren't talking though. Not in Prometheus's presence at least.

"Bend over and kiss your ass good-bye," Prometheus said with a distinct Romanian accent.

Jess froze. This was the first time she'd heard him speak. That accent scared her more than anything else about him. Yes, he might be genetically altered, but he was of old Romanian blood.

The thrum of the ancients burned in her blood, a code instilled from long ago. It told her the old ones were the leaders. Always. From somewhere deep inside her vampire heart, she wanted to revere him.

As deeply as she wanted to follow the code, she fought her way back and regained her momentum. Nothing could change her from the vampire she'd become, thanks to Regent. She could fight those urges, those ancient drums, the savagery that remained ever present but under control.

"I'm flattered to see you need backup to fight me," she said, feeling her teeth growing and her strength building. She was ready to fight him. And the others, too, if she had to. Though she was hoping to goad his baser male instinct that said he didn't need allies to fight a woman.

Even in the vampire world, women weren't seen as much of a physical threat. But she'd proven herself over and over again. Luckily, none of her previous conquests had survived to talk about her abilities.

That gave her an advantage.

Normally she'd be able to spot an old vampire. They looked old; they smelled old. This guy didn't. Why? Because of the serum Sampson found present in Prometheus's victims? Maybe that was why his eyes glowed.

She spread her shoulders wide and hissed at him. No need to psyche herself out about his lineage. Besides, it was a Romanian who'd turned her into a vampire in the first place. This was a chance for retribution.

"I'm ready for you." Unfortunately, he ignored her attempts to make him fight her alone, so she tried again. "Come and try to get me, though a big tough vampire like you shouldn't need a gang to help him do his dirty work. Don't tell me you're afraid of little ole me?"

It worked this time. Prometheus jerked his head at the other vampires. "Get lost," he said in his deep reverberating accent.

Against their obvious wishes, they backed away, their lascivious expressions turning cold. They wanted to be here for the kill. Had been aroused by the thrill of the fight. Even though they didn't know how successful she really was in hunting vampires, she still had a reputation in this city. She knew that just supping on her blood after her death would elevate their status in the vampire world. Too bad they wouldn't get a chance to do that, because she was going to win this battle.

She motioned for Prometheus to come and get her.

He didn't move.

He had the gall to cross his arms over his chest and bare his teeth at her in a feral grin while he looked her over like she was his sexual conquest. Like he would have her tonight.

"Think you're something special, don't you? Well, I'm something special too. This time you've met your match," she said and jumped at him, teeth bared and ready to attack.

With double the speed of the undead, he dove at her. No regular vampire could move that fast. It was futile to get away from him. Even though she jumped to the right, he nearly caught her.

Arm raised, she slashed out with her silver blade and cut his shoulder. She could hear the sizzle of his flesh and blood.

He grabbed his upper arm and smiled at her. "Where'd you get that little pig sticker?" His deep accent spilled over her like hot lava, burrowing into her mind. But she fought against him. He was exuding the oldest form of vampire trickery—mind control. She wouldn't listen. She *couldn't*.

With a laugh, he flung both arms wide as if he were a magician, distracting her long enough to allow his black fingernails to slash into her side. She'd already felt the sharp edge of those nails the other night at the church. She hadn't planned to experience them again.

She looked down and was surprised by the amount of damage he'd done with one quick swipe.

Instead of being the aggressor this time, she flipped backwards, using a headstone as a springboard to put even more distance between them.

It didn't work for long. He was in her face before she knew it. His huge hand grabbed her arm and spun her around, pulling her against his chest so he could bare her neck from behind. Obviously, he liked to attack his victims from behind since he'd done the same thing to her last time at the church. She'd been counting on that.

With a couple of swift movements, she grabbed his arms and flipped him. The second his back hit the ground, he sprang back up again, but not quick enough to avoid her heel spike. She impaled him in the chest. His eyes grew wide and he roared in anger.

Damn! She'd missed his heart—again.

It wasn't like her to miss twice. In fact, with his strength and speed it was downright stupid. He had the tactical advantage now.

Suddenly, she remembered something else that might work. She started speaking in the tongue of the old ones. The vampire's own language was a mix of Romanian and something older than time itself.

She'd studied the Romanian language thirty years ago at the University, and Sampson had taught her the rest. Sampson had found a lost text during his anthropological studies as a young Ph.D. student in Romania. It had changed his focus and alerted him to the reality of vampires. It had also brought him to her.

To her utter amazement, the words seemed to stun Prometheus. He halted and stared at her through

eyes that didn't appear to really see her. Then he began swaying rhythmically, as if the words were driving him deeper into the abyss of pleasure only a vampire can know.

The ancient text was alleged to have a strange affect on true vampires, vampires who existed from the beginning of time, but the words didn't affect her. She wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because she'd been saved by her brother. Or maybe it was because she was the one speaking the words.

If legend was true, the text would mesmerize him, but only for a moment. The words called to the rushing of the vampire's adrenaline. The thirst for blood. In retrospect, maybe not such a good idea in a situation like this, but at least it had given her a window of time to prepare.

Seconds later, the pleasure left his eyes. He took one long breath and lowered his head. Those glowing eyes glared at her from half-lowered eyelids while he ripped a headstone from the ground and threw it at her.

It missed her by millimeters, shattering on the ground beside her.

Shards of stone showered her, and she raised her arm to protect her face. If he expected this little escapade to slow her down, he was very much mistaken. She was ready for whatever he'd try to do. Given the advantage of a few seconds, she'd already tensed to spring at him, while at the same time aiming her double edged silver dagger at his heart. He might have expected her heel spike, but he'd be getting another surprise instead. Since he was in that semi-trance when she took the knife out, he probably didn't even notice she held it.

She threw it. It was buried in his chest before he knew what hit him. The force of it knocked him backwards. His head slammed against the edge of a marble statue, and for a second, blood spurted down the front of his face.

The knife hadn't hit dead-on or he'd be dust right now. But it had caused enough of an injury to slow him down and make him quiet. That might be good, might be bad. If she'd managed to nick a piece of his heart, he'd be severely debilitated.

She watched with astonishment as he dragged the dagger out of his chest. His strength astounded her. Before she could react, the knife whizzed past her head, missing her by inches, and driving into the oak tree beside her.

The glow had gone out of his eyes, and he'd turned a slug gray. The other vampires moved in front of him, circling to protect him, and cutting off her chance of finishing him.

Strangely, the final glance he cast in her direction didn't resemble either hatred or anger.

Not one of the vampires stayed to fight her. They left in order to protect their wounded master. Things might have been different if she hadn't done a good job at slowing Prometheus down.

Looking down at her side she snorted in disgust because she, too, had been injured pretty badly. Her left side was a reddish-purple mass of torn flesh and arteries, and he had ruined a perfectly good leather jacket.

Damn, it smarted.

A deep breath tore through her, making her side throb anew. Unfortunately, she might have hurt the big

guy, but he'd live to fight another day. And he'd be even less agreeable the next time they met.

Glancing around the darkness, her heart stuttered to a stop at the sudden realization that Britt was no here to be seen.

Chapter Twelve

Jess found Britt lying on the ground beneath a massive tombstone. It had been tipped over, roots and dark earth torn up with it. The musky scent of humus filled the air.

His eyes were closed and he looked beyond pale as she flew to his side. She lifted his head and bit back the urge to beg him to be okay. When his eyes fluttered, she lowered her head in silent thanks.

When she opened her eyes again he was looking at her.

"Jess! Thank God you're all right," he said, heaving an audible sigh of relief. He looked sheepish lying there, but the way he was pinned he couldn't get up without help.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I don't think so. It's a good thing my leg sank into the ground under the stone. If the earth hadn't given way after they ripped out the tombstone, I'd be a lot worse."

Jess grabbed the edge of the marble with one hand and lifted it easily.

"Why were your eyes closed?" she asked. "Were you unconscious?"

"No. I fell asleep," he joked. How else could he save face? Big heroic cop trapped under a tombstone leaving beautiful vampire to battle evil monster on her own "It's been quite a while since I killed the guy and no one came along, so..." A valiant attempt to get up failed and he dropped back to the ground.

When he began rubbing at his legs, she realized they'd lost their circulation.

Cute come back. She wanted to laugh out loud. Laughter twice in one day. Not even possible. "I guess you weren't overly traumatized if you were able to sleep after that." She played along with his story.

"I knew you'd handle the rest," he said. In reality she could see the sweat on his forehead and upper arms. His T-shirt was nearly saturated. He'd been trying with everything he had to get free and come to her assistance. It was obvious he didn't like being the impotent man trapped under the headstone.

His breath was coming in shallow gasps when he moved his legs. Though she didn't exactly remember the sensation, she knew pins and needles could be quite painful. He also had a nasty looking black bruise on the side of his ankle. She hoped it was only sprained, but realized it could be broken. That would be a setback.

"There are many types of strength, Britt. Don't get all blubbery on me when I tell you this, but you passed the final test—top of the class."

"Test?"

"Everyone on my team has to prove to me, personally, that they're worthy before I sanction them as a

team member. You've passed the test."

"And if I'd failed?"

"You'd be dead."

"That's comforting. I can see why you didn't mention the final exam to my fellow classmates."

"Be careful. Just try out your foot. Don't put too much weight on it case it's broken."

He gingerly put his foot down. "Feels a little sore, but it's not too bad."

Now that she knew he was okay, she put some distance between them. She crossed her arms and looked him over casually. Hard to believe that only minutes ago, she'd nearly fallen apart when she'd seen him lying there pale and, in her mind, injured. She didn't have those kinds of feelings. Or she hadn't had them until he came along.

Britt ran one hand through his hair to dislodge the pine needles. "Fighting vampires isn't easy."

"No, it isn't at all easy. In fact, if I didn't have to, I wouldn't have humans on my team. But, for some strange reason, most vampires aren't exactly vying to kill off their own kind. It's an unfair advantage vampire versus human. We're stronger, faster, and we don't have to carry weapons—we have them built in. There's no choice, though. It's either people or nothing. That's why I work my teams so hard; train them to the best of my ability. I hate to lose anyone."

She scanned his shirt and pants which were in tatters. He wasn't bloody, just scratched and bruised.

"Hell, if you hadn't trained me, there's no way I would have survived tonight. Since I don't have vampire speed or strength on my side, technique is the only thing I can count on. It paid off."

"Good for you."

"And you? I take it you got Prometheus?"

She leaned her head back and cleared her throat, swallowing back her anger. "This would be a good time to avoid asking questions." She twisted her head to the left and grimaced. Just being reminded of her failure sent her blood soaring through the roof. "I hurt him, but he got away. *Again*."

"You'll get him the next time." His expression contorted and he gasped when his gaze lowered to her side. "Oh my God, you're badly hurt."

She glanced down. The wound did look nasty. Even though he'd seen her injured before, he probably didn't realize the full scope of her healing powers. Watching his reaction made her realize he no longer saw her as a monster. He actually cared about what happened to her. That made her realize something else. Whether or not she wanted it, he threw her off kilter. Maybe she liked it better when he found her abhorrent.

Her only recourse now was to stare him down with her meanest look. She couldn't allow him to care about her. He needed to be reminded she was a monster. Not some warm-blooded woman he could ask out on a date. As much as she wanted to feel like a human being again, they could never have that kind of relationship. "I'm fine," she said, her tone dripping irritation.

She really wanted to tell him to back off because he made her *feel* . Something she couldn't do. Since becoming a vampire, the only person who'd made her feel was her beloved brother, Regent.

Britt let his hands drop and he backed off. There was no doubt he'd felt the brush off, and it was obvious he didn't like it. A muscle bunched up in his jaw when he got really angry. And his eyes became dark, and cold. But even so, that anger didn't feel like it was projected at her.

He walked around a little, as though testing his leg, all the while putting distance between them.

"Don't worry about me, it's already healing," she told him.

Spreading her hand over her side to hide the wound, she thought about how it must look to him. People had a tendency to get all worked up when they saw bloody torsos ripped open. Of course, even if she told him it was just a flesh wound, given the amount of tissue damage, he'd never believe it would be completely healed by tomorrow or the next day.

With disgust, she looked down at her side again, hating the sight of her own gaping wound. Not because of the injury, but because it separated her from the living person she'd been fifty years ago.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

She headed for the truck. Britt limped beside her as they made their way through the damaged headstones.

"Tell me more about the vampire who grabbed you," she said when they'd walked halfway across the cemetery. She'd expected him to boast about how he'd taken down the vamp, but he hadn't said a word. She decided she liked that.

"First of all, I got the distinct impression he was in a hurry to get away from you. I think he was concerned about what you might do to him. I don't think he thought I would be much of a threat." he grinned. "That was his first mistake."

"Apparently."

"His second mistake was assuming he could take his time killing me."

"So how'd you get him?" She shot him an approving glance. He'd done very well tonight. He was bruised and battered, and his torn shirt exposed way too much of those rock hard abs for her liking.

He lifted the stick he was using as a cane. "I used a hawthorn stake."

A night owl screeched deep inside the forest beyond and a soft breeze picked up and blew her hair around.

"It'd work better if it had some silver in it," she told him. "Remember, in class we discussed the fact that silver reacts with our blood. Makes vampire blood do all kinds of nasty, bubbly, burny things."

Killing a vampire had to be hard on him. Even though he had shot one criminal in the line of duty, deliberately killing a person, vampire or not, had to affect him. He was playing tough cop right now, but he'd go home and lick his wounds. Make peace with what he had to do, and move on. She knew from

experience that it got easier with time. Ironically, for the past year he'd thought he was a murderer, then found out tonight he probably hadn't killed his partner. Then he'd had to kill a vampire.

She could see every sinew through his shirt. His muscles were tense. He was tense. It had been a difficult night for him. Hell, it had been a difficult night for her. She'd fought Prometheus alone and was still around to talk about it.

Britt's angry expression had faded and the way he was looking at her right now told her everything she needed to know. And everything she wanted to avoid. His humanity seemed to exacerbate her latent desire to protect him from the horrors of her world. It pained her to know she was the one who had turned him into a killer, for real.

"I have to talk to you before we go anywhere, Jess." His gaze actually smoldered over her, and his tongue flicked out over his full, sensuous mouth. She couldn't tear her gaze away.

"I'm listening," she said, sounding oddly breathless.

"Ah, hell," he ground out as he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her toward him. "I'm sorry about the way I treated you when you told me you were a vampire. I ... I just want you to know I don't feel that way now."

"Forget about it. It was a natural reaction." Not really, because she didn't let many people know what she was. Only special people she thought she could trust. But she wouldn't tell him that.

"I'd like to prove that I have gotten over those misguided beliefs." His voice deepened in a way that made her suspicious and curious at the same time. He led her to the truck, and opened her door. But before she got inside, he took her into his arms. She let him mold her body against his, wound and all. He felt strong and so damn warm.

She closed her eyes and waited for his hot breath to fan her face, her mouth. To taste him. Not like that time on the sidewalk. This time, she'd be tasting the man who wanted to kiss her even though he knew she was a vampire. If anyone had told her a month ago it was possible for a human to want her, she would have said it was inconceivable.

Their lips met and, strangely, Jess felt warm inside. Blood surged through her and she felt desires that she hadn't felt since she was alive. His hot, demanding mouth made her realize how much she'd missed being a woman. How much she'd enjoyed the touch of a man before she'd been turned.

While his hands wandered down her back to her hips, he nuzzled her from her chin to her earlobe. She arched against him and tasted him, savoring every nuance, every touch.

When car lights caught them in their beams, they pulled apart like guilty teenagers.

"You two. This ain't no lover's lane, it's a cemetery. The two of you git." An aged man, wearing a cardigan that had seen better days, parked his car and got out. He shook his head as he walked past them. A security guard, apparently on his rounds. "Ain't you two a little old for nooky in a cemetery?"

Jess snickered and leaned closer to Britt's ear. "Imagine what the old fellow would say if he'd seen the two of us in the middle of battle a few minutes ago. Or he knew how old I really am."

"Yes sir, we're leaving." Britt held the truck door and waited for Jess to get in. "Hurry before he sees

that gash on your side or realizes the cemetery's been trashed. We don't want to be taken to the station. Especially not when we're onto Randy. We don't want anything to slow us down now. I want to catch that son-of-a bitch."

"We will. We're going to find out exactly what the hell's going on."

* * * *

On the drive back to the city Britt couldn't stop thinking about how weird his life had become. He'd just spent the evening in the cemetery with a beautiful vampire. They'd battled and won. And now he wanted to claim his prize. Of course, he shouldn't have kissed Jess, but, damnit, she'd enjoyed it too.

The other night, when Regent had told him how lonely Jess was, Britt had felt a spark of concern even though he still hadn't come to terms with what she was. He'd wondered how any man could ever consider a vampire a needy person.

Now he couldn't keep lusty thoughts about her out of his head. With a ragged sigh he gripped the steering wheel as they turned onto the main highway.

"It's been quite a night for you," Jess said.

"Yeah, a night I'll never forget." He could feel her focus on him. Vampire or not, she was his commander and he shouldn't have kissed her. Especially on duty. She had every right to fire his ass.

"Adrenaline really gets pumping after a good fight like that, doesn't it?" she said. "Sometimes it makes a person do crazy things. Risky things they wouldn't do normally."

"It does." His heart sank.

"You and I accomplished one hell of a coup tonight. We fought off those vampires and sent them running. One human and one vampire—we did it together. Enough to make any combatant's blood soar," she said.

"I have the feeling I know where this conversation is going. I kissed you, okay? It's no big deal. I know I shouldn't have, but I don't regret it. If you really think it's necessary, we can just forget it happened."

She was silent a moment. "In the future, we should keep things on a professional basis."

Hard to do when he remembered that sexy body pressed against him. All leather with just the right amount of cleavage showing to drive him to distraction. She was firm—and soft—in all the right places. She smelled like heaven, not something he would've expected of a vampire. But she was no ordinary vampire. Now that he'd tasted her lips, he wanted more. How could he convince her that it was all right to make love with him? Was she afraid she might get carried away?

It didn't matter. He'd never convince her of his true feelings tonight. They had business to attend to. It was time to get back into cop mode.

The instant he regained his momentum, a thought struck him. "If Randy's wife is dead, who's looking after their kid?"

"Very good question. We should look into that. I'll call Drake in the morning and ask him to do some checking."

Britt and his wife had tried to conceive a child before their marriage had gone from bad to worse. Thank God he'd been too busy at work to put much of an effort into it. He couldn't imagine bringing a child into an unhappy home. And a child wouldn't have fixed their problems.

He shuddered to think what Randy's infant might have had to endure after its mother had died. Given the fact that Randy's wife had been buried in the ground before being moved to the crypt, it would be difficult to tell how long she'd even been dead.

He sucked in a long breath and held it. Surely to God Randy wouldn't have left the child in the house alone? To starve? Would a vampire care about his offspring?

"Jess, call someone at the station and have them check Randy's house right away. Just in case the baby's still there."

Jess looked horrified at his words and pulled her cell phone out of her pocket.

Chapter Thirteen

Concern rippled across Regent's face when they entered the rectory. It didn't take him long to spot the four inch rip in Jess's leather jacket and the deeper wound beneath. He bent over and gave her injury a closer look. "Bad night out, I take it, dear?"

Jess shrugged as if it were nothing unusual. "Britt got a vamp tonight."

"Really now." Regent turned and winked at Britt. "And hardly a mark to show for it I see. At least there's no blood spurting anywhere and your head's still on your shoulders."

"Yeah, I guess so." As grizzly as the task had been, the feeling of accomplishment remained. He hadn't felt like this since he'd been a cop and had just taken down a criminal. Seeing how calmly Regent handled the sight of his injured sister made it apparent they'd been through their share of wounds over their time together as vampire and priest/protector.

"Sit down and tell me what happened." Regent opened a cupboard in the corner of the room and pulled out some dry leaves and cotton bandaging. He tucked the leaves inside the layers of cotton and wrapped it around Jess's waist. Right over her clothing.

Jess sat quietly and let him work. She even raised her arms so he could wrap the bandage around her. With a smirk on her face and something akin to love behind those beautiful green eyes, she gave Regent a playful poke.

"This doesn't do me a bit of good, but Regent always feels better if my open wounds at least look like they've been taken care of."

"Now, Jess, there's no evidence to prove these bandages and herbs don't help."

"None, except on those occasions when you weren't around to bandage me, I've healed every bit as quickly." She put one hand on the side of her mouth and said to Britt, "Possibly even faster."

Regent ignored her and took a seat in his aged leather executive chair behind the desk. The chair

creaked when he sat in it, and he leaned back to get comfortable. Britt expected a sigh of relaxation from him at any moment.

"Okay, you two, I'm waiting for the story to be told."

"Not much to tell. I'll give you the abridged version. Vampires, graveyard, desecration, and the corpse of a dead woman who was vamped. All in a normal night's work."

Tenting his fingers and leaning his chin on them, Regent looked at Britt. "She's a difficult one, isn't she?"

"She can be," he agreed, smothering a grin.

"Hey! What's with you two ganging up on me? I'm a hardass vampire with a mind of my own. I can kill like the best of them. My life is a constant battle between good and evil. I couldn't count the number of times I nearly let myself succumb to that dark seduction under the light of a full moon." Jess stood and paced to the fireplace, standing close to its warmth and staring into the burning embers for a few seconds before she turned back to face the men. "I'm like a drug addict who just came out of rehab. Who knows how long I'll stay clean and sober? So I think I deserve to be a little bit difficult, don't you?"

The expression on Regent's face said her speech had shocked him. But Britt instinctively knew it wasn't meant for Regent. She'd been telling Britt she was damaged and dangerous goods and he'd better beware.

He let her comments slide. He was damaged goods, too, and he could be tougher than she gave him credit for. Were they so different, really? And after her little outburst, he liked her even more for trying to drive him away.

"It's late." He glanced at his watch—nearly four a.m. "I'm leaving," he said slapping one hand on a bare knee poking out of his nearly new jeans. "It's late and I'm tired."

Jess gave him a startled look, almost as if she suddenly believed she'd scared him off for good and wasn't sure if that was what she really wanted.

Unaffected by the tension in the room, Regent yawned and pushed himself out of his form-fitting chair. "Good night, you two. I'm only letting you get away without telling me the whole story because we're all tired." He moved across the room, then halted. "Oh yes, the precinct called earlier. They said there was no baby at the house?"

"Thank God." Jess let out a low breath and looked at Britt.

"The child could be fine. Maybe he gave it up for adoption," Britt said.

"I'm not used to being left in the dark," Regent shuffled his feet. "But I'm tired tonight. I'll expect full details tomorrow." He left through the side entrance to his bedroom without a backward glance.

For about two seconds Jess stared after him as if he were a paradox she couldn't fathom. Then she casually followed Britt to the door.

"It didn't work, you know," Britt said when they reached the entrance.

"What didn't work?" When he started to speak, she held up a hand. "Just remember this before you say

a thing. It's not smart to irritate a vampire, especially when the moon's in its apogee."

Britt faced her and deliberately gave her his sexiest smile. "You don't scare me, lady. And you can't drive me away either. I'm here for the duration."

He leaned in close. So close his lips were nearly touching hers. Their eyes met. There was no warning look telling him to back off. She might be caving in. One more second and he *was* going to kiss her like she'd never been kissed her before.

She hissed out a breath as only a vampire can do, a warning sound, then took two steps back, prodding at the bandage on her side. "Britt, look at me. Really look at me. I'm standing here wrapped with a piece of useless cotton and fig leaves over a gaping wound that doesn't bleed. A wound that will be almost completely healed by morning. I'm not amongst the living. I'm dead, whereas you're a warm-blooded human being. Why would you want to stick around? You should find yourself a woman who bleeds. Maybe one who can have your children."

"Been there. Done that, minus the children. Got the alimony payments to prove it. What makes you think living, breathing women are what I want or need? And not everyone is meant to have children. My wife would have been the worst mother ever. Luckily, she was unable to conceive"

"What's the matter, didn't have the swimmers?"

"Nasty." He grinned, unaffected by her attempt to anger him. "Actually, I have no idea if it was her problem or mine. Neither of us got around to figuring that out." He shrugged his shoulders. "Guess no one cared enough about the other to go that far. Probably the best thing that could've happened to some hapless kid we'd have had."

"You can't make me feel sorry for you. I don't care if you're impotent. Do I look like some sappy teenager out to get laid?"

He narrowed his eyes, giving her his best tough-cop look. As a cop it had been important to perfect dangerous. He tipped his head slightly and stared deeply into her eyes. "I can promise you I'm not impotent." He let his gaze wash over her. "I remember everything about the woman who pressed herself against me that night on the sidewalk. Her body, her scent, the way she made me feel. That woman changed my life forever." He paused for effect. "And, if you want to be crude, that woman *did* want to get laid."

The air between them crackled. Jess could feel her blood pressure rising.

She shouldn't let him make her angry. Anger in a human was one thing, but anger in a vampire quickly turned into an uncontrollable rage. It was time he needed some visualization. A look at reality.

Without holding anything back to soften the blow, she reverted to vampire almost instantly, fangs white against the darkness in the hallway. Her eyes burning like black coals. She was letting him see the real truth, the ugliness of her transformation.

"That's not going to work either." He languidly hung his thumbs from his back pockets and leaned one shoulder against the wall. "Good try though."

She put her hands on her hips again and barely refrained from stamping her foot. *Get a grip. He's doing this to you on purpose. He's baiting you and you're falling for it. Telling him way too much about*

how you feel.

"Call me crazy but the general consensus for most normal men is that they like their women alive." She gave him a glacial smile. "Now that you mention it, I like my women alive too. Blood is much tastier at body temperature."

If he was shocked, he hid it well.

"You can try to prove you're a monster as often as you please. I've seen the woman you really are. And I happen to like what I see, lady, so don't even think about trying to drive me away. I'm a goddamn bull when it comes to being stubborn. If I want you, I'll have you."

Jess stared at him for about two seconds before she got really angry. "Then maybe it's you I'll have for supper some night when you least expect it!" She spun away from him, and marched down the hall. Before she reached the door to Regent's office, she hesitated and turned back.

He still stood there, watching her with maddening resolve. "Never underestimate the tenacity of an Irish cop who's made up his mind about what or who he wants." His gaze washed over her in an aggressive sexual overture. If a look could sizzle her flesh, that one could. If he could set her on fire with a mere glance, imagine what he could physically do to her.

No! She couldn't think like that. He was just asking for trouble. If he kept it up, she wouldn't be responsible for what happened.

"Night now," he said, blowing her a kiss before stepping outside and closing the door behind him.

She could just imagine the smug smile on his face as he walked down the sidewalk. And damn it, she could hear him whistling!

Chapter Fourteen

The team gathered outside the van the next night. Their target, an old house purported to be owned by a drug dealer. Neighbors had been complaining about strange things happening at night and weird looking people dressed in black coming and going.

As usual, Britt lurked at the back of the group. That way he could judge the dynamics of his fellow team members. To his surprise, Tat was still part of the team. He'd heard the rumor that Jess was going to cut him. First chance he got, he'd ask her why Tat was still around.

Tat's attitude hadn't changed. He was still arrogant and mouthy. Jess ignored him for the most part as she said, "It could mean there are vampires, or it could simply mean it's a Goth hangout. Either way, it's our job to find out what's going on. In this case, we're going in as regular police officers and not the vampire patrol."

James stood beside Jess while she talked to the team. It was easy to tell he respected her. And, though Britt hated to admit it, James was a much more ferocious opponent than he'd ever be. James was the one Jess deserved at her side. At least he could protect her. What could a puny human do against predators with super human strength?

Then there was that little bit of information Jess had shared. She'd turned James into a vampire and he'd

stayed by her side for decades.

Jess hauled out NYPD jackets and started passing them around. When she gave Britt his, her fingers brushed against his hand under the jacket. Was it his imagination or had she deliberately touched him?

James must've been furious that Jess had gone to the graveyard with a mere human the other night. And maybe he had every right to be angry, because Britt was well aware how lucky they'd been to make it out of there alive. Even though Jess was tough, those vampires were tougher. How Jess and he had gotten away from them still puzzled Britt. Something didn't jive.

"Heard you saw some action this weekend," Griz said quietly, as if reading his thoughts.

Britt's eyebrows rose. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I overheard Jess telling James about it. I don't think they knew I could hear them."

"I see."

"How'd you get the boss lady all to yourself, you lucky son-of-a..."

"Just happened by chance," Britt cut in, glancing at Jess. Yeah, she was listening. To prove his point, she gave him an inquisitive look. Her eyebrows arched and her mouth twitched as if to hold back a grin. Apparently she wasn't concerned about the group hearing about their escape.

"She's been the lead officer on an ongoing investigation in my building. A young fellow was killed and left in my laundry room a week ago." A partial truth, but all Griz needed to know.

"If she's on the case that must mean the guy was killed by a vampire.

"Yeah, at least connected to them. The victim was apparently a runner for vampires. Being left in my building was a little unsettling. Left my neighbors pretty jumpy, I can tell you."

"I've been jumpy myself lately. Most of the time I have the feeling I'm being watched. It's like I'm paranoid or something, especially when I'm home at night. I hear strange noises on the roof sometimes. I've got my room practically decorated in vampire stakes and crosses. If my sweet little old lady neighbor came to visit she'd be calling the men in little white coats to come and get me. I've tried to convince myself it's all in my head, but I just can't."

"I don't mean to make things worse, Griz, but I've been followed too. It's probably not all in your head, and you're not paranoid. It's part of what we signed up for. The thing is, these vampires don't want us around. They might just try to pick us off one at a time." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card with his home phone number on it. "Do me a favor, okay, big guy?"

"What?"

"Stay alert. If you need to talk or whatever, call me. Any time, night or day. I'm just a couple of blocks from you. There's safety in numbers, and I'll be there for you if you ever need me."

"Thanks, man, you don't know how much I appreciate it. When you're in a secret Ops unit, you can't even talk things out with your closest buddy. No one else can know. And God almighty, I'd kill myself before I'd tell anyone outside the unit. Who'd want to be the one that introduces them to the realities of

this world?"

"Yeah," Britt agreed. He understood how Griz felt. But at the same time, he knew this was the life for him. It felt right deep inside, as if it was his calling.

Griz surveyed his chewed fingernails. "You know, after my wife died, I was like a mad man. When I joined the team, I really needed something to take my mind off the loss. But now that harsh reality has turned into an even worse nightmare, I'm not sure how to handle it. Am I stuck in this life forever? Because if I am, I don't want it."

"You might be stuck for a while, Griz. Just watch your back. Thing is, we're going to get these vampires under control. When it's safe, you can get out. Jess told me when I started I could quit, but it would be dangerous if I did. Once we control the vampires, you can probably go without worrying."

* * * *

Britt eyed the neighborhood while James pulled up to a curb and parked the van outside an unpainted two story house. An old balcony fronted the building. Bits of furniture and rusted appliances were piled all over the place. All the lights in the house were on and a noisy party was going full swing.

"Tat, you're with Britt tonight." Jess gave Britt a knowing glance. "The rest of you pair up."

Everyone started talking at once, trying to team up with the person they thought would be their best chance at survival. Britt stuck close to Tat because he knew Jess wanted him to keep an eye on the idiot.

Before anyone else had even moved, Tat jumped up and threw the back doors of the van open, ready to go off on his own.

"Hold on there," Britt grabbed the back of his collar, stopping him suddenly and hauling him backwards. "You're not going anywhere without me. This is a team effort, and I'll be damned if you're going off half-cocked when we're expected to be a team."

"Pussy."

"Shithead."

Tat swung at Britt. He ducked and Tat missed. Before Tat regained his equilibrium from the swing, Britt's arm shot out and caught Tat on the cheekbone. He'd always been a good fighter. Tat hadn't even expected it. In a situation like this Tat was like a mongrel; he didn't have what it took to fight the lead dog. He'd cower and take his orders from Britt from now on. Britt just wouldn't be stupid enough to turn his back on him.

Tat opened his mouth to speak. Britt moved in closer and put himself in Tat's face. "Yes, did you want to say something? Maybe you'd like to try to get a piece of me right here and now? I'd be happy to oblige."

"Not right now." Tat looked away.

"Get moving then," Britt said. "You take the lead down that alley. I'll be right behind you."

The back of the house was in darkness. He followed Tat quickly down the alley and toward a back door. There, he made sure Tat was still with him and then he turned the doorknob. The door was open.

They found themselves in a back pantry with cupboards on both sides of the room. One cupboard door was hanging off its hinges and he could see a couple of cans of beans inside.

Must be some humans here.

Suddenly, loud music started up again and boomed from the center of the house. Practically shook it.

A quick glimpse proved that Tat was still glaring at him from behind. He'd hung back when they got to the door.

Jesus, he wasn't sure who was more of a threat—the possibility of undead killers or Tat. The guy was a psycho. The team may have been made up of misfits, but if he'd ever seen a born killer, Tat was it.

"Just keep looking ahead. I'm following you. God only knows what's going on inside that room," Tat said, trying to sound as if the thought scared him, but Britt could see the light of excitement in his eyes. He couldn't wait for whatever horrors he hoped were inside.

Britt's skin suddenly began to crawl. He had to wonder who the good guys were in this place. He glanced at Tat again and shook his head. This guy had maniac written all over himself in tattoo ink. The only thing he didn't have was a Swastika on his forehead.

Chapter Fifteen

The odor of overheated bodies permeated the air inside the house. Waxy, perfumed candles of every size and color burned in various locations around the first floor. With its twelve foot ceilings, and no interior walls left standing, it was a wonder that whoever had gutted the place knew enough to leave the load bearing beams in place. The house was old, the wood inside rotting and dried out. It would be an instant firetrap if someone kicked over a candle.

"They're just kids," Britt said loud enough to be heard as he scanned the crowd. Teenagers for the most part. Not vampires. Not murderers. Kids, dressed up in all forms of attire, including Goth.

He moved through the crowd, keeping a close eye on Tat. If Tat got loose in this crowd of teeny boppers, pity the poor kid that found himself facing the man whose eyes rarely blinked. The kids were either so high they didn't notice the NYPD jackets, or they didn't care. Either way, having adults moving through them dressed in police attire didn't faze them a bit.

"Shit. These are just teenagers. Not vamp..."

Britt spun around and glared at Tat. "Quiet! Don't say that word out loud here. Never say that word out loud in public." That had been drilled into their heads. But then, Tat had a big mouth and little common sense.

The top of Griz's head appeared in Britt's periphery. Terry stood beside him. Even though she was only five-foot-seven to Griz's six-four, she had presence. Her expression radiated that "don't mess with me" look that few people were able to ignore—except the kids at this party. She looked like she'd been brought up by a gang. She was tough. She somehow fit right in here with these gloomy kids. Her face was thin and her lips permanently positioned in a grim line. He had the feeling her life hadn't been that great even when her husband was alive.

He waded through a group of sixteen year olds who were smoking cigarettes like it was the most important thing they could do at this stage of their life, like it defined them.

"Hey man, aren't you kind of old for this kind of party?"

Britt looked down at the huge letters on his jacket, then back at the kid. "No. I'm a cop."

The kid smiled like a fool. "Righteous."

A youngster with a headful of curls bounced toward him. This particular lad had progressed from cigarettes. He sucked in a lungful of marijuana and laughed in that dopey, half-stunned way tokers always did. He'd already lost way too many brain cells and didn't have enough left to know any better.

Tat started to push toward the kid and it didn't take an epiphany to figure out why he wanted to pick a fight. Probably hoped to liberate the kid from his dope.

Britt shoved an arm out in front of Tat's chest to stop him before pulling him into a corner where the kids couldn't hear them. "Calm yourself right now or you'll be sorry. And I'll only tell you once to stay away from these kids."

"Think you're the bitch's meow, don't you. Well, you're in for a big surprise, Ex-Cop. That woman's already spoken for and you're not the one who's going to get her."

Britt stared at him hard. "What woman are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Brittain. I'm talking about the one and only She-Vamp. You don't think you have a hope in hell, do you?" He laughed and ran the back of his hand over his mouth as spittle flew out. "Nope. I'm afraid you're going to be one sad schmuck when you find out."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Like I'd tell you anything." Tat blinked several times. Quite a change in body language for a guy who rarely blinked at all. Like maybe he'd said more than he should have and regretted it.

"You'll tell me, or you'll be sorry."

"Jeez, I'm scared. The big, bad cop-killer is going to make me sorry—only I know you didn't really kill that cop," he said sarcastically. "Yeah, I heard how sickening it was the way you hung around the cemetery afterwards." He held up his cigarette-yellowed hands and played an invisible violin.

Britt had no idea how he controlled himself. He should've gone for Tat's gizzard. Matter of fact, his fists were aching to rearrange something, preferably Tat's bony face, but he held back. If he acted on his anger right now, some kid might inadvertently get caught in the cross-fire.

When he calmed down enough to get perspective on the situation, Britt realized Tat was far more dangerous than he gave him credit for. How did he know about Randy? And what the hell did Tat mean when he said Britt wasn't a cop killer? What, exactly, did Tat know?

"So how do you feel about everything now hotshot? You lost your job for nuthin'?"

"How the hell do you know about my partner?" He leaned in until his face was only centimeters from

Tat's face. "When we get back to the warehouse, you'd better be prepared to have one helluva talk."

With an expression of sour boredom Tat backed up, crossed his arms over his chest and planted his feet wide. "It'll take more than a sissy-cop to find that out from me."

Britt felt his Adam's apple jump about six times while he swallowed down the expletives that rushed to the surface. He kept his cool. "Sounds to me like you have a story to tell or you wouldn't have spilled any information in the first place. I'm thinking there's more you want to tell, but you're afraid somebody will find out you've talked. Is that it?"

Tat blinked again, and looked around nervously. "You're wrong. I wouldn't tell you anything."

"That so?" He leaned in. "Then it won't bother you if I spread the word that you *did* tell me lots of juicy information."

For a minute Tat actually let an expression of shit-faced fear cross his face. But then his pea-sized brain must've decided Britt was bluffing because he turned cold again. "F-off!"

Two young ghouls dressed in black with dyed hair and black lips and heavily lined eyelids watched them from the sidelines, like they were the top billed show.

"Fight," one of them said, a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

"Get lost," Britt growled at the kids and they scattered like mice. It'd be best if they kept their distance from Tat, anyway. It gave Britt infinite pleasure to know he had Tat on the defensive. The man had definitely spilled more than he should have. Just what did he know about Jess, though? Surely, Tat didn't think Jess would ever be his woman. He had to know how much she disliked him. How much they all disliked him. So who the hell was he talking about when he said someone else was going to get her? Someone who wanted her bad.

Jess slid in beside him, and Tat instantly moved away. "Britt, where've you been?"

Come to think of it, Tat never hung around long when Jess was in the vicinity. Why was that? Was he scared of her? Or was it something else. Right now it didn't matter; he wanted to talk to Jess without Tat listening in.

"Tat just spilled some very interesting information. He knows a lot more about what's going on than he should. He just told me he knows I didn't kill Randy."

"Well, well, well," she said, but didn't sound the least bit shocked by the revelation.

"You're not as surprised as I expected. Did you already know about this?" While he talked to Jess, he kept half his attention on Tat. The kids in this place were just that. Kids. They didn't need a psycho in their midst.

"I wanted to send Tat back to death row, but my request was vetoed from within the unit. I knew something was up when that happened. Someone in the department has to be pulling strings. I don't know how far up the ladder it goes, but I've got Sampson working on it."

"What did Drake say about it?"

"At least he pretended to be shocked, but I didn't believe him. I've known him long enough to figure he knows who's doing this, but he's not talking. Maybe he can't tell me."

"What do you mean *can't* tell you? Do you think he's being manipulated from the inside? It's bad enough that we don't know who Prometheus is or what his agenda is, but if we have to worry about what's going on inside the department things are going to be a lot more difficult." He shook his head and stared off into the distance with tired eyes. Abruptly, he looked toward the center of the room. "What's going on inside that circle of kids?"

She rolled her eyes. "Would you believe they're doing the limbo? The scream we heard when we first entered the building was from one of the girls trying to get under the broomstick and falling on her rear end. Caught me off guard for a second. I almost went in with guns blazing."

She was kidding. "No vampires here then?"

"Not now, but there was one here a while ago. I could smell him when I first entered the building. Then I found this and knew why the scent remained strong." She held up a familiar looking piece of granite and waved it in front of Britt.

"Shit," he said, looking at the stone. "I threw that into the garbage chute in my building. How'd it get here?"

"Good question." She held it out to him. "Want it back?"

"Nope."

She tucked the rock into her knapsack. He didn't even want to know why she was keeping it. All he wanted to do was forget the damned thing.

When the limbo was over and the kids jacked up the music again and began dancing, the vibrations in the room increased.

"Hell. Where'd Tat go?" Britt said, his gaze searching the room. Tat was nowhere to be seen.

"Last time I saw him he was moving through the circle of kids. You look around and I'll check the other side of the room," she said, moving off quickly.

Britt did as she'd instructed, but there was no sign of Tat anywhere. He had a bad feeling about this.

Jess met him in the middle of the room. "Anything?" she asked.

"Nothing at all." It was like he'd disappeared into the ether.

"Come on, let's get out of here." She gave the signal and the rest of the team followed. "Tat's probably at the van."

Griz looked perplexed when they got outside. "What's going on? No vampires inside?"

"Worse than that. Tat's missing." Britt said. He should have kept a closer eye on the idiot.

"What's that jerk up to?"

"Who knows," Jess said. "James, call in the boys in blue and have them quiet down these raucous teens, will you? This is not our jurisdiction and I'm not going to waste another minute on a regular cop's work."

They arrived at the van. Still no sign of Tat.

"If he's still in the house, I'm going to have his hide," she said. "James, go haul his sorry ass out here pronto."

Tipping his head, James disappeared into the house. He moved like a cat burglar, smooth and fast. A couple of minutes later he returned without Tat. "He's not in there."

Britt frowned. If James said he wasn't in there, he wasn't in there. Even if Tat tried to hide, he couldn't, because a vampire's sense of smell was too acute.

Britt looked down at the ground, his teeth glued together and the muscle working in his jaw. That little slug wasn't going to get away with spilling it about Randy then disappearing. He probably thought he'd pulled one over on Britt by doing just that. He didn't realize just how determined Britt was to get the truth out of him.

"Where the hell did he go?" Terry rubbed her short hair in disgust. She was disciplined. She had no use for loose canons. She'd have made an excellent training officer at the Academy. It might have been right up her alley, if the vampires hadn't killed her husband and put her on a path of retribution. And he knew that's what this job was for her. She didn't have a burning desire for this job; she wanted revenge. He could see it in her eyes.

As long as she was smart about it, she'd probably get her revenge. Right now Britt understood that kind of thinking. He wanted revenge too.

"Here's what we're going to do," Jess said. "Fan out. Tat can't have gotten far. Find him and bring him back. If you don't find him, be back here in fifteen minutes. This distraction has taken way too much precious time as it is."

Everyone went off in different directions, but Britt wanted to search the back lot of the house they'd just left.

Two steps into the next door neighbor's yard, a German shepherd started barking like mad. Tat couldn't have gone through there or the dog would have given him away.

Britt's fifteen minutes were up, so he headed back to the van where Jess was talking in low tones to James. Terry had just returned from across the street, and Griz was coming down the sidewalk, empty-handed.

Britt's gut felt like sand. It could take days to find the bastard. He drew in a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. No problem. It'd already been two years since Randy had left him to wiggle on a spit. After enduring that, he'd have no problem approaching this problem methodically. Slow and steady. With cop-like precision.

So why did he want to tear out of here and find that idiot right now?

"We're going back to the warehouse," Jess said, climbing into the passenger seat and watching the back

of the van while the rest of the group got in. "Don't worry about not finding Tat. It'd be easy enough to disappear given a few minutes lead. He could've hopped a bus."

"Why would he do that?" Griz rubbed the back of his oversized head and frowned.

"He's been dissatisfied with the job. He must've wanted out," Jess replied, her gaze going straight to Britt's. He knew from her expression she'd make sure Tat got that wish whether he wanted it or not, no matter how much pressure she was getting from the inside.

Without commenting, he turned his head and looked out the van window.

Jess frowned at Britt as he looked away from her. There was no doubt in her mind that as soon as their shift was over tonight, he intended to start searching for Tat on his own. She could read him more easily every day. Of course, she'd also be looking for Tat while she followed Britt from the rooftops.

At the warehouse, James pressed the button to open the large garage door and drove the van inside. Jess had always felt as if the place might not be secure, but Drake had insisted it was. The shadowy beams in the thirty-foot roof trusses made a good hiding place for vampires. She'd never liked this spot. Not one bit. She liked it even less since she'd found out Tat had probably betrayed them. The building was no longer secure—probably never was.

"Everybody go home," she said suddenly, ignoring their questioning looks. "I realize you don't know why I'm doing this, and I can't tell you why right now. Suffice it to say, work's over for tonight. I'll fill you in soon." She yanked at the zipper on her jacket. When it didn't budge she whipped it off over her head and threw it across the room.

Britt opened his mouth to speak, but James beat him to it.

"Jess," James said. He didn't say another word, but Jess seemed to understand it, even though no one else did.

She halted and scowled at James, her eyes darkening, and if Britt's guess was right, her teeth had just lengthened although she kept her mouth closed.

"Don't!" She held up a hand toward James. "I'm the commanding officer, and I've given you a direct order. Just go home for tonight. I'll call you with a new rendezvous location tomorrow. Remember this—we'll never meet at the same place again."

Before Britt got outside with the rest of the team, she called, "Britt, stay a moment after the team leaves, will you?"

She met James's gaze and nodded to him, then waited until he left the building and shut the door.

"Look Jess, I've got to go. Can't we talk tomorrow?" Britt said, hands on his hips.

"No, this can't wait until tomorrow. I know why you're in a big hurry and I'm not going to let you do this alone."

"I'm glad you want to help, but I don't have the first clue where to look for Tat. I may be stubborn as a goat, but I know when I can use some help. So when I need it, I'll let you know."

"Don't try to string me along. I know you're going after Tat. But, he's my responsibility, and even though I understand your need to find out what he knows, my first priority is to stop him from harming anyone."

"Understood." His monotone obviously didn't work with Jess. She acted as if she didn't even notice his disapproval.

"Look, I've got files on him in my office. Let's check them out."

Most of the lights were off in the warehouse. Sounds echoed off the walls and their footsteps became hollow clicks as they made their way across the cement floor. The door to Jess's office creaked open, and she flipped on the reverberating fluorescent overhead light. The dull gray filing cabinet she mentioned sat in the corner. She didn't make any move to take files out of it.

"Want a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks." He swallowed. "Got any beer?"

She raised one eyebrow, but answered, "There might be one in the fridge over there. I think I confiscated one from a wayward team member a few weeks back. It could be long gone."

Jess knew exactly what he'd see when he opened the fridge and the little light went on inside. There was a can of beer all right, and it sat right beside the bright red packets of blood that looked very much like a kid's freezer pops. Would his stomach lurch into his throat when he realized for the first time this was her food? Had he ever thought about how she fed, especially since she didn't attack people for their blood?

He slammed the fridge door shut and slowly backed away from it. His face had gone from tanned to sickly.

Apparently not.

His reaction twisted her insides, and she didn't know why. After all, that's what she wanted when she sent him to the fridge wasn't it? She wanted to drive him away, once and for all. Make him realize caring for a vampire had repercussions.

Seeing that blood in the fridge had probably removed those rosy colored glasses he seemed to see her through. But achieving her goal didn't stop the ache penetrating her chest.

Right now, his face was the color of a sheet of toilet paper. For a minute she thought he might be sick.

Before she could pat herself on the back his gaze met hers. His expression was almost unreadable. But his jaws were bunched up and that meant he was ticked at her. He didn't say a word, nor did he move from his position.

Chapter Sixteen

Britt knew this was a test and he was failing miserably. He could feel Jess watching him. Watching his reaction. No doubt this was her latest ploy to drive him away.

"Something wrong, Britt?" She sounded tough right now, and cynical. But beneath all that cynicism was a woman who needed him. Maybe she didn't know that yet, but he'd make sure she found out.

He could be just as tough. He knew the rules. If trying to drive him away with the realities of her life was her best method to get rid of him, he'd let her get it out of her system. It was the only way they'd ever get past the human versus vampire barrier. Of course, she wanted him to react. Probably wanted him to start screaming and calling her a monster. Maybe run out of the building and keep going.

He knew the tactic all right. But he wouldn't give her the argument she wanted. Not this time.

"As I'm sure you're aware, I was taken by surprise by your meal preparations. I hadn't considered how you ... sustain yourself until now."

"Sustain myself. Is that what you call it?" She'd moved to the corner of the room where the lighting wasn't good, and her features were shielded in shadow. "Not very pleasant, is it? Maybe you'd like to have a meal with me some time." Her words were deliberately cold and hard.

"I'm sure that would be something I could get used to."

Jess practically choked. He'd rebounded even quicker than she would have believed possible. "Not likely. Not even Regent can force himself to do that."

"Maybe you'd be surprised by what I can do."

"Maybe I wouldn't." Just the fact that he was willing to try it was something she hadn't expected.

"You're a tough piece of work, aren't you?" he said, stepping closer to her. "You've been handed a hell of a life sentence. Worse than any I can imagine, but you've made the best of it. Turned it into something good."

She didn't react. Just stared at him. Gave him that withering look she'd probably perfected over the last few decades. She might have a few years on him, but he could still see through her. He had the feeling not many people tried to understand her. And maybe she didn't quite know what to do with someone who did.

"Vampire's are tough. But get this straight—there's no way anything good comes out of what we are," she said.

He let one hand trail over her wrist. Just a featherlight touch that created sparks of energy between them. He gauged her reaction, then slid his fingers up her arm in a caressing stroke.

"That's where you're wrong. You're an amazing woman. And you've got me pegged wrong too. You'd find that out if you'd stop trying to shock the shit out of me. You can't drive me away. I'm not like everyone else, Jess."

Even though he couldn't clearly make out her features, her eyes were watching him closely. She didn't comment, so he continued. "Your first mistake was kissing me on the sidewalk the first night we met. I can't get the taste of you out of my mind."

She tried to wrench her arm away, but he wrapped his fingers around it and held her in place. A little more firmly than he'd have normally held a woman, but she was very strong. She could always get away if she really wanted to.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said.

"Why'd you do it, Jess?" He inched closer, his body almost touching hers. She'd be able to feel his heat. She wouldn't make eye contact now, so he knew she was affected by him. "Why'd you kiss me that night?"

"I don't know. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. It was stupid. Weak."

"I don't think it was either of those things and neither do you. But in those few seconds, I learned more about you than you expected."

"You weren't supposed to remember it at all."

"Maybe not. Maybe deep down you wanted me to remember the sensual, exotic woman who made my pulse erratic and who made it hard for me breathe when I looked at her."

"Exotic? You think I'm...? You've really got a screw loose." She again tried to wriggle from his grasp, but he held on firmly. He pressed his body against hers, just like she'd done to him that night.

She backed up a little at a time until he had her pinned against the filing cabinet.

"Don't do this, Britt. Remember what I am. I'm not a sensual woman. I'm a bloodsucking vampire. Don't look at the outer package without being aware of the darkness beneath."

"Honey, I've seen what's beneath, and I happen to respect and admire the vampire as much as the woman. Only right now, I'm afraid all I can think about is the woman." He pressed his lips to hers and wrapped his arms around her. He held her gently at first, then with more need as the kiss deepened and evolved into a dance. An intricate, heady dance between a man and a woman.

Heat fused them together. His hands roamed over her and the kiss became more desperate.

He thought he'd melt when she put her hand inside his shirt and began to unbutton it. Dear Lord, this woman could drive him to Nirvana and beyond with just a touch.

He let his mouth graze her jaw line, then found those luscious lips that were pleasure itself. Her fingers moved over his chest, creating an exquisite vortex of pleasure.

"Britt." She pulled her hand from under his shirt, leaving him cold. "I just heard movement. There's someone outside."

"James?"

"No. We've got company of the unfriendly kind."

Damnit! His ragged breathing, coupled with his pounding heart, made it hard to hear anything. His gaze swept over her, burning with hunger. Before she realized what he was going to do, he kissed her one last time, slowly and effectively.

"We'll continue this another time," he warned. He had no intention of letting her push him away again. He knew she'd try. He hadn't expected to be this successful tonight. It was a step. A step in the right direction.

With deft fingers he buttoned his shirt. "Let's find out who's here," he said, grabbing his jacket out of the SUV and retrieving the silver stake from the inside pocket.

He missed having a gun, but they were useless against vampires. As a cop, his Sig Sauer had been a security feature for so long that a metal stake just didn't quite cut it.

They quietly slipped outside the warehouse. He turned to Jess to formulate a silent plan, but she was already gone.

Had she really heard something out here? Or had she just said that to control the situation inside?

Something creaked to his left on the far end of the dock. When he realized she'd been telling the truth, relief swept through him. He slunk down the dock toward the noise's location.

A vampire jumped off the top mast of the sailboat moored next to the dock and made a ten-point landing in front of him. Britt had never seen this guy before. His hair was wild, long and ratty. He bared his teeth in a strange smile as he began to advance on Britt.

"Why do you look familiar?" Britt felt for the stake behind his back.

The thin vampire hesitated for a second. "You recognize the resemblance?" He looked shaken. "I believe you met my father not long ago. You drove him to the church to meet Father Vandermire. That stupid man has the misguided impression that he can get help for me. That someone can cure me." He squinted at Britt. "As if I want to be cured."

"Why are you here?"

"Trying to distract me, are you? Don't bother. I know Jinx is with you."

That was the second time he'd heard Jess called that name. "Bergeron was your man, I take it?"

Britt scanned the rooftops while he talked, returning his attention to the vampire quickly. Vampires weren't normally this talkative. The ghoul might be trying to keep him distracted.

The sickly grin spread further, baring more of his elongated eyeteeth. "You're a quick one, aren't you?"

"Why'd you kill him?"

The vampire circled while Britt remained in one spot, ready for the attack. Unless she'd been distracted by something or someone else, Jess must be watching too.

"I didn't kill Bergeron. Someone else did. He wasn't a bad kid. Had a penchant for boys, but then so do I."

"Whoa, buddy. Need to know. And I didn't need to know that. On the other hand, it'll make it that much easier to exterminate you, knowing what a pervert you are."

The vampire let out a bestial howl. "Ooooh, I'm scared."

Then he leaned in closer to Britt, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the stake. "Cute little phallic

symbol you've got there." He slid his long, vile tongue suggestively across his lower lip.

"Jesus!" Britt slammed out his hand and impaled the vampire with one blow.

Jess landed beside him. "Stop!" she shrieked.

Too late. The body evaporated instantly. Dried atoms floated in the salty air and then were gone.

Desolation swamped her expression before she masked it.

"What's wrong?" But Britt didn't have to ask; he knew the answer already. His gut twisted. He knew killing that vampire had been too easy. He'd seen regular bad guys do things like that too. Usually when they wanted to die but couldn't do it themselves. "Shit! The kid didn't really molest boys, did he?"

Her shoulders slumped and she turned away. "Who knows? Truth was he wanted to go. You helped him. I guess he just couldn't handle it any longer. At least there was enough good left in him that he couldn't bear what he'd become."

Even though she usually hid any sign of emotion, she'd failed this time. Her wounded expression skewered Britt as she said, "Some of us aren't that lucky. Or that brave." She looked up into the sky and reached out one hand as if to try and touch some of the fading molecules.

"Lady, don't you dare tell me you're a coward. And don't you dare tell me you want out or that you'd ever consider pulling what that guy just did. I won't let you. James won't let you. You help people. You're one of the good guys."

She huffed out a disgusted breath. "Between you and Regent, I don't know which of you is the most deluded. I am what I am. Nothing can change that."

"You are. But you're so much more than you realize, Jess." He touched the back of her neck. "I'm sorry I killed him."

"Don't be. It's what he wanted. Let's get going."

Britt had a lot to learn about vampires. They weren't all totally bad. The majority of them had no remorse and no redeeming qualities. But, there were a few out there, like the kid, who couldn't face up to what he was. He'd known exactly what to say to make Britt wipe him out.

Britt felt sick. He wished he could take back what he'd just done. But it was too late. He'd taken a life that might have been salvageable. He just hoped he could live with that. It was going to be a long night. "Where are we going?"

"First we'll go to Tat's place. He's been staying in a halfway house in Brooklyn so the prison system can keep him under control. Maybe he's turned up there."

"Not likely."

"Yeah, but I want to look around. See if we can find any clues. He might have left something incriminating lying around."

"That's possible. He's one sick bastard. You sure you want to see what he'd leave around his place?"

There could be some nasty stuff there."

She gave him a withering stare. "I'm a cop. *And* I've been around longer than you. Therefore, I've seen what you've seen multiplied by fifty years. There's not much I haven't experienced in the line of duty, or in my own private hell."

She'd been pushing at him just about as hard as she'd ever pushed anybody. No one had ever pushed back like this before. She respected the hell out of that. She'd seen bigger men run scared with just one look from her.

"Sorry." By his expression he at least knew when he'd gone too far.

She nodded at his apology, then said, "Halfway houses don't allow their residents to have unacceptable material, so I doubt we'll find anything the least bit disagreeable."

* * * *

"Tat's room is next to the guard's office so we can keep a close eye on him. He can't come or go without the parole officer unlocking the main door and escorting him to the police car. Every day he's picked up by a cop car and taken to the warehouse and returned the same way. He's never out of the police's sight. Almost never," the parole officer said, taking off his cap and swiping his brow with his shirtsleeve, then replacing his cap.

Jess watched Britt grit his teeth and knew he was reminding himself that he'd let the mass murdering psycho escape. Even though it wasn't his fault, he blamed himself.

"He's escaped," Britt said through tight jaws.

The officer bit off a curse and looked at Jess and Britt as if they were personally responsible. Well, technically, she was responsible. That made her neck muscles taut.

"Tat Brophy is too dangerous to be on the streets," the parole officer said. "Why in hell he was ever let out of prison is a mystery to me. God only knows what he'll do now that he's on his own."

"Can we look around his room?" Britt asked.

The officer nodded. "Just don't take anything. I'm still responsible for his stuff, even if I think the bastard should have been juiced a long time ago."

"Sure. We just want to look."

Tat's room was immaculate. There wasn't a crease in his bed covers. Each end had been intricately folded and tucked in. He had several magazines, nothing suspect. Besides the single bed, he had a small stand with a television and two uncomfortable looking chairs. There was also a small dresser. She pulled open the drawers one after the other and found his clothes, folded and categorized by color. The top drawer housed underwear, socks and T-shirts, the next drawer held two dress shirts, and the last drawer jeans. Knowing he was an obsessive compulsive along with the rest of his profile didn't make her feel any better about him.

After checking under the mattress, Britt wandered into the four-by-four cubicle bathroom with a tiny shower stall. Even from the bedroom she could tell there were no windows in there. Still, she followed him inside, curious to see what he thought he'd find.

"Not a thing." Even though he lifted the back of the flush tank, she didn't expect he'd find anything. That would be one of the first places the parole officer would look during room checks. "You?"

"Nada," she said, feeling a little at a loss now. She'd been so sure they'd find something to help them out. "Let's go."

Disappointment glistened in Britt's eyes. She wanted to find out what was going on as much as he did. She felt like she'd let him down too. God, who knew her hellish life could get any worse. But then, it was her own fault, she should have never let this man get under her skin.

"Find anything?" The parole officer was leaning on the counter when they came out.

"Not a damned thing. How could a man live in there with nothing but two books and a dresser of clothes? Does he have a locker?"

"That's all you found in there?" The officer frowned. "He had a duffel bag with personal things in it. Even carries around his parents' pictures." He shuddered. "Only reason I figure he'd do that is to remember how he murdered them."

Britt and Jess looked at each other. Suddenly Tat's disappearance made sense. It had been planned. "How'd he get his duffel out without being seen?"

"Not sure. There's no way he went out the front door with it. And there're bars on his bedroom window." He came around the counter and went into Tat's room to look. Britt and Jess followed him.

Upon closer inspection, they discovered the bars on the window had been cut through then wedged back into place. Tat Brophy had had help. He could have left any time he wanted.

"Is there anything you can tell us about Tat that might give us an idea of where he'd go?"

"Probably headed for Canada. Isn't that where all the criminals head? Mexico's too far from here."

Jess pulled her card out of her pocket. It had her cell phone number on it. "Listen, if you find anything that could help us track him down, give me a call, will you?"

The officer eyed her up and down and a sly grin creased his doughy face. "Sure will, toots."

"Lieutenant Toots, to you," she snapped.

His eyes widened and he looked at the card. He'd forgotten she was his superior officer.

Britt had never really seen the scope of her abilities as a vampire. It was time for another lesson. She leaned closer to the man, stared him in the eyes and allowed her mind to connect with his. She could practically see his soul mirrored in his eyes while she willed him to forget they'd been there."

"You've never seen us," she said, snatching the card from his tightly clutched sausage-roll fingers. "You'll go back to your duties as if none of this happened."

His eyes glazed over like a sleepwalker's, and he turned and went to his desk and sat down. Jess rewound the video tape on the surveillance system and erased the last twenty minutes.

"The minute we leave, you'll turn the video tape back on and begin recording again like nothing happened," she said.

He stared straight ahead, no sign of understanding visible on his face.

"Why did you do that?" Britt asked when they were outside.

"I have a funny feeling we're being manipulated. We don't know who to trust, and I don't want anyone to know we were here. Especially the wrong people."

"Good point."

They got in the car and Jess pulled out the chunk of tombstone they'd found at the party. "Maybe this is all the evidence we need to find Tat. If he's involved with the vampires, he might even be the one who left it at the house for us to find. I think this was an invitation."

"An invitation to go back to the cemetery?" Britt made a face.

"Most likely."

"If that's true, you know they'll be waiting for us."

She pretended to be more interested in scanning the moldy stone than listening to what Britt had just said. She knew what he meant. Would the two of them be lucky enough to battle the vampires again and live to talk about it?

Chapter Seventeen

The cemetery again! Britt's shoulders went taut. Why'd it have to be the cemetery? She was right, of course. The whole thing added up to that damned rock being a message.

"I'm driving," he said, jumping into the driver's seat and waiting for her to hand over the keys.

"Yeah, whatever. But this truck is Regent's baby. I'm not allowed to get a scratch on it."

"This might actually be something I'm better at than you." He grinned at her and peeled away from the curb.

She looked heavenward. "I think we might be in trouble."

"Nah, I'm a good driver. Got a commendation on the force for my safe driving abilities." He flipped on the radio and realized it was the first time in a long time he'd been able to think about being a cop without that horrible burden of guilt.

The next time he got his hands on Randy he'd kill him for real. But not before he found out what the hell was going on. "What are we looking for when we get there?"

"It's my guess this stone is from a headstone in the same cemetery where Randy's wife is buried. Minus this piece. This puzzle piece. That's how they're intended to work, like a puzzle. Leading the bearer to the

headstone to find his answer."

"And the name on the headstone tells us who it comes from?"

"You've got it."

"Wish you'd told me that before I threw it away."

She gave him a knowing gaze. "At that point I don't think you were ready to learn who—or what—had sent you a piece of gravestone. Or who had been watching you. They didn't want you dead, though, or you would be. The whole idea of vampires trying to set you up just doesn't make sense. It's not their style. They don't play cat and mouse."

"You're right about one thing. If I'd known about them, I might have gone off half-cocked and tried to find the bastards who sent this to me. And not knowing how to defend myself against them wouldn't have been healthy."

"Now you can defend yourself. You're as able as anyone on my team."

"I'm not as able as James." Britt wasn't sure why he wanted to remind Jess of his weaknesses. James was stronger. He'd been at her side for a good many years and they were a solid team.

She didn't respond to the comment or say anything else until they stopped outside the cemetery's wrought iron fencing. "Since the guard might recognize the vehicle, let's leave it outside the grounds and walk in this time. Have you got your stake?"

"New and improved," he said, pulling out a silver stake. "Sampson amazes me. He said I needed something better when he saw my wooden stake, and then he had this specially engineered for me. This thing has a spring mechanism; the end of the stake shoots out and doubles its length when I touch this button."

He hit the button and the shaft lengthened immediately.

"You really must have a way with people if Sampson made that for you without me asking him to. Sampson isn't an overtly friendly man. He's found it safer that way. Especially in his field of work."

Britt grimaced. "It's even more dangerous now that they have that serum and anyone can turn out to be a vampire."

She chuckled and led him into the cemetery. "Yeah, though Sampson was antisocial long before we knew anything about that. Geez, this place is huge. There are so many odors here that it'll be hard to track down one particular scent unless we're within a certain distance."

"There are hundreds of cemeteries outside New York City. We might not even be in the right one. No way would we have time to go through all of them. We may be wasting our time."

"Maybe. But I don't think so. I think this is the one. Especially after running into Prometheus here the other night."

"We should have asked James to come with us," Britt said.

Again, she ignored his comment about James and said, "I'll take this row and you take that one." The two rows ran parallel. They wouldn't be far from each other if they were attacked, but they could cover more ground.

As they moved down the rows, he said, "Half the headstones in this part of the cemetery were damaged beyond repair the other night. Maybe the puzzle piece won't fit into anything, because it was smashed."

"I don't think so. It was left at that party to lure us here. Prometheus knows I'll consider this a key to information. He wanted us to come and find whatever this leads to."

They walked through row after row. It was nearly dark and Britt could barely read the names any longer. He took out a penlight and flashed the light across the last couple of headstones before Jess finished her row and joined him.

"There's one other place I'd like to look before we leave," she said.

A mosquito buzzed past Britt's ear and he slapped at it. He looked around to make sure no one followed them, especially the security guard, who'd probably be doing extra rounds since the vandalism.

The carnage from the other night was almost unnoticeable now. Several headstones had already been put back into place, and some had been repaired. There were still some missing, either broken beyond repair or out for repair. He'd felt disquieted when it had been proclaimed on television and in the newspapers that the vandalism was done by teenagers. How many times had kids been blamed for this type of damage?

A cold chill weaseled up his spine. The world should never know about the reality of these creatures. They should stay fictional for humanity's peace of mind. At least no kids were arrested and charged with the crime.

"Prometheus attacked me beside that big oak tree." Jess stepped up to it and felt the trunk for the location where her knife had been imbedded in the rough bark. "Yes, this is the one. Check the stones around here."

"Ten-four," he said, immediately flicking on his flashlight and moving in the opposite direction. Two headstones in, his heart rate escalated. "Jess, I think I've found it. Bring that rock over here."

She was there so quickly it startled him. He'd never watched her move through the darkness, but he knew she saved her vampiric abilities for times when the world couldn't see her.

She reached forward and put the stone in place. It fit like a glove. Britt could feel his hand tensing, and the tension moved up his arm to his shoulder and his back. Whose name was on the stone?

He quickly flicked the penlight over it. Must've gone too fast in the dark because he couldn't see a name. He tried again, slower this time. No name.

Jess sat on the ground and leaned her chin on her arm, which was draped over her bent knees. "I've never seen this done before," she said. "This is a very old stone. There's no name on it because it's been completely worn away with age. Yet the rest of the headstones around here aren't this old."

Britt scanned some of the others with his light. The oldest one he found was sixty years. This part of the cemetery was fairly new compared to the ancient stone sitting here in the middle of them.

"We need to talk to Sampson. He's done more research than anyone else, so surely he'll know why an old vampire would have an unmarked headstone in a fairly new cemetery," she remarked.

"Why would the owners of this place even allow an unmarked stone?" Britt flicked off the penlight and joined Jess on the ground.

"I think it belongs to Prometheus," Jess said, reaching out and letting her fingers brush across the rough texture of the ancient headstone. "He's old enough for this stone to be his."

"But that doesn't help us. We still don't know where to find him."

"I'm beginning to think that's the whole point. He's having fun sending us chasing after our tails. This is all a game to him. Let's see what we can make them do next." She stood and put her hands on her hips.

"Time to call it a night."

They were silent on the way back in the truck. With an APB out on Tat, there'd be plenty of cops on the job trying to find him. It was a big city, though, with too many places to hide. It irked Britt that he was personally responsible for Tat's escape. He was supposed to keep an eye on him. The little bastard had probably holed up with friends for the night.

Did people like Tat even have friends? Crazy ones like himself, maybe. If he was one of the vampire wannabes, there was always the chance he'd hole up with them.

But the vampires' location was a mystery. Jess hadn't found them in the last few years even though she'd been trying. It wasn't likely he'd be able to do it any time soon either.

* * * *

Jess parked the truck in front of Britt's apartment at three in the morning. She grabbed some files from the back seat and poked them at him. I've read these over. If you want to peruse them yourself, you can give them back to me tomorrow.

"What conclusion did you come to after reading these?" He held one file up and flipped through it quickly without taking the time to read anything.

"Tat'd been involved in several altercations in prison. Considering he was psychotic, that was to be expected. But he also had to have someone looking after him. He'd been given privileges that didn't jive with his track record. He had a TV in his cell, and cigarettes whenever he ran out."

"Just as we suspected. But who was his benefactor?"

"That's the million dollar question, isn't it?" She looked up at his building.

"Care to come in?"

"Why?"

"Do we have to have a reason? I just thought maybe we could sit and brainstorm for a bit. Try to come up with some places to look tomorrow."

She looked up at the rooftop of the building across the street and waved. "Okay, I'll come in, but just

for an hour or so.

"Who'd you wave at?" Britt leaned over and tried to see what she saw. It was too dark.

"James. He's been with us all evening. After the other night at the cemetery, a little backup is a good thing."

"Back at the warehouse you told him to leave."

"Yes and no. James knows what I want before I even have to tell him."

"You two are pretty tight."

"We're professionals who work well together. Nothing more, nothing less."

They climbed out of the SUV. As they walked to his apartment building, Britt ran a hand over the back of his neck. "I can't figure the two of you out."

"There's nothing to figure out. We're dedicated to our job. We work hard to keep the city safe. That's our goal. Our life. There's nothing else, Britt. There can't be."

"Why not? You said yourself you could have a relationship. Maybe it's time you did."

"With whom? James? You? Not going to happen." She climbed the stairs ahead of him. "Did you ask me here to talk about my lack of a love life, or are we going to work? Because if we're not going to work, I'm leaving."

He pursed his lips. "Work, I guess. Though, I'm not done discussing your love life."

She stopped outside his door and wouldn't budge. "Make up your mind right now. What's it to be?"

He held his hands up in surrender. "To be discussed at another time."

"I suggest you forget about my love life or lack thereof," she muttered, stepping into his apartment when he held the door open for her.

She noticed he waited for her to sit down before he sat in a chair opposite her. Maybe he was being a gentleman, or maybe he decided it was better if he didn't get too close to her right now. Smart man.

Jess tilted her head and breathed in. Normally apartments in this type of neighborhood came with all sorts of unpleasant odors permeating every floor. Even the air outside was unpleasant to her sensitive olfactory system. But there was something much worse in Britt's apartment tonight. Death.

His apartment was very small. The dead person couldn't be far away. She glanced around to make sure no vampires lingered in the shadows. They were alone.

Another body placed in this building. In his apartment this time. What the hell was going on? What was it about John Brittain that had garnered this kind of attention?

She looked at John. He seemed unaware of what had happened in here.

"Things just keep getting more and more complicated," she said. "The last thing we need is to be looking for Tat when we have more important issues to deal with." She glanced around his apartment, looking for evidence of foul play.

"About that. Tat was my responsibility. He got away from me. I shouldn't have taken my eyes off him."

"No you don't, Brittain. You're not putting this load of guilt on your shoulders. I'm his superior officer. I was in the room, and I'm the one who distracted you."

She was just about to tell him the bad news when he got a strange look on his face. She waited to see if he'd figured out there was a dead man in his here. The guy didn't smell bad enough for a human to notice him. At least not yet.

"Speaking of distracted." He must have realized his apartment felt strange. Nothing else could have tipped him off. She waited to see what he thought was wrong. A thrill of anticipation struck her. She wanted him to be that good.

His place was small. So small it would be nearly impossible to hide anywhere except the bathroom or under his bed.

He motioned that she should check the bathroom, while he checked under the bed. She moved smoothly. A dark ghost floating across the room. Soundless.

He crept closer to the bed and flashed the light underneath it.

"Oh shit!" he scrambled backwards on his hands and feet like a crab.

Jess watched him move away from the bed. She approached him, nearly reached out to him, but she pulled her hand back. Instead, she leaned over and lifted the edge of the blanket. Cold, lifeless eyes stared out from under the bed.

"He's dead," she said calmly, pulling out her cell phone.

"He'd better be, by the look of him," Britt said, getting up off the floor and brushing off his knees. "Damn it! Why'd they bring him here? I don't get this. What the hell did I do to warrant this kind of attention?"

"That's a question I'd like to have the answer to as well," she said. "I've never seen vampires do this before."

"Just my luck."

"Hang on it's ringing," she said. "Sampson, it's Jess. Listen, get the crew together and meet me at Britt's apartment. We've found Tat. Bring your forensic gear."

Britt stared at his bed. What were those ghouls trying to tell him?

He opened the fridge and got out a beer, popped the cap and drank deeply.

Jess put her hand over the receiver and said, "No more than one." He looked down at the bottle and realized he was still on the job. "Yeah, I wasn't thinking." He set the bottle on the counter.

She checked his patio door and the front door. They hadn't been jimmed. But then, his place wasn't exactly upper class. Security wasn't the highest priority around here and the doorknobs and locks were cheap.

He watched her move around the apartment. "Those doors would be easy to pick. But how easy would it be to carry dead bodies around the city without being noticed?" He looked toward his patio. "I guess it'd be pretty easy for vampires who can climb up the shadowy side of a building."

She nodded.

Britt frowned. "Whoever thinks leaving dead bodies in my place is cute is going to feel the sharp end of my handcrafted silver stake as soon as I find out who they are."

* * * *

Jess cornered Sampson as soon as the coroner finished examining Tat's body. It was evident Tat had been tortured and then vamped. He'd died as he'd lived. Violently.

"Sampson, if you find any evidence at all—*anything*—call me. Or phone Regent if I'm unreachable. He'll tell me the minute I'm awake. I want to come down hard on these vampires. They're flaunting their victims' deaths in our faces. Trying to show us they're better than we are."

He nodded. "Will do, love."

"Thanks. If we don't get our butts in gear, they are going to prove better than us. So far we're falling dismally behind. As much as I didn't like Tat, he was part of my team. Maybe this is a divide and conquer scenario. I need to know if they're trying to pick my team off one at a time. Talk to your contact. See if he can find out what the hell is going on. Please. I need to know. Or better yet, get me his address so I can go ask him myself."

His face became stern and he lowered his voice. "My source won't divulge an address, Jess. I tried that once before. It's risky enough to give me tidbits here and there. He only does it because I'm trying to cure him. You've got to admit the information he gave us on the serum was big. He took a huge chance telling me that. I can't push too hard. My source is very scared."

Already in the body bag, she watched Tat's remains being wheeled through the apartment by two burley specialists from Sampson's team. They nodded at Jess respectfully. They always did. Yet neither of them had ever spoken to her. It reminded her of what she was. These people knew her, worked with her on a regular basis, but like most normal people, they had a healthy fear of her. They were the smart ones.

Now if she could only get Britt to smarten up.

"I understand, Sampson. But try to get a little more if you can." She put a hand on his shoulder.

"I always do, hon. I want that information as much as you do."

Jess panned the room. Britt was still talking to one of the officers. They looked deeply engrossed in conversation. She focused on him. He sensed her almost immediately and met her gaze with a personal look that would send any red-blooded woman flying into his arms. How'd he do that?

She blinked and remained impassive as she looked away. Ignore him. *Ignore him*. She couldn't bear to see what would happen between them if she allowed herself to care. What if he couldn't take the reality of what she was, after she opened herself up to him?

That was why she'd never allowed herself to have a relationship. She'd fought the darkness inside long enough to know that one more devastation, like a broken heart, could fling her over the edge. Forever.

The best thing to do would be to ignore his sexual innuendos. Hard to do, because he had charisma like she'd never experienced before.

He said something to the officer and moved toward her. She liked the way he'd picked up on her emotions and came to her immediately. She liked the attention even though she wanted to deny it.

He made her feel special. A contradiction in terms, if there ever was one. How could a vampire feel special? "What were you two talking about?" she asked.

"The officer just told me I couldn't stay here until the investigation is over. I guess I knew that all along."

"Makes sense. Don't worry. I'll keep you apprised of what's going on."

He huffed out a breath and grabbed his jacket. Everyone was leaving and the inspectors wanted him out so they could lock up and seal the place with evidence tape.

"Want to stay in the rectory tonight?"

His eyelids lowered just enough to send sensual shivers across her skin.

"That's the best offer I've had all day."

"Only if you think sleeping in the bedroom next to a priest is particularly erotic." She deliberately kept her voice hard.

He let out a long, even breath and pulled his coat on. "Now that's a splash of cold water."

"Do you want to leave your key with the officer so they can lock the door when they leave?"

"I already did. Doesn't much matter. This place is like Grand Central Station anyway. Vampires coming and going, leaving dead bodies at will. Might as well leave the door unlocked and make things easier for them."

"You're tired. You need some sleep. Things will seem brighter when you're rested"

"Rest is only *one* of the things I need. But not the most important thing," he murmured, breathing the words slowly, making her blood sing.

She pretended to ignore him and led the way out of the apartment and to the street. Regent's vehicle sat next to the curb. She glanced at the skyline. No obvious shadows. No silhouettes of anyone watching. Strange.

One thing she did know, she had to stay away from Britt tonight. She couldn't handle any more of his overtures. She'd taken about all she could handle. One more burning look and she'd be the one attacking him.

So she stomped into the rectory ahead of Britt, woke Regent with barely a civil word, and told him to

settle Britt in for the night. Then she stalked off without another word.

They just gawked at her as she left. Let them! She didn't care.

* * * *

The call came the next evening, just as the sun had set and Jess had showered and dressed and fed.

Britt was in the kitchen having supper with Regent. The two of them were laughing about something when she entered the room. It made her ache inside to hear the familiar sounds of friendship. Regent must miss that. She was always too serious, too concerned about keeping herself in the light to let herself be a sister.

"Sampson wants us in his office right away," she said.

"What's it about, Jess?" The smile left Regent's face and she regretted taking away his enjoyment.

"Said it was too important to talk about on the phone."

Britt jumped up. "I'll get my coat. Regent, can I get yours for you?"

"Sure, it's hanging in the front entry. The green one with the leather collar."

"I'll get the truck," Jess said and slipped out the back way. It's not like she'd get any colder anyway.

Regent and Britt were waiting at the end of the driveway when she pulled the truck around. Britt jumped into the back.

"You didn't have to give me the front seat, Britt," Regent chided

"Your truck, you should at least get the front."

"Any idea at all, what this about, hon?" Regent then asked Jess.

She expertly maneuvered around a sharp corner. "It must be about the results of Tat's autopsy."

Regent reached up and unsnapped his collar. He usually did that when he was acting as his sister's protector.

"Maybe it's got something to do with inside information," she said. "If you can believe it, Britt, Sampson's got a couple of vamps on the inside. They give him information every now and then, but just bits and pieces."

"Can he trust them?"

"Sampson is careful. If he trusts his sources, then he's very sure of them." She tapped her fingernail on the steering wheel. "Plus, as far as we know, Sampson is the only guy on this planet who's got the expertise to eventually find a cure for them. That's a mighty good reason to keep him happy if you don't want to spend eternity as a vampire. I don't think they'd set him up."

They got into the elevator. Britt thought they'd go to the same lab at the geochemical building, but it stopped on a different floor.

"Where are we going?"

"To the boardroom. I've never heard Sampson so excited. Whatever's going on has got to be big."

They entered a boardroom fit for a world leader. No expense had been spared. Sampson wasn't present, and the scent of coffee lured him to the side table immediately. "Want coffee, Regent?"

"Mmmmm, thanks, Britt, don't mind if I do."

Britt poured them each a cup and handed Regent his. Then he added sugar and cream to his and carried his mug to the old, exquisite mahogany conference table.

James came in next. Britt watched him scan the room for Jess, then sit as close to her as he could. He had a theatrical look about him, with his shoulder length hair and artistic, neatly trimmed beard. He always dressed in black and usually wore a sports jacket. Not at all what one would expect a vampire to look like.

"Regent," James acknowledged.

"Hi, son. How's it going? Where've you been lately?"

"I've been busy with the team, plus Jess and I have to patrol until dawn. There hasn't been much time." His gaze went to Jess and became softer. "Anybody know what this is about? Sampson called me and told me to haul ass and get over here immediately. Since Sampson doesn't normally swear, I figure it's important."

Jess laughed. "You know Sampson. He's always a bit on the dramatic side. But I'm anxious to hear what's up, too. He doesn't find new information all that often, although we've learned more in the past few days than in the last century."

Sampson breezed in, his bald pate reflecting fluorescent light from the overhead fixtures. He grabbed the remote on the table and lowered the projection screen.

Obviously, it was slide show time again. Britt picked up his cup and took a drink.

"I think I've hit the mother lode," he began. "You're *NOT* going to believe what I'm about to tell you. It explains a lot of things."

"What is it?" Jess sounded impatient.

Sampson put the remote down and clasped his hands on the table. "I've found out Prometheus, our big, bad vampire from Romania, is about as dangerous as any vampire can be." His face flushed as if he was holding his breath with excitement. "Prometheus was actually one of Hitler's henchmen in the Second World War. But that's not the most interesting part. He worked as one of Hitler's geneticists!"

Everyone in the room made a noise of surprise.

Sampson nodded. "Thing is, the Aryan race wasn't Prometheus's focus. While Hitler had all the money and resources at his disposal, Prometheus was able to spend years developing the serum I found in those bodies on the church roof."

"Holy shit," Britt said.

"You can say that again." Regent pushed his chair back and crossed himself.

"Apparently, this came about because vampires were dying off. There weren't many of them left, and Prometheus, aka Gunter Haun, knew something had to be done before their kind disappeared forever."

"He's a geneticist," Jess breathed, as if the full impact of Sampson's statement had settled in with a thud.

"Yeah, problem was, he never quite got it right. Until recently, when he met this brilliant student from MIT who was fascinated with the mythology of vampires." Sampson cracked a grin. "Not unlike me, except I only work for good, not evil."

"We're very lucky to have you, Sampson," Regent agreed.

"Thanks, Father. Anyway, apparently the kid was expected to do wonders in modern medicine. It was a blow to the medical community when he dropped out of sight. My inside source tells me he's been working for Prometheus ever since."

The air in the room suddenly felt stale. Britt shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Any idea why they're building up the vampire population?"

"Yes to the first question. Apparently the serum is only fifty percent effective. It works on some vampires and not on others. The desired effect is that they retain their vampire abilities, but also keep their human attributes. They can even eat a little food, I'm told. Enough to at least make it look as if they're normal. But they still have a taste for blood."

"What happens to those it doesn't work on?" Jess asked.

"My source tells me some vampires die and some go insane. And when they go insane, they're not exactly low key. They're crazy enough to expose the whole lot of them. That's why the leader, or leaders, has infiltrated vampires into the police force. It doesn't pay to have nut-case vampires moving around the city night and day without having a way to keep them under control. They still need anonymity for safety, and this drug creates a huge risk of exposure."

"If the serum is that volatile why do they keep using it?" Britt asked.

"Prometheus needs it. He's very old. For obvious reasons the serum is called 'Sunshine.'" He made quotation marks in the air with his fingers. "It doesn't drive Prometheus mad, but its effects are too short-lived on him. He only gets the benefits for half as long as the younger vampires. He likes to be young and virile, and according to my source, he doesn't care how many underlings he sacrifices to find the key to moving about in the daytime. Those who live become addicted. Only Prometheus, with his wealth, can afford to keep giving them their drug, and then only as long as they take part in his experiments."

"Vampire addicts. Could it be any worse?" Britt leaned forward, forearms on the table.

"Yeah, a vampire who did experiments for Hitler," Jess said.

"Good point."

A picture of ocean fauna popped up on the screen and Sampson continued. "Though I haven't got any serum to prove this yet, I believe Sunshine is made from extremely rare deep sea tube worms that are only found near geothermal vents. I know tube worms are bioluminescent. They're only found in the extremely deep oceans where there is no light. Bioluminescence may be the element that allows vampire's to achieve near humanity. The benefits of bioluminescence is being studied by modern science, but we've only scratched the surface. If bioluminescent tube worm DNA is being genetically modified, Lord only knows what it can do."

"How'd they ever find such a rare item to make a serum?"

"Hitler. He tried just about every scientific test possible. From creating cutting edge weaponry to testing the limits of psychic abilities. He had unlimited test subjects. Somehow I don't think he knew what Prometheus was working on. Meanwhile, Prometheus was using the time and materials to improve his own kind. Most likely not the same agenda that Hitler had in mind."

"Unbelievable," Britt looked down at the table.

"The stuff costs two grand a pop for the vampires who survived their first does. And once they start, there's no stopping. They're hooked good, according to my source."

Britt didn't have to take stock in the room. The silence said enough. Vampires were bad enough, but killer addicts who needed money to get their fix? Vampires who would do just about anything to achieve their end goal? Things had just gotten a whole lot worse.

If they didn't get a handle on the vampires, and soon, there'd be nothing to keep their existence a secret from the world. Nothing would stop them from attacking people during the daytime as well as at night.

Chapter Eighteen

Britt returned to the rectory with Regent and Jess. He stood inside the doorway, not sure why he was here. Or if they even wanted him here.

"I'll put the kettle on," Regent said.

"This has got to be a shock to Regent," Jess said, staring in concern at her brother as he disappeared through the swinging kitchen door. Until now, James and I were the only vampires able to go out in the daytime. And that's only because Regent's prayers and his faith have kept us strong and given us those abilities. Finding out there's a chemical that can have the same effect has to be upsetting to him.

Britt nodded as he studied her. She had to have wondered what it would be like to take the serum and regain more of her humanity. Who wouldn't? But at what price?

"You and Regent have been through a lot together over the years. I have the feeling you've both learned to be very adaptable. I know Regent would like to see you live like everyone else, to be able to eat regular food, to have a human existence, but I don't think even that is worth risking your life. Do you?"

She pursed her lips. "I don't know. I just don't know."

"Well I do. And the answer's no. Not at all."

She gave him an odd look before pushing open the door into the kitchen as Regent returned.

Regent sat at the table, a smile stretching from ear to ear. "Do you realize I could hear every word you two just said in the hallway? And, Britt, I'm so pleased you've become a friend to Jess and me. You told her exactly what I'd have said. Now I can die in peace, knowing someone will be around to talk sense into her when need be." He picked up his teacup and took a sip.

Jess scowled at him. "Regent! Stop talking about dying. I don't understand why all of a sudden you're thinking about death all the time."

Regent heaved a shaky sigh and blinked tired eyes. "I know it's hard, Jess. I love you with all my heart and I don't want to hurt you. Ever. But I'm seventy-two years old. The average life span for a lucky male these days is around eight-one. I can't delude myself. And you need to be prepared for the inevitable."

"Stop it!" She flew to the basement door, ripped it open and slammed it behind her. The hinges rattled.

Britt leaped to his feet to follow her, but Regent raised a calming hand and motioned for him to sit back down. "She'll be okay. She might live forever, but she can't get it into her head that I won't. I need to prepare her. My time is coming."

"We all go eventually," Britt said out of habit, then realized that wasn't entirely accurate. Then what Regent had said sank in, and he regarded him in concern. "You're not ill, are you?"

"No. But mortality is knocking at the door." He sighed, then said, "Britt, promise me you'll be here for Jess when I go. That you'll help her through all of the tough times. I am right about you, aren't I? You do love her. You'll protect her like I did for the past fifty-years."

Britt looked away, staring at the oak paneling on the far wall. "I do love her. But she doesn't want to know it and wouldn't acknowledge it if she did. I don't even understand it myself. I know she's your sister, but how can I love a vampire?"

That revelation probably shocked Britt more than Regent. Those weren't quite the words he expected to fly out of his mouth, unbidden. He inhaled deeply and considered his words. Why'd he say it? Because—it was true. Even though he hadn't admitted it to himself, he'd known it for some time. He loved Jess beyond all reason.

Regent set his cup down. "That's a tough question, and I know what the answer is for me. I love her with all my heart because she's the most amazing sister I could have." His eyes got watery and for a minute Britt thought he might cry. "Yes, even as a vampire she's a good person. She's been fighting her illness every day for the past fifty years and only failed once in the very beginning. She's strong, but she has so much self-doubt although she'd never let anyone know it. She still thinks she's an evil creature who doesn't deserve love. But what she doesn't understand is how much good she has already done in her lifetime, and it isn't just my prayers that have helped her do that. It's her innate goodness. She deserves all the happiness and love she can get."

"I'm increasingly aware of that," Britt said.

A look of peace crossed Regent's face. "Bless you, my son! Bless you. I've known you were the answer to my prayers for a long time."

Britt's head snapped up and he gawked at Regent. "I don't know what you're thinking, but I don't think you should get too excited, yet. Jess isn't likely to agree with either one of us."

* * * *

A week later, the team had been on several raids and each new member had a crack at taking out their own vampire. Griz was the final one to succeed. Britt could see in his eyes that the victory was a difficult one. Killing just wasn't in him. He wasn't a vampire hunter.

Britt felt bad for him because he knew Griz wanted out, even though he hadn't admitted it to anyone yet. He also knew the big guy wouldn't quit until they'd completed their mission. If it was anyone else, Britt would discuss the issue with Jess. He'd never work with a partner he couldn't trust. But he knew he could trust Griz in the long run. Griz would never back down from the fight. In fact he'd proven himself already. He could take out vampires; he just couldn't do it as a lifelong career. He'd seen the same thing happen to cops. Good cops who excelled at the job. They just didn't have the heart for it.

"Let's all go out for coffee." He figured Griz would need the company after his ordeal, and he wouldn't feel singled out if the entire group went.

They went to the local bar, one of the few open at breakfast time.

"Thick black coffee, the breakfast of champions," Britt said jokingly and raised his mug, wondering how he was going to get the stuff down at this ungodly hour of the day. He liked coffee, but he'd swear this stuff had been brewing for a week.

Griz took a long drink from his mug and swallowed hard. His eyes were still vapid.

Everyone sensed Griz's depression. They all tried to cheer him up, but nothing worked. In the end, Jess and Britt drove him home in Regent's truck.

"I'm not sure I can do that again," he said when the three of them were alone in the truck. "It felt like I was killing a human being. There's a hole inside me that's growing bigger and bigger."

"But you weren't killing a human being," Britt said.

"They're just like, Jess." Griz's dull gaze captured Britt's and made him squirm. "They're just like Jess," he repeated again, staring off into space. Thanks to Tat everyone knew Jess was a vampire. He'd blown her cover after he saw her take out the vamps with James in the alley. He'd told everyone on the team. Something Britt was sure Jess had wanted to do herself, in her own time.

Britt swallowed hard. If anything happened to Jess ... But nothing would happen to her. He wouldn't let anything happen.

He reached over and patted Griz's shoulder. "They're not one bit like Jess. They're killers with no remorse. They're like dozens of Charles Mansens. Jess is not like that. She'd never harm a living soul. She's proven that over and over. She spends all her time trying to save humanity, not feed off of it. You do see the difference, don't you?"

"I guess so. But it still feels bad, Britt. It feels bad."

"Griz, you don't have to do it again," Jess said suddenly. "You can be the point man. You can be on watch, and monitor things from the van from now on. Just promise me one thing."

"Anything," Griz said.

"Promise me if a vampire finds you and it becomes a battle between you and him, you'll fight for your own life even if it means killing again."

Griz hesitated, then said, "I can promise that. If I'm protecting myself, I think I can do it. Thanks, Jess."

After they dropped Griz off, Jess climbed out of the driver's side and into the passenger seat of the truck.

"I'm driving?" Britt said.

"If you don't mind. It's been a stressful night."

Britt easily read between the lines. She was thinking about Griz's comment that the vampires were just like her. "Jess, honey, you're not like them! Don't you dare think it for a minute." He reached out and grabbed her hand. Apparently, she was more shaken up by Griz's comment than she cared to admit because she allowed him to continue holding her hand without remark.

"I try not to. But there's a blood bond between vampires, a connection that sings through my veins that I can't explain. In a way Griz is right. They are just like me."

"Not at all."

"A lot more than either of us cares to admit."

He caught her expression of despair and his gut twisted. "If it takes me decades, I'll prove to you how wrong you are about that," he said. "You're the bravest, most caring woman I know."

"It's easy to be brave when you're dead. It's not like anyone's going to hurt me."

"You can be hurt. And killed, and you know it. You're not *that* immortal." He added emphasis at the end, knowing it would tweak her dark sense of humor.

She laughed and the sound of happiness in her voice brought a new level of joy to his heart. He hated to see that look of hopelessness on her face and wanted to do something to help her. But he also understood Griz's pain.

They arrived at the rectory. He got out of the truck and opened her door, saying, "I'll walk you in." The sun was just beginning to send tiny rays of light above the horizon, and a bloom of pink lit the sky in the east.

"Thanks."

"Do you think Regent will be up yet?"

"Yes, he's got early mass. He'll have eaten his breakfast and will be practicing his sermon."

Jess opened the door to Regent's study and leaned in. He wasn't at his desk. "That's funny. He's not here."

She searched through the downstairs rooms, then returned. "There's no sign of him." Frowning, she called, "Regent, where are you?"

Britt saw the instant look of concern of Jess's face. He felt concerned too. "Maybe he's in his bedroom or in the church getting ready for mass?"

"I'll go upstairs and check his bedroom. You wait here." She took the stairs at lightning speed. He could tell by her panicked expression when she returned to the kitchen that Regent wasn't in his bedroom either. It didn't take her long to notice the same thing he did. She gasped. A bowl of oatmeal sat on the table—untouched. Cold. Now that Regent was nowhere to be found, his untouched cereal was a bad sign.

She turned to Britt, with a worried look. "He's not in the house and his breakfast hasn't been eaten. He never leaves the house without his breakfast because his blood sugar has a tendency to drop if he doesn't eat."

"Maybe he's in the church."

"Let's go see." Britt practically ran behind her long, loping steps. She jerked the church door open as if it was featherlight. When she ran inside, he grabbed the door so it wouldn't smash into the church wall and spring back at him.

Going straight to the confessional, she checked each box. Britt watched her, feeling useless. Even if he could keep up with her, there was no sense following her to the sacristy. He had a gut feeling she wasn't going to find Regent. The vamps knew Regent was Jess's Achilles' heel. If they had Regent, they had her.

She left the sacristy and scaled the steps to the roof, where they'd found the bodies, faster than Britt could imagine possible.

She returned, teeth extended.

He stood in the aisle with his leather coat draped over his arm. His heart went out to her. She loved her brother dearly and he vowed before God to help Jess find Regent.

"Let's calm down and think rationally about what might have happened." He'd never seen her like this. She was always the image of control, but not right now.

"They've got him. I know it." Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper.

"I think you may be right. But that doesn't mean they'll hurt him. He's probably okay. I'd wager they're just holding him hostage to get at you." Britt took two steps closer to her.

"Why?" Her pained expression cut into him and he wanted to wrap his arms around her and comfort her. But he could tell she was a little out of control in the vampire sense, and he didn't want to push his luck right now. She'd never forgive him for that.

"Maybe it's because we're getting too close. It's possible they think that if they have Regent, you'll back off."

"He's old, Britt. He's feeble. I don't know if he can take any rough treatment. I should've been here to

protect him, just like he's always protected me.” Her hands flew to her throat and she swallowed hard as she tipped her head back and closed her eyes.

“He's stronger than you think, Jess, and he wouldn't want you to do anything without thinking it through,” Britt said moving his jacket from one hand to the other.

She moaned and looked heavenward. “Keep him safe! You keep him safe!” she ranted opening her eyes and staring at the crucifix on the wall. “He's been your lamb, your right hand, all these years, so you make sure he doesn't come to any harm.”

She switched her attention to Britt. “Prometheus did this, and when I get through with him, he's going to wish he'd never gone near Regent.” Her hands fisted tightly at her sides.

She started to turn toward the door, but Britt took a chance and grabbed her arm, saying, “Jess, I'm with you on this one hundred percent. I'll help you find Regent. But you have to stop and think. Why are they doing this? Maybe the whole idea is to keep you busy looking for your brother so you can't continue with your raids. Regent would be furious with you if you let other people die while trying to save him. Let's sit down and figure this out.” Britt pointed to the pew on their right.

She cast a mournful look at him that made his heart wrench. That one look told him all he needed to know about her humanity. She might be a vampire, but she felt for her brother in the same way any sister would. Her humanity was very much intact.

“If that's their goal then they've succeeded, because nothing is going to keep me from rescuing Regent. I'll find Prometheus and make him talk. I hurt him that night in the graveyard. If I injured him then, I can do it again.”

“But, if you remember, you were hurt too. You didn't come out of that fight unscathed.” He hated to point that out, but it was true. She needed to realize it.

“But I'm smarter. I can take him. He just got lucky last time.”

“He probably did. This time though, we're going to take enough time to figure out where we stand before we charge in. That way we'll have a better chance of saving Regent, right?”

Jess's blood pounded through her veins, and her heart beat harder than she knew possible. He was right, she had to calm herself. She needed to be able to think rationally. She sucked in a quick breath and looked at him from the corner of her eye. Then she lowered her head and forced her breathing to slow down. “Okay. You're right.”

What had she done to deserve someone like Britt? He'd been able to soothe her and make her see reason. If Regent were here he'd be ecstatic. Britt didn't realize it took a special person to calm an agitated vampire.

“Normally I'd be the one laying the groundwork, but to be honest, right now I know I'm not thinking straight. Why don't you suggest what our next step might be.” she said, turning her back on him and taking a deep breath. She hunched her shoulders and felt her teeth aching again with the need to attack. Could she wait to find Regent? She had the nose and the tracking abilities to find him. But Britt was right. They had to come up with a plan.

She'd never handed the responsibilities over to another human being other than her brother. Never

trusted anyone enough to take the first step.

Britt might be green when it came to vampires, but he was a cop. And a good one. She'd allow him a small concession to prove himself. But he only had a short window of time. If his ideas didn't gel with her, she was going after her baby brother no matter what Britt said.

"We're going to look around. This church seems to be a hot spot of vampire activity. Maybe there's a reason."

"Maybe it was just a show of strength and there's absolutely no reason. We can't afford to waste precious time," she said impatiently.

"Is there a basement?"

"Yes, the door's through the sacristy and to the left," Jess said. "You go there and I'll check the balcony overlooking the church."

A short time later they met at the front door.

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

"Nothing." He looked at his watch and adjusted it on his wrist. "It's almost morning. Don't you have to rest? It's been a long night. We're both tired. If we get some rest, we'll be better able to find Regent at dusk."

Jess wanted to argue, but she could feel the lethargy that oozed into her bones, insisting she sleep. *Damn!* This was the worst thing about being a vampire. Especially at such a critical time. But she needed to regenerate whether or not she wanted to. And this time she'd have to do it without a protector to watch over her. She'd never been completely alone before when she slept. She'd always had Regent.

Maybe that's what the vampires had in mind. Snatch her brother so they could kill her in her sleep.

She didn't care what they did to her, as long as they didn't hurt Regent.

"What if we're wrong and they kill him?" she said, everything in her fighting against logic.

"I'm betting they won't risk it. I think they're using him as bait." His eyebrows rose. "Unless they want him for his clerical ability, want him to give them your capabilities."

Even as he made the comment, he shook his head. "That doesn't feel right. It's too coincidental that it would happen when you're closing in on them. I'm going back to my first scenario. They're using Regent to get to you."

"Okay, let's say you're right and they're using him as bait. What happens if we don't show up right away?"

"They'll probably be disappointed that you took time to regroup. But if I'm right, they'll keep him alive, if for no other reason than to draw you in to whatever trap they're setting."

She chewed on the corner of her lip.

"If you don't agree and want to go after him now, I'm more than willing to do that. I'm just not sure it's the best thing for you." He gave her a once over. "You look like you're about to fall over. If you want, I can go after him and you can stay here and rest."

He was right. She was about to fall over. Her limbs felt leaden. It would be suicide to go after Regent like this, and if she died, what hope would Regent have? She had no choice but to wait. And there was no way she'd let Britt go looking for Regent without her. Even if he could find her brother, Britt wouldn't stand a chance alone.

"What do you say?" Britt edged her toward the entrance.

"As much as I want to go after Regent, you're right. I need sleep. So do you."

She pushed the church door open and led the way back to the rectory. Outside the kitchen, she slowed and put one hand on the door casing. "I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done. What happened tonight wasn't in the job description. Calming down an agitated woman is hard enough, but when she's a vampire it's a dangerous combination." She was able to smile, just a little. "You've proven yourself an A-1 vampire hunter and friend."

Britt's jaw tightened. "Jess, I have to tell you I'm glad you recruited me. That you decided I was worthwhile to have on the team. Without you, without the training, I'd have been a sitting duck for whatever those vampires had in mind for me."

She felt the blackness approaching. Knew she had to get to her room. "You should go home, Britt. Get some sleep and be back here at dusk."

His head jerked around and he stared at her. "I'm not leaving you alone. Unprotected while you're..." He hesitated. Not quite sure what to say. "Incapacitated."

She began making her way to the basement door. He could follow her, but there was no way she'd let him in her room. No way she'd let him see her in her deathlike state.

"I don't have the time to argue. But I insist you go home."

"I'm staying. You can rest knowing that I'll be here looking out for you. And when you wake, we'll be ready to find Regent. Who knows, maybe when this whole thing is over, if Randy truly is a vampire, I might be able to look at myself in the mirror again."

She spluttered cynically. "Wish I could do that. Look in the mirror, I mean."

He looked shocked and opened his mouth as if to speak, but then slammed it shut without saying a word.

She gave him a playful shove. "I'm kidding. I can see myself in the mirror." Then her features crumpled and she covered her face with her hands. "What am I doing, cracking a joke at a time like this?"

Britt pulled her close and pressed his chin against the top of her head. "Regent would be happy if he knew you'd done that."

"I'm just tired. And worried about Regent. I'm saying silly things to try to forget what's going on."

How was it possible, at this dark moment, that she wanted him to take her into his arms and just hold on? Sometimes she thought being stuck in a half-life between vampire and human was harder than just being a big, bad vampire. At least then she wouldn't have these feelings of vulnerability and need.

"Understandable. You need rest," he said.

"Until dusk," she said waiting at the door to her sanctuary. "Lock the door on your way out."

She knew he'd ignore her, but she had to try. Right now, more than ever in her existence, she hated being a vampire. She should be out looking for Regent. The sun was rising and within minutes she'd be useless to everyone. Being able to go out in the daylight did her no good in this crisis. She needed hours to prepare. Time to meditate and pray beforehand. Without that, she became one of the undead and nothing could stop the process. Not even Regent's disappearance. She'd never hated what she'd become more than she did at this moment.

She looked at her bed and wondered if this would be the night her existence as a vampire ended. If they were coming for her, there was nothing she could do. Once she went to sleep, there was no waking her until the sun rose. She had no choice. It was either sleep here or become comatose somewhere else where she'd be even more vulnerable.

With one last thought of how much she loved Regent, she crawled into bed and closed her eyes.

She lay on the bed and waited. The black void approached. She couldn't move now, her limbs were like lead. For the fraction of a second before she succumbed to the nothingness, she heard a creak on one particular floorboard in Regent's office. The floors were old, and normally those sounds gave her comfort, knowing Regent was in the room.

But seconds ago she'd left Britt outside her door. Could that sound be him in Regent's office? Would he have had time to go into that room and stand on that old floorboard?

Dread filled her. She tried to fight sleep. But it was too late.

* * * *

Britt stood outside the door to the basement. The night Jess had been burned by the holy water Regent had told him where they kept the spare key. Regent had also told him how vulnerable Jess was when she was asleep. And how important it was to have someone protect her during that vulnerable time.

He sat down in the living room, flipped on the television, and surfed through a couple of channels before realizing he was hungry. He wandered into the kitchen, emptied Regent's cold breakfast into the garbage and put the bowl in the dishwasher. Then found a TV dinner in the freezer. It was a diet frozen dinner, but it would have to do.

After he'd eaten, Britt checked the windows and doors of the rectory, making sure they were all locked. He resisted the urge to go downstairs and see Jess in her room. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to visualize what his life would've been like if he hadn't met Jess.

She was an amazing woman. Beautiful. Strong. Talented.

Without making a conscious decision, he found himself moving down the basement stairs to her room. It wasn't as if he'd wake her, and he should know where she was in case he had to protect her against an attack. He needed to get the lay of the land. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

Besides, he needed to look for weapons. Surely Regent had some vampire fighting equipment in the house, and he'd bet the man had stored it in the basement. After all, you couldn't have members of the church or a housekeeper stumbling across weaponry.

He saw her bedroom door as soon as he entered the basement. It was made of heavy wood, and he figured it would be locked. He tried the knob and found it open. Good thing he'd come down here. He'd lock it when he left. Any thoughts of weapons left his head when he saw Jess lying on the bed with her hair pillowed around her head. She looked like any other beautiful sleeping woman, except her chest wasn't rising and falling.

He stood over her, admiring her facial lines, her mouth, her nose. He thought about the night she'd pressed herself against him. Thoughts of her soft lips and firm body were paramount in his musings. His gaze traveled the length of her before he decided he'd been staring at her longer than he should have.

With a silent curse, he turned away. Voyeur he wasn't. Or at least he hadn't been until now.

After one last look around the room to verify she was alone and safe, he returned to Regent's office and began scanning the papers on his desk just in case there might be a clue as to what had happened to him. There wasn't.

He yawned and stretched his arms into the air. He needed rest and would have to find a suitable place to sleep. Hopefully not far from the door to the basement. He wanted to be nearby in case Jess needed him.

He scanned the room and noted the old leather couch in an alcove near the window. Not quite long enough for him, but it would have to do.

He stood, and then, as an afterthought, he leaned down to look under Regent's desk. To his surprise, he found a button underneath with a thin cord that led down to the floor and tunneled under the carpeting. Positioning his finger over the button, he prayed it didn't automatically dial 9-1-1. That'd just be his luck. How would he explain an apparently dead woman in the basement, especially when he was an intruder in the home of the missing priest?

Well, if it came to that, he'd deal with it. He pressed the button and a panel on the wall sprang open. An interior light flicked on the inside, displaying a cache of archaic looking weapons. Not to mention some pretty modern ones too. Guns, knives, even a few nasty looking axes that made him cringe, were mounted on the wall. Those babies could do a lot of damage.

At least he knew where to find an extra weapon if he needed one. He returned to the button and pressed it again. The panel closed.

Stifling another yawn, he settled onto the couch in Regent's office. Besides the kitchen, this was the only room that led to the stairwell and to Jess. This was where he'd stay.

He closed his eyes for just a moment then flashed them open again. He had a low-level feeling he was being watched. Nothing urgent enough to make him jump off the couch—just a nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right.

But then, with Regent missing, that feeling would be natural.

Glancing around the room and seeing nothing, he figured his imagination was getting the best of him.

He closed his eyes again, telling himself he was just going to rest them for a minute. Whatever he did, he could not fall asleep.

Chapter Nineteen

A cold breeze blew across Britt. He shivered, waking suddenly from an uninvited deep sleep.

Must've left a window open, he thought, sitting up and looking around. He cleared his throat, blinked his eyes a couple of times and rubbed his stiff neck that had been propped against the arm of the couch. The throw blanket he'd covered himself with was on the floor.

"Wake up, buddy!"

Britt leaped to his feet. On the other side of the room, someone stood partially hidden in shadow. At first, he thought it was Regent. But Regent wouldn't lurk in the shadows.

Panic set in, and Britt's gaze flashed instantly to the basement door, visible from Regent's office door. He'd locked Jess's room and the basement door earlier, but vampires were strong. If the shadowy person was a vampire, he could wrench that door off its hinges without thinking about it.

"Who are you?" he demanded, squinting at the shadows.

He was still trying to clear his sleep deprived vision when Randy stepped forward, and smiled at him.

"God Almighty. It's true. You're a damn vampire!"

"So, you've already figured it out." Randy looked mildly impressed. Then he stalked to the window, pulled back the curtain and peered out. "I thought it would be so much fun to shock the shit out of you, and you've spoiled my good time."

"I'd like to say I feel for you, but it'd be a lie."

"You're supposed to keep the location of your charge hidden at all costs." He pointed at the basement door. "Not much of a vampire protector, Brittain. You're as much a failure at this as you were at being a cop."

He knew Randy was trying to get a rise out of him, but his words stung just the same. He took a tentative step closer to his ex-partner. Seeing a vampire was one thing, but seeing someone he knew, someone who'd been a partner and friend, coming back from the dead was another.

Randy didn't look dead. In fact, he didn't look one bit different than he had when they were partners. But that was the whole point of becoming a vampire, wasn't it? If Britt could work with him side by side, day in and day out, and not know Randy was dead, how would he expect to see a difference now?"

"So, you're a vampire," he said, trying not to be obvious as he stretched his taut shoulders and then rolled them. He needed to warm up in case he had to fight Randy.

Had Randy had been a vampire the entire time they'd been partners? He still couldn't believe he could work with him night after night and not see something that would indicate everything wasn't quite right.

"There's no life like it." Randy breathed deeply, and then his smug grin disappeared. He suddenly looked bored as he walked around the room, picking up Regent's things, looking them over and setting them back down.

When he got between Britt and the basement door, Britt jumped forward. With one swift grab he pulled the stake out from the back of his pants and hit the spring, extending it for maximum protection.

"Relax," Randy spat. "I don't have any designs on your girlfriend."

Britt kept the silver stake angled for use in his sweaty grasp and continued to block Randy's path to the stairwell. "You're going to pay for what you did to me."

"Really?" Randy gloated, his eyes as focused as a pit bull about to attack. "As I said before, the first rule of a protector is to never give away the location of your vampire." He laughed. "I could take her if I wanted to. Might have already done it while pretty boy was sleeping."

Britt blanched, but even as panic surged through him, he forced himself to calm down and balanced himself for a fight. Had Randy found Jess while he slept on Regent's couch? He couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep on the job.

He decided to ignore Randy's goading and turn the man's—no, the vampire's—attention elsewhere. "How the hell did this happen to you, Randy?"

A look of hatred flitted across Randy's face, but then he grinned wickedly. "Becoming a vampire?" He snorted. "Best thing that ever happened to me."

Britt watched his ex-partner closely. Hard to believe this man wasn't in the land of the living. "Why play dead? Why put me through all that?"

"Wouldn't you like to know. I'm afraid that's something you won't be able to get out of me."

"You're right here in front of me and you're not going to give me an explanation for screwing up my life? Why the hell not? I at least deserve that much."

His head began to throb across the top of his scalp as his tension built. He wanted to tear down the stairs and check on Jess, but he couldn't let Randy know how desperate he was to make sure she was all right.

"There are things going on. Things that would put even my life, or lack thereof, at risk if I told you too much."

"Then why are you here now? To try to kill me?" Emphasis on *try*, he added silently. Randy would fail because Britt had every intention of winning this battle.

Randy laughed full out. "Kill you? Not likely. You're somewhat of a celebrity among vampires."

"Why?"

"Damned if I know. I can't seem to get to the bottom of it. Word on the street is any vampire who touches you is dog meat." He crossed his arms over his leather jacket. "I go to all the work of becoming a supernatural wonder and find out you *still* have more pull than I do, even in my world. You can't begin

to imagine how much that pissed me off. But at least I got to play dead and get you canned. I really wanted you to go to jail, but I couldn't let them do an autopsy on me, could I? Even vampires can't survive having their insides cut out. Unfortunately, that put a damper on the trial and let you off the legal hook."

Britt shook his head, confused by Randy's hatred of him. "I thought we were friends, but you destroyed my career and my life because you were jealous? What the hell was there to be jealous about?"

Randy rolled his eyes and showed his teeth for the first time. They were longer than Jess's which made them look more ominous. "I wasn't jealous. I was mad as hell. Everything you touched turned to gold. You made more collars than me. You saved more little old ladies. You had women clambering after you, and all you cared about was your slut wife. Who, by the way, was a very good lay." He smiled malevolently.

Britt didn't give him the satisfaction of seeing how angry that revelation made him. Not because he'd called his ex-wife a slut. That part was basically true. But because the man he'd considered a friend had slept with his wife.

"Hopefully you don't think you were her only conquest. That's why I divorced her. Hope you didn't waste too much of your valuable time on her."

He didn't wait for Randy to respond. "But tell me, why would you have an affair with my wife, when you loved your own enough to try to turn her into a vampire? Admit it. You wanted to take her with you, but instead you killed her."

His words hit their mark. Randy hissed and his face darkened. He sprang at Britt, gangrenous anger oozing out of every pore. Britt grasped the stake even tighter and raised it over his head. He'd forgotten about the cross around his neck until Randy's eyes went to it. He backed off enough to confirm it bothered him.

"Why are you so goddamn special?" Randy rasped angrily.

"I think you should be asking why Prometheus wouldn't tell you," Britt said.

"Who?"

"Nice try. If there's a master vampire in town, I know damned well you'd be one of his suck-ups."

"Christ, Britt. You never could resist a stupid pun." Randy snorted and tried to look tough, while continuing to back away from the cross.

Britt kept edging closer. His jaw was set in a tight line, and he was sure his eyes were hard as ice. Killing Randy right now would give him immense satisfaction. But something didn't click. Why was Randy here, if it wasn't to kill him? Was he after Jess?

Britt's worry kicked up a notch. Was Jess okay? Had Randy already been down there? Damn, he shouldn't have been sleeping so soundly. Britt glanced at his watch. It was nearly dusk. That meant Randy had come here during the day.

Britt looked at him, monitoring his expression. Was he one of the vampires who'd become even more psychotic because of Sunshine? He must be using it if he could come here at this time of day.

"Tell me about Prometheus or I'll send you to hell," Britt ground out.

Randy feigned surprise. "Are you talking about that big guy who was lurking around the church? Word on the street is he had quite a little orgy going on up on the roof. That must've bothered your saintly vampire to no end."

Before Britt could blink, Randy had removed a package of cigarettes out of his pocket. He lit one and drew the smoke into his lungs. "How'd you find out about Sharon's death?"

So, Randy didn't know about the run-in with Prometheus at the cemetery. Maybe he wasn't as high on the totem pole as he wanted to be and didn't even realize Britt and Jess had been at his family crypt.

He thought about goading Randy with the information, but he decided to change the subject instead. "Why'd you do it Randy? Why make me believe I killed you?"

Randy glanced toward the window again. Britt got the distinct impression he was going to leave.

"Wait!" Britt said, following him as he headed out of the room. "Where's Regent?"

Lurching to a stop, Randy gave him a perplexed look. "Regent? How the hell would I know?"

When Randy fled at vampire speed, Britt spat out a curse and slammed his fist into the door casing. No sense trying to catch him; he was too damn fast.

As if the hounds of hell were on his tail, Britt flew to the basement door and wrenched it open. He bounded down the stairs, jumping whole sections by hanging onto the railing.

Jess lay dormant on her bed. Her face still looked peaceful. Of course her chest wasn't moving. How would he know if she was dead? *Really* dead? Did every vampire evaporate when they were killed? He put a finger on her carotid pulse. Nothing. But what did he expect?

Not knowing if she was okay or not, he huffed out an irritated breath and plunked down on the bed beside her. He'd just have to wait for the sun to go down, which should be very soon.

He checked his watch again. There were no windows in the room, so he couldn't tell when darkness settled. Regardless, it should be less than five minutes to dusk. Impulsively, he reached over and threaded his fingers through hers, holding her hand while he waited. Funny how he'd gotten used to the idea of her condition. She was as beautiful now as she'd been when she was awake. Her hand felt cool, but not like that of a dead person.

He jumped when she said, "What are you doing here, Britt?"

He'd expected at least some movement of her fingers when she first woke to indicate she was coming around. But she lay there, still as stone.

"Regent told me where he hid his extra key, so I stayed the night to protect you. Unfortunately, I need to brush up on my protection skills. I fell asleep and Randy got in. I wasn't sure if he got to you, didn't know how to tell if you were okay." Britt fought down his anger. "I failed you, Jess."

"John Brittain, haven't you figured out yet that you're way too hard on yourself. You haven't failed me or

I wouldn't be here."

"He could've come down the stairs."

"No, he would've tripped an alarm the second his hand turned the door knob. Seconds after my bedroom door is locked and alarm is set. If there's movement without heat, the alarm goes off. You would've reached me in plenty of time."

"I wondered how Regent got any sleep. I guess an alarm would help." He didn't bother to tell her she'd forgotten to lock her door in her haste. He was glad he'd done it, even though he was unaware of her safeguards.

"Regent!" She pulled her hand from his and sat up. "Get out, I've got to change."

Britt walked to the stairs. "I'll wait for you. Where's your food?"

"No time," she said.

"Don't you need to eat to keep up your energy?"

She looked irritated. "Of course."

"Then make sure you have some or I'll spoon feed it to you before we go."

She began to take off her jeans while he stood there. Her black lace underpants were even more enticing than her leathers. He swallowed and continued to stare shamelessly.

She scowled at him. "Spoon feed me. Now, that I'd like to see. Get out of here or you're going to see your first naked vampire."

His eyes raked over her. "If the circumstances weren't so dire, I'd take you up on that offer."

"You're hopeless," she hissed, grabbed her clothes and stepped into her ensuite bathroom. But not before he got a great rear view. Shit! Talk about a picture.

On his way up the stairs, he muttered, "I'm not hopeless, I'm hopeful."

"I heard that," she called out. "Why do you always mutter to yourself? People will think you're loony."

"I'm not used to people listening to my nearly silent ramblings. Guess I'll have to be more selective about what I whisper from now on."

"Yeah, right," she called out from below. "You knew exactly what you were doing."

He closed his eyes for a second and relived the sight of her curvaceous derriere. Hot blood rushed through his veins and he tried to tamp down the urgent need for her.

Thinking about Regent helped. The old man was probably in a bad position right now. If he were still alive.

* * * *

It only took Jess a couple of minutes to pull herself together and swallow a packet of blood. She rushed up the stairs to find Britt waiting at the door with her coat and sunglasses in hand. She could have kissed him. No way would she have been able to wait one second more to be on her way.

"Got your cell phone?" she asked. "I've got to call the team. Get them moving on Regent's disappearance."

"Already did it." He held the door open for her. "Drake, James, and the team are going to be waiting for us outside the precinct. In the back parking lot."

"Drake is coming too?" Drake had been acting strangely lately. Maybe because he was being pressured from above. Either way, she had concerns about Drake right now. But he'd always been a good man, and she had no real reason not to trust him other than he wasn't telling her everything. When it came right down to it, he was the boss. He didn't have to tell her every detail of what was going on, though she preferred that he did. She was the one on the front lines. The one putting the team at risk.

"Yeah, I called to give him a quick heads up. He insisted on going with us."

"I don't care, as long as we get Regent back in one piece. Let's go."

Britt had barely braked to a stop before Jess jumped out of the truck at the designated meeting place. She couldn't contain the vampire tonight. Normally she kept that feral side hidden from the team, but tonight she was what she was, and God help anybody who got in her way.

The worst part was she didn't know where to look for Regent. That made her feel more impotent than she'd felt in the last fifty years.

She spotted James first. He didn't approach her, but she didn't have time to wonder why. She had more important matters to take care of.

Drake was at the forefront of the group. She hadn't seen him for the last week, only spoken to him on the phone. As stressed as she was right now, she still couldn't miss how awful he looked. His eyes were sunken and he had dark shadows under them. After they'd rescued Regent, she'd have to sit down with him and find out what was going on.

"Everyone on the team knows why they're here, Jess," Britt said in an official voice as they crossed the parking lot. "There's no need to explain what's going on,"

Thank God, he'd taken the initiative to contact the team. And speaking to her in his strong, competent voice while they crossed the parking lot had helped to soothe her inner turmoil. He'd once again been able to effectively calm her. She needed to hear his voice. It helped keep her together.

"Jess, I'm sorry to hear about Regent," Drake said, stepping forward as she and Britt neared the group.

"Thanks. Have you got anything solid that might help us track down these vampires?"

His gaze shifted down and he shoved his hands into his pockets. He didn't have to speak. His expression of hopelessness said it all. It wasn't like Drake to succumb to defeat, and she sure as hell didn't want to see it on the face of her superior officer right now.

She expelled air through her nasal passages, irritation humming through her. This was the first time in her

life that she'd disliked cops. If they couldn't help her brother she'd lose all faith in them. What could her haphazard team do against vampires anyway? She was crazy to believe they could help.

Britt touched her elbow, and she glared at him. "There is something. Some information," he told her.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" She wrenched her arm from his grasp, trying to exorcise her looming rage.

"I couldn't tell you because I wasn't sure there was anything to tell." He turned and watched Sampson climbing out of his VW Bug, smiling hugely. "I called Sampson last night. Told him to get something from his source and fast. When he heard it was for Regent, he said he'd do what he could. Even then I wasn't sure if he'd have any luck."

He edged himself between her and Sampson, almost like a buffer, giving her a chance to get herself fully under control before the next bit of news was thrown at her. She wouldn't want to appear anything but composed in front of her team, especially in a situation like this.

In this case it was easy, all he had to do was point out the positive as he said, "Since Sampson rarely cracks a smile, I'd say he's got something for us."

Jess hung her head for a second and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she knew her teeth were back to normal and her eyes sparkling green. "Thank you," she whispered.

"We'll get through this, Jess," Britt said, his voice inaudible to anyone but her and probably James.

Britt turned his head and saw James watching him through lowered eyelids. The man's brows were drawn together in a frown, his stance was edgy and mouth set in a grim line.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Chapter Twenty

Regent tried to lift himself into a sitting position. It was hard to do with his arms tied behind his back, plus he was weak. A smelly burlap bag covered his head, but, thankfully, they hadn't bothered to gag him. Probably because there was no one that could hear him—or help him if they could.

The bag had a loose enough weave that he could tell it was dark inside the building where he was being held hostage. His stomach gurgled noisily. He was hungry and had to take a whiz. Hadn't these people heard of the Geneva Convention? They should at least give him bathroom privileges. But then, his captives weren't people, were they?

He leaned his head back against something hard, probably a wall. How long had it been since they'd abducted him? His back was stiff and his feet felt like they were numb blocks.

Jess would be so upset. She had a habit of losing control, in the vampire sense, when she became extremely agitated. Britt would have to prove his worth while they searched for him. If the man could keep her calm, he'd have accomplished the last task Regent hoped Britt was capable of.

He tilted his head and listened, wondering if he'd become delusional. Every now and then he thought he heard a baby crying, then a mother crooning. Not likely in a place like this. If the other sounds around

him were accurate, he was in a deserted building. Pigeons were roosting in the eaves. That meant there had to be openings where they could get in. He couldn't see, but he could smell the scents of rotting wood, and something else he couldn't identify.

Could there be transients living here? Or just vampires? But vampires lived in the lap of luxury and indulged themselves in the best of everything. They had no trouble surviving in this world full of corruption and criminals. In fact, they fit right in.

A moment of dizziness swept over him, and a pain tingled through his left arm. He told himself to hang on. Jess was on her way. And God help those soulless beasts for taking him. She'd never let them escape.

He started praying again but stopped when he thought he heard a woman moaning close by.

"Who's there?" he said, turning his head back and forth in futility. No one answered. Whoever had made the sound had stopped just as quickly.

A rustling noise in the opposite direction brought Regent's head around. He turned to it. Bright light shone toward him. Sunlight through the eaves? No. It moved away from him then scanned back over him. "Jess? Is that you?"

Laughter erupted from several directions. A sharp pain pierced Regent's chest, as he felt himself being lifted off the ground like he weighed nothing. Regent screamed when the pain struck again. This time it was his neck. It felt like something sharp had pierced his skin.

* * * *

"Here's the deal," Sampson said from the front seat of the black departmental SUV which was big enough to hold nine team members. "My source was very reluctant to tell you this. In fact, I nearly lost my own life when I had to put a wee bit too much pressure on him." He made a face and wrapped one hand around his neck. "But, I guess that's part of the allure—the frigging fear."

"Thankfully, sweet talk is one of the many things you do well," Jess said seriously .

Britt wondered if she even knew she boosted people's ego like that. He'd tell her some day. Prove to her she was more than a killing machine.

"Which way from here?" Britt was driving. Griz sat in the passenger seat and Jess, Drake and James were in the backseat. He kept an eye on Jess in the rearview mirror. She was quiet. Too quiet. Her eyes had become coal black again, and he could almost feel the anger simmering beneath her thinly veiled façade of calm. He pitied the poor bastards who thought they could get away with kidnapping Regent. And not just because of Jess; everyone on the team loved Regent. He was a nice old man. And a priest!

"Keep going straight," Sampson said. "We're heading out of the city."

Jess started to protest. Or panic was more like it, Britt realized when he saw her. Along with darkened eyes, he could tell her teeth had grown even though she kept her mouth tightly closed. She had a tendency to transform fully into a vampire when things got bad mentally or physically.

Sampson quickly added, "It's not far, won't take long at all. They're holed up in an abandoned shoe factory about half an hour outside the city."

"I expected them to be at a place like the Ritz," Jess said. "Maybe they are smarter than I'd pegged them. I never would have looked for them in a dump. It's too cliché. And not at all what real vampires would consider doing."

"Is Prometheus the leader?"

"Not sure." Sampson gave his shiny bald pate a rub. "I've been hearing conflicting information. Some say it's Prometheus, some are saying it's a two member vampire team. Either way you look at it, word is they've built up their numbers considerably."

Jess glanced at Drake. "Have you contacted the rest of the undercover ops teams?"

"No. I'll call right now. They'll be on their way in minutes."

Britt had known Drake for a long time, and he'd thought the man was acting weird back at the parking lot. Now he was sure of it. Drake's hands were shaking hard enough that he had trouble dialing the number on his cell. And since when did he have to be told to make a tactical move? It was his forte. He was one of the best at it.

"Did you get positive proof they have Regent?" Jess asked Drake when he finished his call.

"I'm afraid I've learned very little," he said, then turned to stare out the window.

Sampson picked up the slack just in time. Britt could feel Jess's anger turning to magma. "My sources say they're definitely at the abandoned shoe factory. It took guts for my vamp to come forward and give me this information. It's always a crap shoot. You have to take the information where you can get it and pray that it's good. In this case, I think it is. Remember, I'm working with vampires who are stuck between the big bad vamps and me trying to cure them. They can't turn their back on their Master because he'll kill them, but they want me to find a cure so they don't dare leave me swinging either." He released a wheezy breath and twisted in his seat so he could see Jess in the back. "You know I'd do anything I could to help you, Jess."

"Thanks Sampson. I ... I really appreciate it."

"There's just one problem. What if this is a trick? We could be walking into a helluva trap," Britt suggested calmly, noting the instant fear that illuminated Drake's eyes.

"Then they're in for a helluva fight," Jess said without missing a beat. At least she'd gotten herself back under control.

"Get your pep talk ready, babe, because we're almost there," Britt said, not caring who noticed the endearment. He wanted the whole world to know he loved Jess. "No need to announce our arrival just yet. I'm going to stop a couple miles from the place. That way you can talk to the team, and we can figure out a plan of action while we wait for the rest of the troops to arrive."

Britt was still concerned about James's reaction earlier. He'd looked damned pissed when Britt had soothed Jess by telling her it would be okay. Britt stole a quick glimpse at the vampire who'd fought at Jess's side for decades. James was staring out the passenger window as if he'd been totally unaffected by Britt's statement. Britt would've sworn James wanted Jess for himself, so why the cool as a cucumber routine? With VNA running in his blood, being cool wouldn't be one of his strengths. If James thought Jess was his, would he let Britt stake a claim on her?

It was a question he'd have to think about later. Right now he had to concentrate on rescuing Regent.

* * * *

Jess paced in front of the vehicle parked near a shrub-filled field surrounded by dense forest. The field was full of crickets and frogs, and other animals making noises that were setting her teeth on edge. She wanted quiet so she could think. She also wanted to get a grip. Her brother relied on her and it was damned well time she pulled herself together.

She straightened her back, raised her head and did just that.

"Jess, we need to talk. Alone," Britt whispered. They were at the outside edge of the camp they'd set up in the field.

She nodded once and turned toward him casually.

"See that copse of trees on the other side of the assault vehicles?" he said. "Meet me there in five minutes. This is important. Don't tell anyone, and I mean *anyone*, what we're doing."

Again she nodded, but managed to make it look as if she was merely stretching out the muscles in her neck.

Five minutes later, she met Britt fifty feet into the forest. He stood behind a huge pine tree. He looked like crap. His expression was about as broken down as she'd seen it. Even worse than the defeated expression she'd seen the first time in Drake's office when he'd said he was a cop killer. Whatever this was, it had to be bad. Her worst fears sprang into her heart and twisted like a sharp edged knife.

"What's going on, Britt?"

"It's Drake. He's dirty."

She lowered her head and placed a hand against the pine tree's rough textured bark to support herself.

"I didn't want it to be true."

"You've had reservations about him?"

"Only recently. In the past two weeks he hasn't been available to meet with me. We've had every one of our meetings over the phone. That's not only not like him, and it's also detrimental our work. Decisions can't be made effectively over the phone. Plus there's always the fear of a phone tap." She leaned a hip against the tree and crossed her arms over her chest. "I was suspicious. I had the feeling someone on the inside was dirty, but I never dreamed Drake could have anything to do with it."

"What do you want to do about it? Given the likelihood that Drake's dirty, there's a high probability the vampires know we're coming. How do we know that phone call he made was even to his men? Right now there are only five of us. We can't fight a horde of vampires with that few people."

"You're right. Plus the other teams should've been here by now. She blew out a breath, pulled out her phone and called the department. She told the officer what she needed and hung up. Savage anger broiled up her spine. "As we feared, he didn't call them."

"I figured from your conversation."

"They'll be here in twenty minutes." She grit her teeth and saw the muscles bunching in Britt's jaw, even though he kept his anger hidden.

"Don't beat yourself up," he said. "At least we know now, and it will give us an advantage. I don't think we should wait. Let's act as an advance party. Go in, find the vampires, then retreat until the others get here."

"You're right. We don't want to do anything to tip the scales in their favor again," she said, allowing herself a moment to admire his dark good looks, his muscled biceps and strong neck. More than that, she admired his dedication. If anyone could help her save Regent it would be him. She had no doubt about that. He wouldn't turn out to be a traitor. But then, she'd never expected Drake to be one, either.

James would be there too, of course. He'd been distracted lately. Maybe a little jealous? They'd been so close for years, and with her friendship with Britt blooming, they didn't have as much to talk about.

"We'd better get back. We don't want Drake to realize we're on to him."

Britt stepped closer to her, placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her against his chest. She inhaled his masculine scent. He felt warm to the touch. His hand gently cupped the nape of her neck before his fingers tangled into her hair and she lifted her face to his. His gaze caught hers. Captured her. Held her. When his lips brushed hers, just a featherlight touch, she closed her eyes. Her breath caught in her throat. And she waited for him to kiss her again.

Teasing her, he kissed the corner of her mouth the next time. She wanted him to devour her. She wanted him to love her. But she waited, thrilled at every touch of his lips, his tongue on her flesh. And when his mouth finally took hers, she was lost in a world beyond anything she believed she was capable of experiencing.

"Stop," she said, finally. Burning with desire, she opened her eyes and saw the same wanton look in Britt's expression. "We can't do this now."

Britt frowned. "You're right."

She pulled herself away from him and straightened her hair. "Let's go."

He nodded, but looked her over in a seductive manner that made her sorry she had to stop him. He turned to walk away and she grabbed his arm. "You fight like the devil in there, Britt. Don't you dare die," Jess said vehemently, surprising even herself.

He raised an eyebrow and gave her one of his sexiest smiles. "Not going to happen, babe. We have unfinished business."

"If that's what'll help you get through this alive, I promise to make that unfinished business the most exciting you've ever experienced."

"Honey, you sure know how to up the ante and give a man the will to make it out alive."

Jess walked out of the clearing ahead of him, knowing he was watching her every move. She went straight to the truck to gather the weapons and begin sorting them for distribution.

There was a lot on the line today, and she couldn't bury the feeling that she might never see Britt again.

This was a fight they might all lose.

Chapter Twenty-one

When they finally got a good look at the factory, Jess's mood sank. This place was a dilapidated monstrosity. It was bigger than she expected, with four levels of weathered gray brick that looked as if it was built in the Dark Ages. Windows were boarded up, some were smashed out. Black holes gaped from exposed window casings, and Jess knew vampires were watching. Waiting. She could feel them.

Smell them.

Drake was at their side. She'd tried to make him stay behind to help with the logistics and command. It was where he should be. Where he would be normally if he wasn't dirty.

Britt moved silently beside her through the tall grass and spiky tree growth surrounding the factory. Drake, Terry and Griz were on her other side. A line of vampire hunters and one traitor. Everyone had grim expressions. Except for Drake, they were a team in the real sense of the word, and Jess was proud to serve beside each of them.

Drake had gone sickly white when they got close to the factory. He bent over, placed his hands on his knees, and puked right on his own shoes. A sign of guilt?

"Care to share what's bothering you?" Jess said, moving next to him. It was difficult to keep the rancor out of her voice. It was harder to get past the fact that her beloved brother was nearby. Only rotting brick and wood stood between them. If he was dead, Drake would be too.

"Nothing. Something I ate for breakfast, I think." He moved away from her without looking back.

She angled herself next to Britt. "It's him. It's really him. Somehow I still thought—hoped—we might be wrong."

"Then it's time to get the truth out in the open." Britt charged toward Drake and cut him off mid-stride. "Before you take another step, you're going to tell me why you're working for the vampires."

Drake slumped and tears formed in his eyes. He didn't even try to deny the charge before he crumbled to the ground, as if his legs had given out.

Britt must have sensed her behind him, because he reached to stop her before she could get to Drake. He barely touched her elbow, but that touch was enough to calm her. She knew if she attacked Drake they might never find out the truth. Her teeth were elongated, and she could feel evil roiling in the pit of her stomach. It was always there, always waiting for her to drop her guard so it could burst forward.

"How'd you know?" Drake didn't wait for a response. "This is the worst moment of my life. Britt, you, of all people, know being a cop is the most important thing in the world to me. There's only one thing more important. My wife."

"Lucy?"

Drake slowly nodded, tears slipping unashamed down his face. "They've got her, Britt. They took her

two weeks ago. I've been their puppet ever since.” He ran the back of his hand across his eyes. “They said if I breathed a word of it, they'd kill her. Hell, it's probably already too late. She's probably a vampire or worse now. I was supposed to retire next year. Lucy and I, we had lots of plans.” He tried to choke back a sob, and his shoulders heaved for a minute before he finally pulled himself together enough to speak. “It's all over for me. My career's gone and I don't care. I just want Lucy.”

They hadn't thought of this. Britt didn't look any more hopeful than she guessed she did. With a solid hand on Drake's shoulder, Britt squeezed and then reached out a hand and helped the man up.

"Given your situation, I would have done the same thing. Lucy is your life. We'll do what we can to save her."

"But they know you're coming. I had to tell them. It was so stupid. I know better. I know the odds against kidnappers releasing their victims. I just couldn't chance it with my Lucy."

"No. You did the only thing you could.” Britt stepped back to give Drake room. “You can turn the tables on them, though. You can help Lucy now. You're here. You can fight with us. You can save her.”

Drake looked weary and cynical, but he forced a slight smile. “Thanks for being the great guy you've always been, Britt. I'll do whatever I can, but I'm not sure I'll be much help to you if I find out she's ... dead. I just pray she's still alive.”

"Me too, Drake. Me too."

Outside the door to the building, Jess set her shoulders. The time had come to rescue her brother. She took a breath. He had to be all right. He just had to.

"You be careful inside,” she whispered to Terry, Griz, and Britt. “I don't want any casualties today, do you hear me?”

"Yes, ma'am,” they said in unison.

She gave the signal and watched Britt move forward. A foreign feeling of fear clutched at her heart. She wanted to tell him to stay outside where he was safe, but he'd never agree to that. Probably wouldn't even understand why she'd asked him to do it. His whole life had been about saving people. Being a cop was a part of him. The part that made him whole.

He suddenly returned to her. “Before we go in...”

He leaned in as if to whisper in her ear, then encircled her face with his hands and lifted her mouth to his. His kiss was hard and merciless. A desperate last kiss for all eternity.

"Be safe in there, love,” he said, turning from her.

His fading smile sent shivers up her spine. She followed, aware that she probably wouldn't be able to help any of her teammates from here on out, because she'd be the vampire the enemy would try to take out first. Her reputation would make her a target in this war. But she still worried about Britt. They'd been watching him for a while. She had to hope he and the team would hold their own.

It was cool and dark inside. The shoe company had apparently left its stock behind when it went out of business years ago. Debris littered the place from ceiling to floor. Shelves of rotted shoe leather filled her

nostrils, making it difficult to sort out other odors lurking in the depths of the building. Now she knew why they used this place. She could smell the vampires along with all the rotting leather which wasn't much different than dried rotting flesh. A great way to mask their exact location.

The vampires didn't attack right away, which was unusual. She thought they'd be surrounded the minute they got inside, but there wasn't a single vampire to be seen.

Drake had already admitted the vampires knew they were coming. So what was their battle tactic? She gave the silent hand signal for everyone to spread out. She and James would search the first level. The others would work their way up to the other three floors from the side entrances.

Except for the team moving around upstairs, she still didn't hear any activity. The reason came to her in a sudden flash.

It was because they were below.

This place must have a basement.

Circling back to the point of entry, she waited for the others to return as designated.

James was the first to show up. "There's nothing down that way," he said. "I couldn't smell anything but rotted leather."

Terry and Griz weren't far behind him. Then Britt and Drake returned.

"Nothing," Britt said, looking as strained as she felt.

Suddenly, she recalled him kissing her outside. She gave a disgusted shake of her head. This was the worst possible time for her to think about his kiss. What the devil was wrong with her? Her brother's life was at stake!

"I know where they are," Jess said.

"Where?" James asked.

"There's got to be a basement in this place."

Drake looked so stressed that she feared he might faint at any moment. For such a meritorious policeman, he'd fallen apart over his wife's kidnapping. But then they'd been married for nearly forty years.

She let her gaze stray back to Britt. If she was alive instead of a member of the undead, she would have loved building a life with him. They'd probably argue because they were both strong willed, but she knew in her heart it would have been a glorious life.

"What are we waiting for?" Britt pulled out his silver stake. She noticed he also had a couple bottles of holy water hanging on his waist like grenades. A shiver rocketed up her spine at the thought of being splashed with holy water again.

They hadn't searched long before they found an elevator shaft, sans elevator.

Terry leaned forward and tried to see into the dark pit at the bottom of the shaft. "What's down there? It smells even fouler than the rest of this place."

James grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "Careful, or you'll be down there with the rest of those percolating bodies."

"Bodies!" Terry jerked back with a horrified expression. "Poor bastards."

Britt had his flashlight, but Jess didn't need it to see what was down there. The vampires had discarded their *refuse* in this hole. Apparently, they'd been using this place for quite a while.

"This is stupid. They know we're coming and they're just going to let us march right in?" Griz shoved his hands into his pockets.

"That's exactly what we're going to do," Jess began searching for an entrance again. There had to be a way to get down there. Finally, she found a door hidden behind a rack of shoes. She shoved the rack aside.

At the bottom of the stairwell they found a dead end. The only thing in the large, open room was another elevator door with no button and no other obvious way to get into it.

"I don't like the thought of walking into a place without knowing where the exits are. This elevator is operated from the inside. There's no telling if we can get back out, once we get in." Britt carefully scanned the room for any type of door. The walls were perfectly smooth.

"That's the least of our worries," Jess said. "This whole thing is too risky. The rest of you don't have to go in there. I do. They have my brother."

"I'm going too," Drake said. "They have Lucy."

"We're on camera, folks." Britt leaned against the door and waved at the small instrument in the far corner of the ceiling. "Not only do they know we're coming, they just heard everything we said."

As if to confirm Britt's theory, the elevator door opened.

"Jess stepped in without a moment's thought. She'd give up her life for Regent in a second.

"Why don't we wait for the rest of the teams to arrive? There're only five of us here. We can't put up much of a fight alone," Griz said.

Jess clenched her hands. "And if the elevator door doesn't open for us the next time, I've lost my window of opportunity. No, I can't risk it. I don't expect you to do this, Britt. Or any of the rest of you. I'm a damned good fighter. I can handle myself."

Britt gave her a bleak look. "Honey, not even you can fight off a gang of vampires, especially if Prometheus is one of them. Hold that door, I'm coming with you."

"Me too," James leaned over and, to everyone's surprise, kissed Terry on the mouth. She clung to him for a moment. "You stay here and be safe," he said. "Promise me."

"I want to come too." She tried to push her way onto the elevator.

James remained firm. "No. Griz, you stay here with her. Please."

"Hell no, man, I want to come too," Griz said, his face set in determination.

Terry stepped forward. "You go ahead. Maybe I should wait in the elevator so I can open the door for everyone. Being stuck inside isn't an option I want to consider for any of you. And as much as I want to be in there, I think somebody's got to hang back."

James looked concerned, but agreed.

"Terry, when the others arrive, tell them to try to find an alternate way in," Britt said. "Just in case the elevator doesn't pan out. I don't plan on this being a death mission. I plan to make it back out again with everybody in good health."

"Will do." Terry took a deep breath, and positioned herself next to the elevator button.

Jess raised her eyebrows and leaned against the elevator's back wall. She didn't think Britt had reason for so much optimism but hoped he was right. "Let's go."

Britt pushed the sole button on the inside of the elevator and the door shut. The elevator moved downward. At least with a button on the inside, they'd be able to operate the elevator to get back up.

"You two shouldn't have come," Jess said to Britt and Drake. "James and I are better equipped to fight the vampires down here."

"I've got a trick or two up my sleeve," Britt said as the door opened onto a narrow hallway thirty feet long. "Feels like we're rats in a maze doesn't it?"

"We might be rats, but at least we can fight back," Griz said. He adjusted his belt and felt for his weapons, apparently making sure they were still within easy reach.

"Here's hoping," James said.

Jess walked alongside James. "How long have you and Terry been a couple?"

He gave her a guilty look. "I'm sorry. I know we shouldn't have. It just happened."

"I'm glad for you, James. Really."

They reached the end of the corridor. Jess looked up at the camera and said, "Let us in."

The door opened. They stepped inside a chamber the size of an aircraft bay. Huge columns supported the ceiling. As far as they could see, the room was empty except for a twenty foot statue against the far wall that somewhat resembling an Ancient Egyptian creation. There were two thrones at the base of the statue. In keeping with the theme, fires burned on each side in black vats.

"Is this a shrine?" Drake whispered. "And where is everybody?"

"Good question." Britt moved lithely around the room. There were four closed doors next to each of the corners. There were no doorknobs.

Since they were now trapped, the team gathered in the center of the room with their backs together and their weapons at the ready.

Where were the vampires?

A clicking sound echoed through the chamber as an unseen door creaked open behind the statue. They hadn't even noticed it when they searched the room.

Prometheus came around the side of the statue and limped to one of the thrones. He didn't look as animated as he had that night at the graveyard. He looked older.

"The Sunshine must be not be working on him any more," Jess said.

"Very astute." Prometheus adjusted his position on his golden throne. "Veronica, where are you?"

"Veronica?" Britt tensed. "That's my ex-wife's name."

He felt the blood drain from his face when his ex-wife stepped into the room. He knew instantly she was a vampire; her eyes were glowing just like Prometheus's. Apparently, she was under the influence of Sunshine as well. And, dear God, a baby suckled at her breast!

A baby that had been turned into a vampire. Would it always be a baby or would it grow to adulthood? The thought of the tiny thing living as a creature of the night sickened him. He'd bet this was Randy's missing baby.

Blood trickled down Veronica's bared breast and the baby lapped at it like a kitten. For a moment Britt thought he might be sick.

Jess put her hand on Britt's arm in a gesture of support. "Keep your wits about you, Britt. They're trying to throw you off-center."

"Well, it's working." He sucked some much needed air in through his nostrils.

Veronica took a seat on her throne beside Prometheus. He leaned over and partook of the blood leaking out of her breast, then kissed her. They broke away with blood on their faces.

"Where's your army?" Jess stepped forward, unaffected by their show of solidarity.

"Oh, they're around here somewhere," Veronica said, glaring at Jess. "I hear you've got my ex-husband panting after you."

"Veronica!" Britt stepped forward. "How the hell did this happen to you?"

"Tsk, ts, Britt. Don't even try to pretend you're concerned. This isn't exactly news. Why do you think I couldn't conceive?"

He stared at her, his expression stunned. "You were a vampire when we were married?"

"I wasn't at first. But then Randy and I had an affair. How was I supposed to know Randy was a vampire? One night, he got a little carried away, and, well—" She raised one hand and smiled wickedly.

"Here I am."

"How'd Randy's wife get pregnant if he was a vampire?"

Veronica looked at the tiny baby whose face was covered in blood and cooed. "My little darling, Sephina, was artificially inseminated. Randy's wife thought he had a low sperm count. But Randy had found an unethical doctor who would inseminate her without testing him." She laughed, and her voice echoed around the room. "She just had no idea exactly how low it was."

Britt swallowed. What kind of a monster would turn a baby into a vampire? He'd always known Veronica was nasty, but this was downright evil. "Where is Randy?"

"Preparing a special surprise for you."

"Where's my brother," Jess spat out.

"Funny you should ask." She leaned forward and kissed the baby's curly brown hair. The child turned its head in their direction. Its eyes were terrifying black coals. Then it started to cry.

Putting the baby back to her breast, Veronica pressed a button and settled back in her chair.

Randy entered through one of the side doors. He pushed Regent and Lucy into the room in front of him. Britt noted that Regent's face was deathly white. Had he been vamped? Lucy was dirty and disheveled and terrified, but she still looked human.

Lucy tried to run to Drake, but Randy had dog collars on them with the spikes on the inside, and he jerked her back.

"Jesus! What do you want?" Drake cried out, trying to get to his wife.

Britt held him back. "Stay with the group for now, Drake. Keep your wits about you and we might get out of her alive."

Prometheus grunted as though tired. "Enough, Veronica. I'm tired of your vindictive games that serve no purpose but to please you. Let's get on with this."

Veronica cast a vicious glare at Prometheus. "We'll get on with it when I say so and not before."

He leaned back in the throne, looking old and tired. "Just get me some serum that works, my love. And hurry."

She smiled and touched his arm. "Soon."

Regent had slumped to the ground almost the minute they entered the room, his head hung forward limply.

"Don't, Jess. Not yet!" Britt said when she started toward her brother. Britt had the feeling this was what they wanted. There was something strange going on here. Where were all the other vampires? This place should be full of them.

"But, Regent..."

"I'm okay, Jess. I'm just tired and hungry," Regent said, his voice so weak that for the first time he actually sounded like a senior citizen.

Randy exposed his fangs. "The four of you will do as you're told or Regent and Lucy will be bled dry before your eyes."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" Jess shot back. "Do you honestly think you've got the upper hand here? James, Britt, and I can take the three of you with no problem."

Prometheus hissed out a bored sigh. "Maybe you could if we were the only soldiers you had to fight, but we're not exactly alone."

Jess looked around the room as several other vampires entered via the many doors.

Britt shrugged. Even with the new additions, there couldn't be more than a dozen of them.

"Something's still not right here, Jess. Is this what they call an army? There's only a handful of them"

"Silence!" Veronica sat forward and the baby started screeching. She ignored the child.

"What kind of mother are you?" Jess said. "Is that any way to care for a baby? Screaming in its ears?"

"And how would you know about child care? You don't have a child and you'll never have one."

"Turning a baby into a vampire and never letting it grow into an adult is despicable. Only a monster would do something like that."

Veronica's face twisted with rage. Britt knew that look. And he knew what Jess was doing. She wanted to start a fight between the two of them, thereby distracting Randy and keeping him from torturing Regent and Lucy. Her plan just might work.

"You think you're something don't you!" Veronica pushed herself out of her chair and carelessly tossed the child at Prometheus, who set the baby on the ground with more care than Veronica had showed the child.

Prometheus watched her with little spark. He looked like some tired, old rock star, with his blond stringy hair billowing over the collar of his leather coat as he sat on his throne. Skin tight jeans showed emaciated legs, emphasizing his deterioration. He certainly didn't look like a vampire who'd survived for centuries. Maybe he was going mad. The drug had sent other vampires over the edge.

Veronica stepped forward, her hair perfectly coifed. She was dressed in a flowered sundress and wore white high heels, as if trying to look like a perfect housewife. The image was destroyed by her black eyes that glowed like coals and her still bloody fangs.

Jess waited to gauge Veronica's temper. She had the feeling, it would be easy to push her over the edge. "I think you made a mistake when you left John. I think your ex-husband is the most fantastic man I've ever met. He's strong. He's sexy. He's got everything a woman could possibly want. Why would you let a man as good as him get away?" If she was right about the way Veronica felt about Britt, that statement should send her over the top. Veronica had tortured Britt for too long after their divorce not to have strong feelings for him. And Jess was sure Veronica was the reason the vampires had been following

Britt. Either she still loved him, or she hated him enough to continue to torment him.

With a hiss, Veronica's expression grew menacing and she sprang across the room at Jess. There was no doubt from her glowing eyes that the Sunshine had made her strong, but Jess's strength came from inside. From the abilities Regent had prayed so hard for her to have. Jess knew she was the one in control.

Grabbing Veronica's perfect hair, Jess wrenched her sideways, twisting her head as far as it would go. Unexpectedly, the wig came off in her hand, revealing Veronica's nearly bald head. There were only tufts of hair here and there, as if she'd been exposed to radioactivity. "Lovely hair, you've got."

Veronica screamed, as if she'd been mortally wounded, and put her hands on her head. "You'll pay for this!"

She made another running jump at Jess. She had enough impetus to become airborne and flew across the room to attack.

Jess jumped to meet her in the air. They both fell to the ground, landing on their feet, arms locked in battle. Whipping one hand free, Veronica pulled a dagger out from the dress's white belt that matched her shoes.

In a deft movement, Jess's fingers wrapped around the pearl handle of her own crucifix shaped knife. Britt, James, Griz and Drake were locked in mortal combat in the center of the room, she could hear them fighting, but she couldn't afford to take her attention off Veronica to see what was going on.

Behind Veronica, Prometheus, who had been an impressive opponent in the past, sat on his throne, either too far gone from the drug or too weak to care.

She and Veronica circled each other. "Where's your army?" Jess taunted Veronica. "Is this all you have? I've got fifty people outside this room alone," she lied. "And it looks as if they won't be necessary, because the four of us are going to take all of you down by ourselves."

"Shut up!"

"Does Prometheus know you're still sleeping with Randy?"

Veronica leaped toward her again, screaming in anger. She slashed out at Veronica and cut her cheek. The blood bubbled from the wound, stunning her. But not long enough that Jess could kill her.

"Bitch. You bitch!"

Jess didn't expect Veronica to react the way she did. Maybe she really was sleeping with Randy. In the vampire world, it wasn't wise to sleep around on the Master.

Jess tapped her heel onto the ground twice, took a running jump and impaled Veronica through the heart. Veronica's expression was so stunned that Jess realized Prometheus hadn't warned her about her heel spike. Maybe he'd had enough of Britt's ex-wife too.

Veronica's bloodcurdling scream echoed through the room, and for just a second she held her arms out to Randy before she burst into searing coals and disappeared in a burst of ash.

Randy let out a roar of anguish and rushed at Jess. At least he'd left Regent alone.

As she readied herself to battle him, it suddenly occurred to her that Randy and Veronica had been playing Prometheus. They'd thought they could manipulate him.

Only there was no doubt in Jess's mind that Prometheus knew what was going on. He'd been around too long not to be aware of their deception. That's probably why he hadn't warned Veronica about the heel spike. That's why he wasn't helping them now. It had nothing to do with Sunshine.

"I'm going to make you sorry you ever interfered in our plan," Randy said as he slowly circled her. He strategically held a balloon container of holy water in his right hand. He had to be desperate because when he threw it, the water could splash back and burn him too.

"Jess, be careful," Regent said, distracting her for a moment. A very critical moment. She allowed her attention to shift to her baby brother. He looked so pale. So ill.

"No!" Britt threw himself on top of her, slamming her to the ground and taking most of the water. A few drops fell on her arms, but only small burning drops. Not enough to disable her.

"You okay?" He asked, quickly rolling off her and jumping back to his feet just in time to see Randy charging him, teeth hyperextended. He looked like a rattlesnake about to attack.

Jess sprang up, ready to help with the attack, but then she backed down just as quickly. Britt needed to do this himself. She'd help him if he got into trouble, but not before.

The two men wrestled, Randy's fangs hovering too close to Britt's throat. It took everything in Jess's power not to intercede. She knew that after all he'd been through, it was important that he gain power over the vampire who had ruined his life.

Randy's blade slashed out and caught Britt's upper arm. Britt looked down at the cut and cursed. It didn't slow him down. With both hands wrapped around his silver stake, he raised it and, with a powerful thrust, drove it into Randy's chest.

Randy's face registered shock as Britt impaled him with enough force to send him flying backwards before he atomized.

Meanwhile, James had taken out two vampires, and Drake was still scuffling with one and losing the fight. Jess flew to his aid and arrived just as the vampire's elongated canines were about to sink in Drake's neck.

She drove her knife into the vampire. He exploded into a cloud of dust.

"Thanks," Drake said, then sped to Lucy's side.

Jess wasn't far behind. Regent still knelt on the floor, his head sagging. Was he okay?

"Regent, honey." She gently twisted his head from side to side, checking his neck for telltale holes. To her relief, there were none. "Are you okay?"

"I am now." His voice was hoarse and weak. "I thought I was a goner once. Felt something sharp poking into my neck, but it was just this sharp collar. I'm very thirsty. They haven't given us any water or

food for two days."

"Let's get you out of here."

"Not just yet," Prometheus announced, and Jess silently cursed. She'd forgotten about him.

He stood and injected a bright yellow syringe of serum into his arm, transforming himself almost immediately. Within seconds, he stood straighter, appeared more alert. He surveyed the room before giving Jess a look of disappointment.

"Now look what you did to the few followers I had left for experimentation. Even Hitler wasn't brazen enough to try to take away my experiments. How will I do my research now?" In contrast to his words. He looked pleased.

"You won't. This is where you die," she said.

"You disappoint me, Jess Vandermire. I had very high hopes for you."

"You haven't seen what I can do yet." She raised her dagger which was shaped like a stake.

His smile disappeared and his expression darkened. "Be careful. I've been patient with you. I even let you stake me twice because I wanted you to see how strong I am. I fed on the roof of the church to show you the benefits of Sunshine. You could do so much more working with me than with those piteous humans. I need a strong vampire at my side, one who can guard my interests, give me time to do my experiments. But don't mistake caring for lack of good judgment. I will have my way. I always do."

Jess eyed him suspiciously. "You kidnapped Lucy and Regent to try to win me over?"

He pushed one side of his long leather coat back and hooked it back on his belt. A dagger with twin blades hung at his side, alongside three more vials of bright yellow serum situated in leather holders.

He scanned the room, and when his gaze settled on Regent and Lucy he looked pleased. "This room is sealed. You can't get out."

Jess glanced back to check on Regent. James and Britt had moved Lucy and her brother next to the hallway door leading to the elevator.

"Because of your vampire hunting teams, I've lost dozens of vampires. Vampires who would have helped us, Jess. You and I."

She frowned at him. "You're crazy too, aren't you? The serum has driven you mad."

"No. But the serum is losing its efficacy. It's been decades since I created Sunshine, and even though I've tried to come up with new variations of it, nothing has worked. Our vampire VNA is winning over. We live forever because our own biochemistry works to keep us the way we are. It took a long time to overcome Sunshine's effects, but our VNA is nearly back to its normal state."

"So you won't have psycho vampires on your hands anymore. Besides not being able to go out in the daytime, what have you lost?"

He moved toward the edge of his pedestal and loomed over her. His expression one of admiration. Jess

nearly puked.

"You have what I desire. You may walk freely in the daytime."

"It's not that simple," she said, preparing to battle him. She wrapped her fingers around her blade and readied her stance. Her shortcomings had been made even clearer to her when Regent had been taken and she hadn't been able to go after him. Even she, with the power of prayer, could only go outside in the daytime after hours of preparation.

"I wanted you alive. I wanted you to share your blood with me. Don't you see? You have what I need to create the most powerful drug. Your blood would overcome VNA's battle to return to its original state. Join me and we can be the most powerful vampires on the planet."

"Not going to happen," she stated flatly.

His expression turned black again. His teeth grew, but he didn't move against her yet.

"With your blood I can create a serum beyond all serums. I could have killed you and taken your blood, but I want you to give it to me freely. That way we can work together until we create the perfect drug."

He glowered. "I have to get back to the lab and test your blood."

"You won't be going back to any lab. And you won't be taking any of my blood with you. You're going straight to hell," she said, feeling her strength building with a force she'd never experienced before.

She had to kill him if it was the last thing she ever did.

He smiled again, but his eyes sparkled dangerously as he watched her. "I am one of the old ones. Do you think you're really stronger than me?"

Suddenly, he began speaking in the old language. Words she'd never heard before and didn't understand. She felt funny, woozy. Her heart rate picked up and she could actually feel it beating. The feeling was euphoric, and she knew that was dangerous. The text wasn't supposed to work on her because of Regent's intervention in the completion of her vampirism. Or so they'd thought. Obviously, they'd been wrong.

Prometheus flew from the pedestal and loomed over her now. She didn't even try to fight him. He reached out one gnarled hand and let his fingernail gently slice along the edge of Jess's lip. It started to bleed.

"Jess! Fight him. Don't forget your promise to me when this is over! I expect to collect."

She heard Britt from far away, but she was on a saccharine cloud, in a haze of happiness she hadn't felt in fifty years. It was luscious. It was...

Going to take her away from Britt!

"No!" She physically recoiled from the mind-bending hold Prometheus had on her. When she regained her lucidity, she realized she wasn't alone. Had never been alone. Britt stood on one side of her and James on the other.

"Three against one, Prometheus. You're not up to it," Britt said.

"You, Mr. Brittain—" He pointed his black fingernail with hatred glowing on his face. "—are a pain in the ass. I'm afraid you're going to have to die a most painful death. Nothing will come between me and my desires."

"I won't let you have her." Conviction filled Britt's voice and Jess's heart at the same time.

"Nor will I let you have her," said James.

Britt and James looked at each other, as if making a silent pact, and moved into position. Jess crossed her arms and tapped her heel on the floor two times.

Prometheus laughed. "You don't really think you're going to get me with that heel stake again. You only got me before because I let you."

"Ever hear the expression, three times lucky."

The three of them circled around Prometheus. For a nanosecond he looked worried, Jess noted with pleasure.

"I'm disappointed in you, Jess," he said. "You and I could have ruled the world."

"Guess you didn't learn that much from Hitler." She dove at him.

He slashed an arm at her. James flew at him to avert his aim. In the process, James took a deep cut across his chest.

Jess wanted to glance at James and verify he'd make it, but she realized his action had distracted Prometheus, giving her the time she needed to kill him. She wouldn't waste the opportunity.

Springing into the air, she kicked out her leg with every ounce of strength inside her and rammed her heel deep into Prometheus's chest, impaling him.

His scream pierced her soul, making her realize how deep the connection was between her and this vile creature. He fell backward, slamming into the side of one of the burning vats. It tipped over and burning oil spilled across the floor in a fiery wave. The curtains around the shrine quickly caught fire and began burning.

She ran for the baby and whisked her up. Sephina's coal black eyes focused on her and she snuggled in and began to suck her thumb.

"Hang, on baby," Jess murmured soothingly. "There's a nice Forensic Vampirologist I want you to meet. He just might be able to help you."

"We have to get out of here," Britt shouted, pulling Jess away from the inferno and dragging her toward the hallway to the elevator. James had already run down the hallway, and he pounded his hand on the elevator door, Terry opened it immediately.

"No, wait, I have to see him die first. Make *sure* he dies." Jess said.

"Vampires are susceptible to fire. He'll die. He's surrounded by flames. He can't get out, and he may

already be dead. You impaled his heart this time."

"What if we're wrong? What if Sunshine gives him more abilities than we realize?"

Britt's deep blue eyes looked into hers, pleading. "Please, Jess, we don't have much time. This place is going up like a wick."

James waited at the elevator, holding the door for them.

They got in just before the ceiling collapsed near the statue. Prometheus had to be buried under the burning material.

When they reached the main floor, it was already burning. Old leather was like dry tinder. They rushed outside and met the team just arriving. The building was engulfed in flames and had become a three alarm fire within minutes.

Lucy and Drake were taken to the hospital in the first ambulance and Regent in the second.

Jess and Britt followed in the departmental vehicle. James and the rest of the team stayed behind for mop up.

When they arrived at the hospital the doctor did tests on Regent. He'd had a heart attack earlier in the day and was put in the heart unit. Jess stayed with him until nearly sunup.

"Jess, you've got to go. I'll stay with Regent," Britt said.

"No. I can stay. I've been doing my preparations that allow me to stay awake."

"Really. How'd you do that?" Britt got out of his chair and stood behind her, both hands resting on her shoulders.

"I wasn't asleep. I was meditating and praying," she said.

"I wonder how that works," Britt said.

Jess looked at her beloved brother's ashen face. "It's the power of prayer, Britt. And the power of love that gives me this ability. There's nothing special in my blood. Nothing that Prometheus could have used to create a new serum. He just had no understanding of family. She took Regent's hand and held it to her face. "Hang in there baby brother. You're going to make it."

Chapter Twenty-two

Britt leaned back in his chair and sighed in satisfaction. He was in his favorite bar full of friends, coworkers, and one very special lady. Metaphorically speaking his cup was overflowing, or was that metaphysically speaking?

"Britt, are you staying on the team?" Griz asked, slapping him on the back before wrapping one arm around him and hugging him awkwardly.

Britt smiled and nodded, then caught Jess's gaze from across the room. "I am. I've found the job

perfectly suited for an old ex-cop like me."

"Good. I'm glad for you. I enjoyed working with you. And I appreciate the way you offered to cover my back when I thought the vampires were following me."

"Hey, that's what friends are for." He took a sip of his drink. "So you've decided to call it quits?"

"Yeah. They had to cut some of the team members anyway, since most of the vampires are gone. I was happy to be one of the unemployed."

"What will you do?"

Griz got a misty, faraway look in his eyes. Who would have expected that from a big tough guy like Griz? He had a huge heart.

The man finally said, "Now that I know what the underbelly of life is like, I've decided to live in the moment. To enjoy every inch of the good life. I'm going on vacation. I've got quite a little nest-egg saved up. You remember the little old lady neighbor I told you about?"

"Yes?"

"Well, she's not as old as I made her sound. She and I have decided to live together and we're going on vacation. Mexico, I think, for at least a month."

"Good for you."

"You two are looking pretty serious over here," Regent said, moving between the men. When they'd rescued him, he'd been in rough shape for a couple of days. But his health had improved over the last week.

"Griz and I were talking about our careers."

Regent caught Britt's gaze. An instant look of concern crossed his face. "Really?"

"I'm staying with the team; Griz is retiring." The tension immediately left Regent's face, and he smiled as wide a smile as Britt had ever seen on a man.

"How is Jess these days?" Britt asked, his voice softening. It'd been ten days since the shoe factory burned. She'd been busy writing up reports and taking over Drake's job. Britt hadn't seen her for more than a minute here or there, and always with other people around. He'd been promoted and given her job as Lieutenant over one of the teams. Finding his momentum had been hectic, especially since he had such big shoes to fill.

Britt searched the room for her. Found her talking to the Captain next to the bar on the other side of the room. As always, the minute he looked at her she seemed to feel his gaze on her. She glanced at him and smiled.

He wanted to go to her right now and drag her off into a shadowy corner. He couldn't, though, because she was on duty. After all, this was as much part of the job as patrolling the streets at night. She was the boss now. He couldn't—wouldn't—do anything to undermine her authority.

Drake had retired the day after he got Lucy back. He wanted to spend every minute he had with his wife. Plus, being the ultimate career man, he hadn't been able to get past the fact that he'd been a double-agent for the wrong side for a couple of weeks. Britt planned to make sure Drake got over it. A good man like him shouldn't blame himself. He had done what he had to do in the worst of situations. The fact that not one team member died during that time would make his recovery a lot easier. It could've easily gone the other way.

Attention back on Jess, he watched her moving from person to person. She had obligations to everyone at the party, was giving each of the team members a thank you for a job well done.

He'd get his chance.

She was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her hair was done in an upswing with chopsticks holding it in place, accenting the turquoise silk oriental dress that matched those green eyes that made his breath catch every time he looked at her.

He let his gaze move to James and Terry. Everyone now knew they were an item. They couldn't take their eyes off each other. Britt was glad for them. And even happier for himself. He wouldn't have wanted to come between Jess and her best friend.

He moved toward the last location he'd seen Jess and cornered the nearest recruit. "Have you seen Jess?"

"Yes, sir. She just received a call on her cell and went back to the station."

Britt's mood plummeted. He'd have to wait for another time to get her alone. Since she'd been called away, he decided to call it a night. He was in no mood to hang around and socialize. He'd had only one thing on his mind tonight. Jess.

He stepped outside and noticed that, once again, the streetlights were out on this block. He wondered if the underground wiring had become damaged during the last heavy rains.

It wouldn't be a problem to notify the police this time. His fellow officers no longer considered him a pariah. Mostly because Randy had been the one who'd stolen his records from the precinct. In his haste to get in and out without being seen, he didn't realize they'd installed a camera in the file room. That, along with the latent fingerprints Randy had left, meant the visual image was irrefutable. Britt was no longer a murderer in the eyes of his fellow officers. His shoulders widened and he took a deep breath. Then he started down the shadowy sidewalk.

Like a wisp of excitement, Jess brushed past him. Then she spun around to look at him. She'd changed into his favorite leather outfit that enhanced all of her enhanceables.

"Looking for a good time tonight?" she asked.

"I thought you'd never ask me that question again," Britt breathed. He grabbed her and pulled her closer.

She smiled. "Why did you think that?" With both palms on his chest she pressed him against the wall and planted one hand on each side of his head. "This time, I'm going to make sure you have every reason to want to stay with me."

"Now, this I'm dying to hear."

"Oh no, you're staying very much alive, my love."

He took her mouth with a fiery passion that had been building within him for weeks.

* * * *

High above, and using long range binoculars so she wouldn't know he was there, he watched her.

Slamming his fist angrily against the parapet in front of him, he cursed violently.

He'd left her alone all these years.

Even when he'd been offered a veritable fortune to get rid of her, he'd been content watching her from afar.

Until now.

His heart sank when he saw her swoop down from the rooftop, and press herself against that man. Pushing her beautiful breasts against him in the most disgusting display of sexual intent. Bile burned up his throat and he spat on the rooftop's gravel coating.

She had promised to love him forever.

She'd broken her promise.

And now she'd die.

To be continued...

* * * *

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